

PUBLICS AND COUNTERPUBLICS ON THE FRONT PAGE OF THE INTERNET:
THE CULTURAL PRACTICES, TECHNOLOGICAL AFFORDANCES, HYBRID
ECONOMICS AND POLITICS OF REDDIT'S PUBLIC SPHERE

by

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Publics and Counterpublics on the Front Page of the Internet: The Cultural Practices,

Technological Affordances, Hybrid Economics and Politics of reddit's Public Sphere

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Kathleen M. Ryan

This dissertation represents an in depth examination of the cultural practices, technological affordances and political economic forces that inform the publics and counterpublics formed on the website reddit. Through interpretivist netnography, textual analysis and document analysis, the research presented here establishes a variety of different events (both historical and contemporary) and discourses that have taken place on the site and shows how these events and discourses are emblematic of contemporary neoliberal ideologies. Drawing on the theoretical tradition of the “public sphere” established by Jürgen Habermas, this research concludes that reddit shows the potential for an effective public sphere through digital technology. However, despite this potential, much of the discourse on reddit reinforces traditional neoliberal ideologies; furthermore, actions on behalf of the administration, moderators and users on the sites also indicate that while reddit has afforded individuals the opportunity to change federal political policy, these events do not translate into an inclusive public sphere that escapes the neoliberal trappings of technological fetishism.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving wife, Jamie Springer. Without her continued support and patience over the last four years, none of this could have come to fruition. Thank you for listening to me.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During the 2012 U.S Presidential Campaign, incumbent candidate, Barack Obama participated in an “Ask Me Anything” (AMA) question-and-answer session on the social news site, www.reddit.com (reddit). Although he only answered ten questions, President Obama’s interaction with his citizenry through reddit represented an important juncture for the self-billed “front-page of the Internet.” Founded in 2005 by Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman, reddit has risen from a small tech start-up to one of the largest sites in the US. Fundamentally, reddit aggregates content submitted by users (either as external links to images, videos or articles, or as self-posts) and ranks it based on how users vote (upvote or downvote). Likewise, reddit users (redditors) can also vote on comments underneath each link or self-post. Through reddit’s interface, thousands of redditors expressed their opinions and directly posed questions to their sitting President, indicating the site’s potential for citizens to communicate with their governmental representation through the site. Generally conceived of as a discursive cultural form through which “publics” communicate their opinion to the state, German social theorist Jürgen Habermas formerly introduced “the public sphere” as an area for analysis in the late 1960s. As the Internet developed and access to the Web became more commonplace throughout the 1990s, various theorists began questioning this new technology’s ability to afford a new form of the “public sphere” through advanced communication networks. President Obama’s AMA session seems to provide an answer to these initial questions; yes, the Internet can be used for publics to communicate with the state at the highest level. In addition, the recent Federal

Communication Commission (FCC) ruling in favor of “net-neutrality” was heavily influenced, in part, by the reddit community that circulated petitions and encouraged each other to contact the FCC and their congressmen about the influential issue. Following the FCC’s decision, President Obama released an official, hand-written note to redditors, thanking them for their continued participation in the democratic process (see Figure 1).

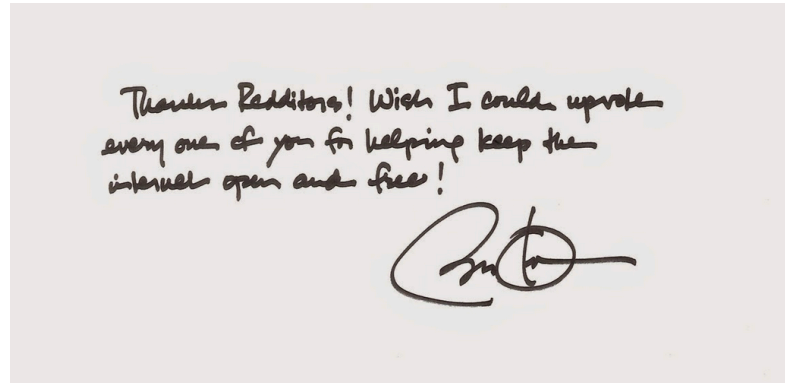


FIGURE 1: President Obama Thanks redditors¹

I first heard about reddit in 2007 from a college friend majoring in computer science. Often, he would find a thought-provoking picture, read an interesting article, or mention a little known fact, and when I pressed him on where he found these things, his answer was inevitably “reddit.” I created my first account in 2008 and began looking through the numerous subreddits that cater to mainstream and niche communities. From sports teams, to TV shows, to obscure music genres, to notable fandoms, reddit’s platform seemed to provide a forum for any community that wished to establish its texts for a public audience and distribute them openly across the web. Given that any redditor can establish their own, unique front-page by subscribing to subreddits of personal interest, I quickly began tailoring my front-page to subreddits discussing movies, music and television, art and graphic design, along with news and politics. However, as I continued to read comments across different subreddits and explore various nooks and crannies of the site, I quickly began seeing reddit as a productive site for the analysis of digital culture and online

political engagement. I also began seeing some very problematic trends develop across the site, both in smaller communities and throughout dominant subreddits. In 2011, reddit received negative news coverage when Anderson Cooper reported on the r/JailBait community and its primary moderator, u/ViolentAcrez, who circulated sexually suggestive pictures of minors that were not *technically* illegal. While the reddit administration closed r/JailBait soon after Cooper's exposé, a number of controversial subreddits have remained (e.g. r/CuteFemaleCorpses, r/CoonTown, and r/PicsOfDeadKids). Reddit also gained notoriety after members misidentified Sunil Tripathi as responsible for the bombing of the 2013 Boston Marathon; further, the site struggled after it became the de facto distribution center for a number of stolen celebrity nudes in August 2014. Nevertheless, the site has continued growing, often thriving as the administration continues to extend the reddit networks into news arenas.

This dissertation represents one year of netnographic research on the communities found under the reddit domain, as well as the culmination of four years of doctoral research focused on different aspects of the site. I chose reddit as the field-site for my dissertation, because, for the past seven years, I have visited the site with increasing frequency. My research agenda, at large, has focused on methods of information distribution, and I found reddit to be a particularly useful website for finding diverse content and information online. Alongside Facebook and my e-mail, reddit had become one of my primary hubs on the web and seemed to offer a wider variety of content and discussion than anywhere else I had seen online. However, as I continued to browse the site, I saw the quality decline as its audience/contributer base became larger, and I became intellectually interested in how reddit could be a valuable resource politically, while at the same time proving incredibly problematic.

The following research explores the cultural practices, technologies and economies of reddit while looking at how they influence the publics (and counterpublics) that have developed through reddit's interface. I am specifically looking at how the technologies, cultures and politics found on reddit influence the publics and counterpublics formed on the site. In order to address these issues, I have taken a critical-cultural approach that contrasts the Habermasian public sphere with later contestations of his theory that emphasize the poetic and neoliberal aspects of contemporary publics and counterpublics. Conceptually, my research also represents an attempt to combine the political economy of media with cultural studies, two theoretical traditions that often struggle to reconcile fundamental disagreements about power and reductionism. Throughout this dissertation, I appropriate theories of culture, technology, language, economies and politics to provide a critical examination of the political potentials of a large social news site, like reddit. Although not prescriptive, this work represents a critique of digital politics and cultures found on the site.

Nevertheless, I want to clarify here that reddit is not a monolith; thousands of communities exist on reddit that do not, and will not, inherently match my interpretations. However, during my careful ethnographic research over a twelve-month period, as well as deep textual and document analyses, I have spent many hours reading through threads, crafting case studies of subreddits and talking with other redditors online in order to understand: how redditors understand their own work on the site, how administrators envision the site as a whole, and how the rest of the world views the site based on media coverage. In addition, I also aimed for my research to be as transparent as possible, so I created an archive subreddit on [r/reddit_research](#); in this archive, I reposted comments, articles, and self-posts that pertained to my research into the nature of publics and counterpublics on reddit.

Drawing on this method, I first examined the various cultural practices found on reddit. Through Nick Couldry's concepts of searching, showing, presencing, archiving and other complex media-related practices, I explored how redditors practice producing and consuming content across a variety of subreddits, and how these practices are influential in the circulation of content across the site. I also engaged with these practices through my own archiving and commentary on the site. The description of these practices proves valuable for understanding the basic, everyday actions anyone might come across on reddit, along with alternative ways in which reddit can be used.

I then investigated the economic and technological structures that influence reddit, and its public sphere. Specifically, I drew on J.J. Gibson's theory of affordances to theorize technological impacts, and I drew on Lawrence Lessig's notion of a "hybrid" economy to understand both the commercial economics that undergird the site, as well as the sharing economies that have influenced a variety of technological and economic developments on reddit. Through the collision of these two types of economies, Lessig argues, a hybrid economy can form and significantly compete with traditional commercial enterprises. Does the reddit administration effectively merge its traditions of sharing and commercial economies, or are their hybridic gestures actually continuations of neoliberal capitalism within a digital environment?

Once I established the cultural practices and economic structures, I started exploring the development and maintenance of a public, along with the subsequent counterpublic on reddit. Through a case study of r/KotakuInAction and r/GamerGhazi, I interrogated the circulation of texts and discourse through these two communities, which began and prospered during my research phase. Centered on the controversial hashtag, GamerGate, both subreddits offered compelling narratives about how redditors use the site for political goals, in addition to the role

of the Internet in the promotion of social justice. Through the work of Michael Warner, I explored the intellectual styles and politics of this public and counterpublic and interpret what their discursive practices say about their publics.

Finally, having established the nature of a localized subreddit, I expanded out and explored the political economy of reddit through Jodi Dean's on "communicative capitalism" and "neoliberalism." While Dean primarily argues that online discourse does not result in political action and engagement, because it continues to circulate without ever materializing policy change, reddit's influence in the net-neutrality debate and the defeat of the Stop Online Piracy Act/Protect IP Act in 2012 indicate official policy change, thanks in part to reddit's public sphere. To reconcile these differences, I explored the political opinions, discourse, and practices throughout reddit's public sphere to understand how Dean's "neoliberal fantasies of technology" are represented and challenged by the reddit public.

Thus, through this research, I hope to provide an interpretive analysis of reddit's public sphere, along with the political effectiveness of the publics and counterpublics developed through its interface. By establishing the cultural practices that permeate the site, the technological affordances that structure the discourse, and the political economic implications of the publics and counterpublics of reddit, I intend to show my public how one site can pose such great, yet problematic potentials for political engagement and an effective public sphere.

NOTES

1. Alexis Ohanian, "Thank you, reddit. Your efforts led to an historic FCC ruling and this note from the President of the United States," *Reddit Inc.*, February 26, 2015, <http://www.redditblog.com/2015/02/thank-you-reddit-your-efforts-led-to.html>.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

Before I begin addressing the theories and methodologies I employed throughout my research, I start with a brief introduction to reddit and the relevant social, cultural and political issues within which my research occurred. In this chapter, I briefly establish several important points within reddit's history. I then explore the rise of social media within the context of the "Web 2.0" environment and its implications for the consumption, production and circulation of content on the Internet. Finally, I address the contemporary political circumstances within which my research took place, specifically introducing the issues surrounding net neutrality and mass surveillance, which redditors regularly discuss across different comment boards.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF REDDIT

Soon after Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman founded reddit in 2005, they merged their project with the late Aaron Swartz's start-up, Infogami, and invited Swartz to become an equal partner in the company. By October 2006, magazine conglomerate, *Condé Nast* acquired reddit and subsequently fired Swartz in early 2007.¹ Under Condé Nast, reddit began expanding, and by 2008, the reddit administrative team grew to six members, including Christopher Slowe, Erik Martin, Jeremy Edberg, and Mike Shiraldi. In 2009, Ohanian and Huffman left reddit to focus on their new travel company, *Hipmunk*, and Slowe followed in 2010.² After Condé Nast's parent company, Advance Publications moved reddit out from under the magazine publisher's wing in 2011, Yishan Wong took over as CEO.³ Wong expanded and developed new products for the

site, such as reddit live (a site for live feeds of current events), University of reddit (online courses about a variety of subjects), and multireddits (customizable front pages that can be made public). Likewise, reddit's administrative staff began expanding, and by 2015, reddit Inc. had nearly 70 employees. In November 2014, Wong resigned, Ellen Pao stepped in as CEO, and Ohanian returned as Executive Chairman.⁴ In 2013, PEW Research Center reported that six percent of online adults used reddit. Typically, reddit attracts young males living in urban or suburban environments.⁵ As of March 29, 2015, the reddit administration announced that the site received over 151 million unique visitors from over 212 countries whose members viewed over six billion pages and cast over 22 million votes in over 9,000 active subreddits.⁶ While reddit's apps only premiered in 2014, by the end of the year 1.4 million people had installed the official iOS app, Alien Blue, and 2.96 million threads were viewed in the newly developed the "reddit AMA" app.⁷

Reddit first began gaining mainstream popularity in 2007 after u/_black encouraged redditors to vote for the name of Greenpeace's new mascot. As a protest against Japan's continued hunting of humpback whales, Greenpeace wanted to place a GPS tracking chip on a whale and personify it with a name. They relied on an online poll to choose it. According to Ohanian, Greenpeace put together a list of "very erudite, very thoughtful, cultured names," including Anahi, "the Farsi word for immortal" and Kaimana ("the divine power of the ocean in a Polynesian lagnague").⁸ However, as a joke, they also included "Mr. Splashy Pants" as a choice. Following the lead of other content aggregation sites, such as Digg and 4Chan, redditors flocked to *Greenpeace.org* to vote for the name "Mister Splashy Pants." Mr. Splashy Pants soon moved from 5% of the vote to 70% of the vote with reddit's involvement. After Greenpeace extended the vote for another week to raise a successful challenger, reddit renamed their movement, "Fightin' Splashy," and the

online meme entered the real world as various individuals began posting Splashy posters around different college campuses. In the end, Mr. Splashy Pants won the Greenpeace poll by 78%; as Ohanian stated in his TEDTalk, in an online environment, “you no longer control the message. And that’s OK.”⁹

The mobilization of redditors around Mr. Splashy Pants represents one of many times when redditors have actively participated in and fund-raised for several different online campaigns. In October 2010, redditors helped raise over \$600,000 for the charity, *DonorsChoose*, to encourage Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert to hold their *Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear* on the Washington Mall. A few months later, redditor, Margaret Crymes, suggested that r/Christianity raise money for the Christian relief group, *World Vision*; in response, members of r/Atheism and r/Islam opened competing fundraising drives for *Doctors Without Borders* and *Islamic Relief*. Overall, these three communities raised over \$50,000 in 2010, and r/Atheism raised over \$200,000 in a similar drive the following year.¹⁰ The reddit administration and reddit users also participated in online protests against the much maligned Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and PROTECT IP Act (PIPA) in January 2011, by blacking out their site, along side sites like Wikipedia, Google, and Wordpress; Congress shelved both bills following these protests in 2012.

By participating in these fundraisers and civil protests, redditors gained positive attention for the site. However, at the same time Anderson Cooper began investigating the subreddit, r/JailBait, and its potential to circulate child pornography on the site. As a result of this report, the reddit administration amended its three fundamental rules (“don’t spam;” “don’t ask for votes or engage in vote manipulation;” “don’t post personal information”) to include “no child pornography or sexually suggestive content featuring minors.”¹¹ Cooper’s report represents one

of many news stories that has critiqued reddit, and the actions of redditors. In December, 2010 the *Village Voice* reported on skeptical redditors who accused u/BadgerMatt (whose account has since been deleted) of falsifying his story about donating a kidney to the American Cancer Society. u/BadgerMatt reported receiving threatening voicemails, telling him to go “straight to hell,” in addition to private reddit messages, calling him “a crook, a scammer and scum.”¹² After a family member began to receive threats, u/BadgerMatt returned to reddit with proof of his surgery, and redditors began apologizing, including the user who originally accused him of lying, who wrote, “Sorry, but it's not that big of a deal, it's just the internet.”¹³ Likewise, in 2011, online magazine, *Jezebel*, reported on u/theoculus’s experience after she posted her story of being raped the night before. Again, skeptical redditors accused her of lying, only to have their claims refuted soon after.¹⁴

While these examples represent some of the negative press reddit received in the past, nothing exemplifies the problems of the site more than redditors’ actions after the bombing of the Boston Marathon in April 2013. Following members on the anonymous message board 4Chan, redditors founded r/FindTheBostonBombers to scour images of the race to find the bomber(s). After identifying a number of suspects, redditors misidentified 22-year-old Brown University student, Sunil Tripathi, as the primary suspect in the bombing; in fact, Tripathi had committed suicide several weeks earlier after disappearing from Providence, RI.¹⁵ To stem the increasing tide of online speculation, the FBI released the names of the actual suspects, giving them time to attempt to flee for freedom and forcing Boston into a lockdown as police tried to apprehend them. Although the reddit administration shut down the subreddit and officially condemned the impromptu witch-hunt, the thread was one of the most read on the site, with over 85,000 redditors in the thread at one time.¹⁶

Despite these missteps, as Condé Nast began expanding the reddit network, the site rose in popularity with technologists and computer scientists because of the text-heavy user-interface, ease-of-access, along with voter-based aggregation and distribution of content. While only about 500,000 people visited reddit every day in 2009,¹⁷ by December 2011, reddit hosted over two billion page views, 35 million unique visitors and had over 100,000 subreddits.¹⁸ Many of these new redditors began frequenting reddit after a site redesign of their major competitor, Digg; as u/Murrabit explained, co-founder Kevin Rose “turned the site into a spam-launcher, decided major content publishers could just sign up and flood the front page with advertising - er [sic] I mean every single article they produce, and most of them, if they were paying advertisers would just be promoted to the front page just due to the power of money.”¹⁹ As users grew dissatisfied with these changes, they started “The Great Digg Migration” to reddit, which offered many of the same benefits of Digg without relying on “power users” and heavy advertisements.

SOCIAL MEDIA, SOCIAL NEWS

Ultimately, reddit’s history is emblematic of the problems and benefits of harnessing the collective intelligence of the crowds, a critical feature of what Tim O’Reilly termed, “Web 2.0.” Coined the same year as reddit’s founding, O’Reilly’s notion of Web 2.0 reflects many of the technical, economic, and philosophical approaches Ohanian and Huffman drew upon when designing reddit’s software and community.²⁰ As Ethan Zuckerman states, “Web 1.0 was invented to allow physicists to share research papers; Web 2.0 was invented to allow people to share pictures of cats.”²¹ Web 2.0 represents a paradigmatic shift away from the government- and university-centered foundations of the Internet toward a “set of principles and practices that tie together a veritable solar system of sites that demonstrate some or all of those principles.”²²

Services on the Web 2.0 platform improve with more users, treat users as co-developers, and focus on light-weight, flexible programming models that encourage “hackability” and “remixability.”²³ Perhaps most important to our discussion here, O’Reilly describes Web 2.0 as a platform for “harnessing collective intelligence,”²⁴ and points to online success stories, like Google, Wikipedia, and Ebay as prime examples of how entrepreneurs are developing websites that use collaborative filtering, aggregation and curation as primary methods for achieving success. Within the Web 2.0 platform, O’Reilly writes, blogs

can be thought of as a new, peer-to-peer equivalent to Usenet and bulletin-boards, the conversational watering holes of the early internet. Not only can people subscribe to each others' sites, and easily link to individual comments on a page, but also, via a mechanism known as trackbacks, they can see when anyone else links to their pages, and can respond, either with reciprocal links, or by adding comments.²⁵

Essentially, O’Reilly remarks, blogs and RSS (“Real Simple Syndication”) feeds harness “collective intelligence as a kind of filter” by tapping into “the wisdom of the crowds” in order to select content based on perceived value and create a new business model in which “‘the former audience,’ not a few people in a back room, decides what's important.”²⁶ Ultimately, reddit acts as, perhaps, the ideal vision of O’Reilly’s Web 2.0; users submit another’s (or their own) content via Hyperlink, and redditors, as a group, curate the content based on their collective intelligence.

As social news began gaining popularity on the Web 2.0 platform in the last decade, traditional news outlets began rethinking their business models as their audiences became more fragmented across the ever-increasing number of new sources for information. In 2012, newspapers took in \$38.6 billion, of which \$25.2 million was generated through advertising.²⁷ Some of this success derives from the implementations of digital “paywalls,” which have helped circulation increase, and several publicly owned newspapers saw share prices rise as much as 30% in 2013.²⁸ The total circulation of US daily newspapers in 2013 went up three percent from

2012, representing the first sign of growth since the newspaper industry began declining in 2000;²⁹ nevertheless, as the Newspaper Association of America reported in 2014, daily newspaper circulation rested just above 40,000 paid subscriptions, down from over 55,000 in 2000.³⁰ As the PEW Research Center reported in their “The State of News Media 2014,” thousands of journalists have begun working for “digital native” news outlets after being let go from a previous appointment; however, many taking these positions have relocated from the 16,200 positions cut from newsrooms, and 38,000 jobs cut from magazines between 2003 and 2012.³¹ These numbers indicate the decline of print media over the past decade-and-a-half. The US public has noticed these cutbacks, as well, and in 2014, nearly one-third of US adults “have stopped turning to a news outlet because it no longer provided them with the news they were accustomed to getting.”³² Both broadcast and cable news have maintained relatively stable audiences and even increased revenue, but as “cord-cutting” (consumers cancelling cable TV subscriptions) and “cord-nevers” (young consumers who never subscribed to cable) increase, cable news executives worry about the future of their product and platform.³³ Meanwhile, between 2010 and 2012, online news consumption grew by 5%, and over 64% of smart-phone and tablet owners reported using their devices to access news weekly; 37% report they access news on their mobile device daily.³⁴ Furthermore, on the eve of the 2012 US presidential election, 27% of those who watched the results did so with a “second screen;” throughout the campaign, 41% of second screen users fact-checked claims in presidential debates, 46% monitored broadcast media responses, and 32% monitored social media on their Internet-enabled device.³⁵

While news consumers certainly began using the social networks provided by the Web 2.0 platform to find information, journalists and news producers began to harness the potential of to

engage their audiences. Given that 71% of Internet users accessed Facebook in 2014, and that 52% of Internet users accessed more than one social media network in the same year, social media represent immense audiences who are looking for digital media content.³⁶ The International Netherlands Group (ING, a Dutch banking corporation) reported that in 2014, 78% of journalists use social media on a daily basis, with 68% believing that “journalism can no longer operate without social media.”³⁷ Furthermore, ING’s study predicted that in the near-future, crowd-fact-checking will continue to increase in importance, as journalists report first and correct if necessary, and journalists will continue to rely more and more on user-generated content.³⁸ Thus, while Web 2.0 sites continue to proliferate, distracting audiences from more traditional news outlets, journalists also use these platforms to distribute their content and promote their brand in new ways.

While journalists and news outlets have begun adapting their business models to meet the demands of audiences with increasing access to new communication technologies, user-generated news has also become increasingly popular across the web. As NYU journalism professor, Jay Rosen explains, “when the people formerly known as the audience employ the tools they have in their possession to inform one another,” they are practicing “citizen journalism.”³⁹ As the average person gained the power to make meaning and communicate through computers and digital technology, “both the capacity to make meaning [. . .] and the capacity to communicate one’s meaning around the world, are held by, or readily available to, at least many hundreds of millions of users around the globe.”⁴⁰ With the advent of affordable and accessible computers, some former news consumers have become news producers and added voices to the public sphere that may have otherwise remained unheard. Citizen journalism rose to public prominence during the protests of the 1999 World Trade Organization in Seattle, WA

when media activist, Jeff Perlstein launched a “24-hour activist newsroom” that quickly became the Seattle Independent Media Center (IMC).⁴¹ Fearing that mainstream media outlets would fail to cover the protests, or purposefully misrepresent the aims of the protesters, the Seattle IMC

acted as a clearinghouse of information for journalists, and provided up-to-the-minute reports, photos, audio and video footage through its website. Using the collected footage, the Seattle Independent Media Center produced a series of five documentaries, uplinked every day to satellite and distributed throughout the United State to public access stations.⁴²

Their site received nearly 1.5 million hits during the protests, and within a year, IMCs began appearing in cities across the US; by 2015 hundreds of IMCs provide pieces of citizen journalism in cities across the globe.⁴³

While these independent media centers continued to publish alternative news through the networked communication technologies, newer social media sites founded within the Web 2.0 environment have further extended the capabilities of citizens to become politically engaged. Following the re-election of Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009, protestors took to Twitter after authorities began blocking text messages across the country; protestors also posted videos of police violence to Youtube after traditional media outlets failed to accurately record the atrocities.⁴⁴ Likewise, activists across the Middle-East turned to social media to organize protests, resulting in new regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya.⁴⁵ With the exception of Libya, social media use increased during their respective revolutions.⁴⁶ Likewise, in the US, activists from the “Occupy Wall Street” (OWS) movement in 2011 also used Twitter in high volumes “to elicit participation from a set of highly interconnected users with pre-existing interests in domestic politics and foreign social movements.”⁴⁷ However, as Wikileaks founder, Julian Assange, reminded students at Cambridge University in 2011, “the guide produced by Egyptian revolutionaries . . . says on the first page, ‘Do not use Facebook and

Twitter,’ and says on the last page, ‘Do not use Facebook and Twitter’.⁴⁸ While citizen journalism and social media supported by the Web 2.0 environment certainly played an important role in the organization of social activists throughout the Arab world and in Zucotti Park in New York, many activists acknowledge that they must maintain a healthy distrust of corporate-run media institutions.

THE POLITICS OF WEB 2.0

Alongside these shifts in journalistic practices and news reporting, dramatic revelations about the nature of online governmental surveillance have also shifted the dynamics of social interaction. For the rest of this chapter, I briefly introduce the issues surrounding copyright policy, mass surveillance and net neutrality; each of these contemporary political issues involving digital culture are regular topics of discussion and sources for political engagement by the reddit public. Copyright policy bears particular relevance for this study, given reddit’s role in protesting the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the PROTECT IP Act (PIPA) in 2011. Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) introduced PIPA in the Senate in May 2011, with the stated goal of preventing “online threats to economic creativity and theft of intellectual property, and for other purposes.”⁴⁹ In short, if a copyright-holder filed an injunction, search engines and payment websites would no longer be allowed to list the domain name or process payments for it, essentially shutting the site down. Likewise, Texas representative, Lamar Smith (R-TX) introduced SOPA in the House of Representatives in October 2011 to promote “prosperity, creativity, entrepreneurship, and innovation by combating the theft of U.S. property, and for other purposes.”⁵⁰ Smith’s bill proposed several drastic changes to how copyright infringement is regulated in the digital realm. First, the bill would provide a court-ordered Cease and Desist

letter against foreign sites that engage in copyright infringement. Secondly, the bill would also allow for court orders against U.S. based sites and payment providers to those sites. More significantly, the bill “requires online service providers, Internet search engines, payment network providers, and Internet advertising services, upon receiving a copy of a court order relating to an AG action, to carry out certain preventative measures, including withholding services from an infringing site or preventing users located in the United States from accessing the infringing site.⁵¹ However, both bills were shelved within the year after numerous sites, including reddit, Wikipedia, and WordPress shut down their sites for up to 24-hours, in protest of the bills.

While both of these bills represent attempts at expanding copyright policy, they only exemplify the recent history of copyright’s expansion in the US. According to article one, section eight, clause eight of the US Constitution, Congress has the power to “promote the Progress of Science and the useful Arts, by securing for Limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Rights to their respective Writings and Discoveries.⁵²” Congress quickly codified this clause with the Copyright Act of 1790, which extended the variety of materials that could be copyrighted to include maps, charts and books, in addition to stating that the copyright could be maintained through two 14-year terms.⁵³ While The Copyright Act of 1909 doubled that term length, The Copyright Act of 1976 granted a copyright term that included the life of the author and 70-years after the author’s death.⁵⁴ Since 1976, policy-makers have contentiously debated the role of copyright in the digital age and whether the language from 1976 maintains salience in light of new information distribution technologies. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) of 1998 amended the 1976 act to agree with the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), which required member nations: “(1) to provide legal remedies against the

circumvention of technological measures designed to block access to copyrighted works; and (2) to prohibit the interference with copyright management information digitally encoded in copyright works.”⁵⁵ The reddit administration revealed that they received 218 DMCA requests during 2014, but only removed content 31% of the time.⁵⁶

In addition to issues surrounding copyright in digital culture, Edward Snowden’s recent revelations about the extent of the National Security Agency’s digital mass surveillance also represent encroachments of privacy throughout the web. In early-2015, reports from the TRUSTe Consumer Confidence index indicate that 92% of Americans are concerned with privacy when using the Internet, with 45% disagreeing with the statement “personal privacy is not as important as national security;” furthermore, 42% of Americans reported feeling more concerned with online privacy than the previous year.⁵⁷ While the top concern for 38% of the sample involved companies sharing consumers personal information with other companies, former National Security Agency (NSA) analyst Edward Snowden’s continuing revelations about the scope and nature of the NSA’s domestic and international surveillance concerned only 28% of respondents.⁵⁸ In June 2013, Snowden absconded with an unknown number of highly classified documents that describe the nature of the NSA’s use of the Internet for mass surveillance, leaking them to the public through a number of journalists and news outlets.

“Taken together,” *Washington Post* correspondent Barton Gellman writes,

the revelations have brought to light a global surveillance system that cast off many of its historical restraints after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Secret legal authorities empowered the NSA to sweep in the telephone, Internet and location records of whole populations. One of the leaked presentation slides described the agency’s “collection philosophy” as “Order one of everything off the menu.”⁵⁹

Roots of the NSA’s information collection and analysis date back to World War I when the army first began using “cryptanalytics” to decipher foreign codes, and the agency itself was officially

established under Harry Truman in 1952.⁶⁰ Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, President George W. Bush authorized the NSA to execute warrantless wiretaps of overseas phone calls by American citizens; as a former senior official told *The New York Times* in 2005, the NSA's new program represented a "sea change" because "it's almost a mainstay of this country that the NSA only does foreign searches."⁶¹ However, in 2007, President Bush cancelled the program on the advice of Attorney General, Alberto Gonzales,⁶² after intelligence officers reported that the "Terrorist Surveillance Program" was relatively useless for identifying terrorist suspects.⁶³ Nevertheless, Snowden's 2013 releases showed that the NSA quickly replaced the "Terrorist Surveillance Program" with "Planning Tool for Resource Integration, Synchronization, and Management" (PRISM : a clandestine data mining operation) after President Bush and Congress passed the "Protect America Act" (PAA) the same year.⁶⁴ Under this new law, the NSA began targeting Americans for mass surveillance by collecting unknowable amounts of data on hundreds of millions of domestic and international users of numerous multinational corporations, including Skype, Facebook, Microsoft, and Apple. While PRISM provided the NSA access to private communications across these networks with court-orders, agents also infiltrated corporate communication networks through operation "MUSCULAR." Alongside their British counterpart, the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), NSA agents broke into the main communication networks between Yahoo! and Google's international servers to obtain millions of digital records and metadata about users without the warrants required by the "Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978" (FISA).⁶⁵ *The Washington Post* reported that through this operation, the NSA and GCHQ collected over 180 million records in the course of one month in 2013.⁶⁶

In addition to collecting call records, instant message transcripts, and online interactions of US citizens and foreign Internet users, Snowden also revealed that the NSA had been monitoring the phone calls of 35 different world leaders. As *The Guardian* reported in October 2013, a “confidential memo” revealed “that the NSA encourages senior officials in its ‘customer’ departments, such as the White House, State and the Pentagon, to share their ‘Rolodexes’ so the agency can add the phone numbers of leading foreign politicians to their surveillance systems.”⁶⁷ Notably, German chancellor, Angela Merkel, directly asked President Barack Obama whether the US had been spying on her phone; White House Officials assured the German newspaper, *Der Spiegel*, “that the United States is not monitoring and will not monitor the communications of Chancellor Merkel,” but refused to clarify whether she had been under surveillance in the past.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Snowden’s revelations clearly indicated that the surveillance regime started under President Bush in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 continued under the direction of his successor who brought charges against Snowden for violating the “Espionage Act” in late 2013.⁶⁹ President Obama argued that Snowden should have reported his misgivings about the government’s surveillance programs to his superiors and pursued the official whistle-blower routes established by the President in a 2012 Executive Order that

ensures that employees (1) serving in the Intelligence Community or (2) who are eligible for access to classified information can effectively report waste, fraud, and abuse while protecting classified national security information. It prohibits retaliation against employees for reporting waste, fraud, and abuse.⁷⁰

Snowden’s prosecution echoes the administration’s case against former US Army private first class Chelsea Manning. Like Snowden, Manning eschewed official whistle-blowing channels in 2010, when she channeled over 700,000 classified documents to the public through the anti-secrecy website Wikileaks.⁷¹ Established by Australian journalist, Julian Assange in 2006, Wikileaks is a non-profit media organization that aims to “bring important news and information

to the public” by providing “an innovative, secure and anonymous way for sources to leak information to our journalists.”⁷² After *The New York Times* failed to return her phone calls and *The Washington Post* demanded source evidence, Manning began submitting documents that detailed significant counts of corruption in Iceland’s looming financial crisis, the killing of Reuter’s journalists in 2007, and thousands of diplomatic cables and official documents detailing civilian casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁷³ Meanwhile, Manning also began chatting through “Internet Relay Chat” (IRC) with ex-hacker, Adrian Lamo, who eventually reported him to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) because he believed Manning was placing others at risk by “basically trying to vacuum up as much classified information as he could, and just throwing it up into the air.”⁷⁴ Unlike Snowden, who had carefully curated his data before relaying it to the public, Manning simply released all the data he could find without any redaction.

In addition to the state struggling to control the diversity of social interactions online extending copyright and mass surveillance, political discourse on reddit often also focuses on the challenges facing “net neutrality.” However, as I noted in the introduction, the Federal Communication Commission’s (FCC) recent rulings in favor of “net neutrality” evince how reddit’s platform affords users an avenue to communicate with the state. In their 2015 ruling, the FCC re-classified ISPs as “common carriers” under the Federal Communications Act of 1934, which made the blocking of sites, the throttling of data transmission, and paid priority “fast lanes” illegal.⁷⁵ In 2003, Tim Wu argued policy governing digital communications must focus on the “conflicts between the private interests of broadband providers and the public’s interest in a competitive innovation environment centered on the Internet.”⁷⁶ Despite some economic theories that suggest that ISPs would maintain neutral platforms for the sake of long-term profit, Wu shows that many providers have already petitioned to limit potential external attachments

like virtual private networks (VPNs) or WiFi devices, and discriminate against certain sites that use more bandwidth.⁷⁷

With Wu's (and others') work in mind, the FCC adopted net neutrality in 2010, and Verizon sued the FCC a month later for overstepping its authority by limiting Verizon's interference with data transferred through their service.⁷⁸ In April 2014, the US Court of Appeals for the DC circuit ruled that the FCC had indeed overstepped their authority, because in 2005, the FCC had classified broadband services as "information service providers," which are "exempt from Title II's common carrier requirements."⁷⁹ Following the court's 2014 decision, FCC Chairman, Tom Wheeler, rejected additional judicial appeals against the ruling, instead soliciting public opinion on the FCC website and maintaining the option to label ISPs as common carriers.⁸⁰ Following the 2015 ruling, the FCC has temporarily secured net neutrality as the primary regulatory framework of the Internet, but the future is still undetermined as USTelecom (a telecommunication trade group) and Alamo Broadband have separately filed suit against the new rulings.⁸¹

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I described the history and development of reddit, demonstrated how it fits within the "Web 2.0" discourse surrounding the potentials of online information circulation, and introduced a number of social and political issues that influence contemporary discourse across the web, and across reddit during my research period. The discourses around surveillance, copyright and net neutrality are fundamental dimensions of reddit's public sphere, and I will continue addressing these terms, people and events in different contexts throughout this dissertation. Having established the social, technological and political contexts for the

development of reddit, in the next chapter I turn to the theoretical frameworks that ground my research within the traditions of critical theory and the digital public sphere.

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CHAPTER 3

CRITICAL THEORIES OF TECHNOLOGY, CULTURE AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

Having established the cultural and political contexts within which my research took place, I now establish the theoretical traditions that influence this dissertation on reddit. Primarily, my work here draws on the traditions of “critical theory” established by the scholars in Frankfurt School; specifically, the first section of this chapter focuses on contextualizing Jürgen Habermas’s work on the “public sphere.” Once I have shown how Habermas’s theory developed and has since been expanded upon, I will show how other scholars have explored the digital public sphere. Next, I examine the current literature concerning reddit in order to demonstrate how my research provides a much needed critical approach to the political potentials of reddit’s public sphere. Finally, I establish how I establish my approach to reddit’s public sphere by presenting the theories of technological affordances, cultural practices, and political economy, and I conclude by exploring the schism between Cultural Studies and the political economy of media.

CRITICAL THEORY AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

Fundamentally, my research on reddit throughout relies on the theoretical frameworks established by the Frankfurt School and the tradition of “critical theory.” To establish a solid foundation for my work, this section focuses on framing my findings by discussing the research of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno on the “culture industry,” along with the concept of the “public sphere” as presented by Jürgen Habermas. I also expand upon Habermas’s theory,

exploring how it has been used to understand the Internet, and how it has been critiqued by other scholars.

THE CULTURE INDUSTRY THESIS

To understand the rise and success of the Frankfurt School in the US, I first introduce fundamental elements of Karl Marx's "historical materialism" and show its influence on the research of the Frankfurt School by employing the works of the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci. Breaking from Hegel's speculative philosophy that promoted history's metaphysical holistic "spirit," Marx argues that "it is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness."¹ By prioritizing the material conditions under which society functions, Marx emphasizes the dialectical influence of specific epochs on ideas found within them. Thus, when Marx writes "men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please,"² he is at once criticizing contemporary German idealism, while simultaneously promoting his idea that consciousness is historical and contextual. Society's struggles result from the modes of production, divisions of labor, social institutions and class divisions found within that society, and historical materialism provides an effective theoretical approach to understand the development of society.

Although historical materialism represents a fundamental shift away from the idealism that often plagued philosophers before him, many of the first generation of Marx's followers promote an equally problematic approach to Marxism ("vulgar Marxism") that had developed into a dogmatic, scientific field that relied on the idea that "the economic base determined the superstructure, and laws of history, rooted in the economy, determined the trajectory of all social life."³ In response to this early reductionist strain of Marxism and the failures of several Marxist

revolutions in Europe, numerous thinkers (including György Lukács, Karl Korsch and Antonio Gramsci) began adopting a critical approach to vulgar Marxism, and they quickly became known as “western Marxists” who advocated for a “philosophy of praxis” and “concerned themselves consciousness, subjectivity, culture, ideology, and the concept of socialism precisely in order to make radical change possible.”⁴ Within this tradition, Carl Grunberg founded the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in 1923. Soon after, Max Horkheimer took over leadership in 1930, and the primarily Jewish scholars of Frankfurt began fleeing Germany, as the expectations of a leftist revolution were crushed under the rising wave of National Socialism.

Horkheimer and his colleague, Theodor Adorno, took up residence in the US and began interrogating American culture through “critical theory.” Opposing the “traditional theory” of the Enlightenment, which organizes the material world (and oftentimes humanity) into determined categories based on utility, through which it can be known, critical theory is

motivated today by the effort really to transcend the tension and to abolish the opposition between the individual's purposefulness, spontaneity, and rationality, and those work-process relationships on which society is built. Critical thought has a concept of man as in conflict with himself until this opposition is removed. If activity governed by reason is proper to man, then existent social practice, which forms the individual's life down to its least details, is inhuman, and this inhumanity affects everything that goes on in the society.⁵

Horkheimer questions Immanuel Kant’s claim that Enlightenment thinking can lead to humanity’s “emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity”⁶ which brought about by religious and dogmatic thinking; rather, critical theory proposes that Enlightenment thinking and the positivist tradition simply lead to alternative forms of domination rather than liberation. Thus, the goal of critical theory is to provide a historically-situated, self-aware account of the contradictions within this system of Enlightenment thought, while still engaging with the beneficial aspects of modernity. By exposing the contradictions of society and revealing the

dialectical nature of social norms and practices, Frankfurt School scholars engage a “supradisciplinary” method that synthesizes philosophy, sociology, economics, and politics to critique the boundaries within academic disciplines, as well as society as a whole.⁷

While Frankfurt School scholars interrogate a variety of different cultural traditions, economic practices, and institutions of power, for my work, I focus on Horkheimer’s research with Theodor Adorno on the US culture industries. After the two scholars found themselves in Los Angeles in the 1940s, they began analyzing the American media system under the framework of the “culture industry.” Their writings contend that “all mass culture under monopoly is identical [. . .] the truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce.”⁸ By extending Enlightenment logic to the production of mass media like film and music, Horkheimer and Adorno argue the culture industries commodify and homogenize the arts. Technologies required to mass produce American culture, they claim, echo the ideologies of “those whose economic position in society is strongest. Technical rationality today is the rationality of domination. It is the compulsive character of a society alienated from itself.”⁹ The culture industry exists as a total system that alienates subjects from the objects of their cultural labor, promoting pseudo-individuality and the illusion of choice. However, by viewing power as flowing from the top-down, Horkheimer and Adorno construct “the masses” as mere pawns of the culture industry with few opportunities for resistance against the dominance of monopoly capitalism. However, as Adorno clarifies in a later work, “the masses are not the measure but the ideology of the culture industry, even though the culture industry itself could barely exist without adapting to the masses.”¹⁰ Thus, although Adorno and Horkheimer understand audiences as the objects

of domination by mass media, the masses are still capable of interpretive actions that escape the ideology promoted by the culture industry.

JÜRGEN HABERMAS AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

After World War II, Horkheimer and Adorno return to Germany and reinstat the official Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. While numerous scholars study under Horkheimer and Adorno's tutelage, for my dissertation, I have drawn primarily on the work of Jürgen Habermas and his theory of the "public sphere." In his seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (republished in English in 1989), Habermas argues that as liberal, democratic ideologies pervaded the Western world in the 17th through 19th centuries, new arenas for public discourse emerged in the forms of coffee shops and salons; neither governmental nor economic, these new bourgeois public spheres offered citizens social spaces wherein social hierarchies were bracketed in favor of rational discourse that could affect social transformation. Situated between the private realm of commodity exchange, social labor, familial space, and the public authorities of the state and court, the public sphere acted as "the vehicle" through which "public opinion" could be put in touch with "the needs of the state."¹¹ In these discursive spaces, private individuals could critically and rationally engage the state through deliberative and participatory democratic action. To achieve the status of a bourgeois public sphere, Habermas sets up three normative criteria for institutions to meet. First, bourgeois public spheres encourage equality of their members by disregarding social status and hierarchies; secondly, discourse within these publics focus on critically engaging and interpreting domains (e.g. art, literature, philosophy) which had previously only been engaged by the elites of the church and state; and finally, these publics include anyone who could access the general market of the cultural products that were

being discussed in the public sphere.¹² Thus, the bourgeois public sphere relies on an open-market of information, so the public opinion achieved within the public sphere represents the deliberation of any citizen who wishes to participate.

For Habermas, the bourgeois society in 18th and early-19th century Europe meets these requirements through three “institutional designs:”

First, the private autonomy of citizens, each of whom pursues a life of his or her own; second, democratic citizenship, that is, the inclusion of free and equal citizens in the political community; and third, the independence of a public sphere that operates as an intermediary system between state and society.¹³

According to his normative theory of democracy, these three institutions ought to guarantee equal protection for individuals under the law, the potential for political participation by interested individuals, and the “appropriate contribution of a political public sphere to the formation of considered public opinions.”¹⁴ However, as electronic media systems develop during the latter half of the 19th-century, they begin relying on advertising to attract the mass audiences derided by Horkheimer and Adorno;

channels of communication became more regulated, and the opportunities for access to public communication became subjected to even greater selective pressure. Therewith emerged a new sort of influence, i.e., media power, which, used for purposes of manipulation, once and for all took care of innocence and the principle of publicity. The public sphere, simultaneously prestructured and dominated by the mass media, developed into an arena infiltrated by power in which, by means of topic selection and topical contributions, a battle is fought not only over influence but over the control of communication flows that affect behavior while their strategic intentions are kept as hidden as possible.¹⁵

As institutions of power infiltrate media outlets and influence the deliberative communicative action of the public, the bourgeois public spheres begins to lose the ability to (a) encourage critical debate and deliberative communicative action, and (b) supply the state with an accurate gauge of public opinion.

Habermas's normative theory of the bourgeois public sphere has inspired vigorous debates among scholars interested in the continuing relationships between culture, technology, economics, and politics. Early critiques of Habermas's theory often follow Michel Foucault's argument against the top-down structures of power Habermas derives from Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry thesis. Foucault claims that oppressive power can be challenged by discursive truths, and Habermas, he contends, promotes a view of "juridico-discursive" form of power that "produces nothing but 'limit and lack.'"¹⁶ For Foucault, structures of power can be repressive, but also liberatory given the proper circumstances. Following Foucault, Nancy Fraser contests Habermas's "bracketing" of social inequalities in the public sphere because access to these ideal publics in 17th and 18th-centuries was essentially limited to white males. Rather, Fraser contends that a multiplicity of "subaltern counterpublics" continually negotiate civil society and the state by offering "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."¹⁷ Under Fraser's model, voices marginalized within the liberal, bourgeois model of a public sphere gain the power to inform public opinion by creating counterpublics that challenge the definitions of public and private maintained within the bourgeois public sphere. For instance, as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue, the political success of the LGBT movement, beginning during the 1990s and extending to today have depended upon reconfiguring queer culture as public; by destigmatizing the intimacies of same-sex couples and through the establishment of queer social spaces in public (they use Christopher Street in New York City as a primary example), the LGBT community has opened

a wedge to the transformation of those social norms that require only its static intelligibility or its *deadness* as a source of meaning. In these cases, though, paths through publicity led to the production of nonheteronormative bodily contexts. They intended nonheteronormative worlds because they refused to pretend that privacy was their

ground; because they were forms of sociability that delinked money and family from the scene of the good life; because they made sex the consequence of public mediations and collective self-activity in a way that made for unpredicted pleasures; because, in turn, they attempted to make a context for support for their practices; because their pleasures were not purchased by a redemptive pastoralism of sex or by mandatory amnesia about failure, shame, and aversion.¹⁸

As nonheteronormative sexual relations began to enter the public sphere, queer culture and theory contested the public heteronormative hierarchies that construct homosexual intimacy as private and heteronormative relationships as public. Berlant and Warner's claims then echo Seyla Benhabib's assertion that Habermas's inherent distinctions between public and private further discourses of power that "legitimize women's oppression and exploitation in the private realm."¹⁹ By critically engaging the binary of public and private, feminist and queer theory effectively exposes the gendered blindspot of the Habermasian public sphere, along with his potentially problematic understanding of power.

Michael Warner further expands on many of these critiques in his investigation of "publics" and "counterpublics."²⁰ He argues that the social totality of "*the* public" is often confused with "*a* public;" while "*the* public" often refers to social totality in which all are included, "*a* public" is a "concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space."²¹ Warner contends that publics and counterpublics are imaginary cultural forms within which strangers circulate discursive texts. Drawing on Louis Althusser's concept of "interpellation," Warner argues that certain discourses "hail" individuals "by virtue of their address;"²² only once someone produces a text or speech addressing a public will it come into being. By being addressed as a public, strangers enter into discursive relationships with each other based on participation with the given public, uniting

strangers through participation alone, [. . .]. Strangers come into relationship by its means, though the resulting social relationship might be peculiarly indirect and

unspecifiable. [. . .] In the context of a public [. . .] strangers can be treated as already belonging to our world. More: they *must* be. [. . .] Publics orient us to strangers in a different way. They are no longer merely people whom one does not yet know; rather, an environment of strangerhood is the necessary premise of some of our most prized ways of being.²³

For example, on reddit, anonymous strangers connect with each other through the site's networks in order to circulate texts and further address the members of the publics formed within specific subreddits.

Through the circulation of discourse across time, publics sustain themselves by organizing their own histories and temporalities.²⁴ According to Warner, publics rely on archived and indexed records of their texts and discourses to establish “style” that allow “participants in its discourse to understand themselves as directly and actively belonging to a social entity that exists historically in secular time and has consciousness of itself, though it has no existence apart from the activity of its own discursive circulation.”²⁵ By establishing its own existence as a social and cultural form that exists historically, a public represents what Warner terms a “poetic world making.”²⁶ He argues that the ideology of a rational-critical public sphere

obscures the importance of the poetic functions of both language and corporeal expressivity in giving a particular shape to publics. The public is thought to exist empirically and to require persuasion rather than poesis. Public circulation is understood as rational discussion writ large.²⁷

Warner suggests that the ideology of a rational-critical public sphere rejects the poetic dimensions of language and rhetoric that influence discourse across any public or counterpublic.

Other theorists have questioned Habermas's reliance on rationality and deliberative discourse as a method for emancipation. Chantal Mouffe contests Habermas's reliance on “deliberative democracy” as the most effective paradigm of liberal democratic theory by arguing for a theory of “agonistic spaces.”²⁸ Mouffe argues that theorists, like Habermas, support a deliberative model of democracy by relying on public opinion that is formulated through the rational

deliberation among equal and free citizens. However, as Mouffe contends, for these models, success depends entirely upon the extent to which “it realizes the conditions of ideal discourse: the more equal and impartial, the more open that process is and the less participants are coerced and ready to be guided by the force of the better argument, the more likely truly generalizable interests will be accepted by all persons relevantly affected.”²⁹ By expanding the critiques of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Slavoy Zizek, Mouffe argues that the obstacles to achieving the ideal speech situation necessary for effective deliberative democratic action are ontological in nature; without regulation, communication cannot exist, but regulation inherently impedes Habermas’s ideal speech situation. Deliberative democracy denies the conflictual nature of politics as collective identities define themselves within the public sphere; like Foucault and Fraser, Mouffe argues that the Habermasian conception of deliberative democracy misunderstands power relations by assuming that claims to social legitimacy are based on rational decision-making, rather than exercises of power.³⁰ Instead, Mouffe offers a project of “radical and plural democracy” that conceptualizes power as constituting social relations; “agonistic pluralism” acknowledges the impossibility of rational, collective decision-making and recognizes the limits of its own inclusiveness. Mouffe’s model accepts the antagonistic relationships between political opponents, and rather than focusing on the impediments to the ideal speech situation, agonistic pluralism promotes awareness of these limits in order to simultaneously engage publics in political action while avoiding the

ever present temptation that exists in democratic societies to naturalize their frontiers and essentialize their identities. Such an approach would, therefore, be much more receptive than the deliberative democracy model to the multiplicity of voices that a pluralist society encompasses, and to the complexity of the power structure that this network of differences implies.³¹

Through transparency and open discourse about the limits of inclusiveness and the democratic, agonistic pluralism offers an alternative to Habermas's reliance on rational deliberation in an ideal communicative space by, instead, focusing on the conflict that is inherent to the conclusion of any deliberation.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND DIGITAL CULTURE

While these criticisms have exposed some weaknesses to Habermas's original conception of the public sphere, his work has still become a part of the dominant discourse surrounding the development of the Internet and digital culture. Habermas argues that his work can be used productively to “determine whether the exercise of domination and power persists as a negative constant, as it were, of history—or whether as a historical category itself, it is open to change.”³² As a normative theory of communication and political action, the Habermasian public sphere can be employed as a framework to clarify how current publics impede the ideal speech situation needed for an effective deliberative democracy. Thus, when the World Wide Web began affording users opportunities to engage publics outside of the culture industry, scholars began employing Habermas's public sphere framework to critically engage the implications of this new technology held for institutions of power. Early cyber-utopians predict that the web would lead to a more fully engaged populace that could effectively consolidate public opinion without influence from the state or commercial-based economy; as Evgeny Morozov notes, early theorists often see the Web as a completely open forum capable of almost “supernatural things, from eradicating illiteracy in Africa to organizing all of the world's information.”³³ Often, early inspirations for the Web drew upon works of science fiction, like William Gibson's vision of “cyberspace” in his 1984 novel, *Neuromancer* and Neal Stephenson's “metaverse” in his 1992

work, *Snow Crash*. Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron argue that much of this idealization of new technology can be traced to the “California ideology” that fundamentally influenced early computing design in the 1960s and 1970s by combining the “free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies.”³⁴ George P. Landow traces utopian discourses surrounding computing to the early *Memex* machine, which would aid information aid information retrieval, annotation and “associative indexing” through hyperlinking text; early computer developers, like Theodor Nelson, Douglas Englebart and Andries van Dam predict that these changes to textuality would “produce effects on our culture, particularly on our literature, education, criticism, and scholarship, just as radical as those produced by Gutenberg’s moveable type.”³⁵ Given the discourse that developed around computing during the 1950s through the 1980s, J. P. Barlow’s 1995 assertion that the Web represents “the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire” does not seem too far from the primary lines of discourse surrounding the Internet in the 1990s.³⁶ A year later, Barlow writes “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” declaring:

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us. You have no moral right to rule us nor do you possess any methods of enforcement we have true reason to fear.³⁷

Barlow’s polemic against the institutions of traditional media and the authority of the state over cyberspace appear quaint after Edward Snowden’s recent revelations about online mass surveillance. Although recent uprisings across the Middle-East have rejuvenated idealists, as corporate interests continue to push towards the extension of intellectual property and laws abolishing net neutrality as means to regulate the Web, the overly humanistic cyber-utopianism

and overly pessimistic dystopian views of the 1990s have been generally rejected in favor of more nuanced and qualified understandings of the political potentials of the web.

Within this utopian discourse surrounding digital technology, a number of scholars began critically engaging the potential of a digital public sphere to increase democratic participation and political participation. As Irene Ward notes in 1997, although the participatory nature of the Internet “and the bourgeois public sphere do seem similar in many ways and seem to point to the Internet's potential to function as a form of public sphere, other factors such as the limits of the technology, economic factors, and differing historical circumstances also seem to undercut that potential.”³⁸ In her thorough review of early literature concerning the Web as public sphere, Zizi Papacharissi concludes that

research so far has shown that *access* to information, *reciprocity* of communication, and *commercialization* are the three primary conditions that prohibit the transition from public space to public sphere. A new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere, in that a virtual space simply enhances discussion; a virtual sphere should enhance democracy.³⁹

Jodi Dean contends that instead of the grounded political action that Habermas saw arise from the bourgeois public sphere, communication within the digital public sphere simply circulates without affecting political resistance. Under “communicative capitalism,” messages circulate through the public sphere but fail to change official political policy, which “seems to run independently of the politics that circulates as content [. . .] Under conditions of the intensive and extensive proliferation of media, messages are more likely to get lost as mere contributions to the circulation of content.”⁴⁰ As the norms of access, inclusion, and participation expand through global communication networks, communicative capitalism inverts the emancipatory potential of the Web; “instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence, instead of enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the

deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world's peoples."⁴¹ Dean rejects emancipatory potential of the Web as a collection of fantasies that actually undermine the goals of deliberative democracy, in addition to the liberal, bourgeois public sphere.

While Dean's work is compelling, and I will address her theory of communicative capitalism later in this dissertation, she is also incredibly pessimistic about the digital realm despite admitting some arenas for resistive potential. Less pessimistically, Papacharissi argues that models of the digital sphere should

represent more realistic assessments of online media potential. Romanticized retrospectives of past and future civic engagement often impose language and expectation that curtail the true potential of technologies of the present. The public sphere can be helpful in critiquing and contextualizing the political role of online media, but not in prescribing that role.⁴²

Instead of focusing on the utopian possibility of the Internet as the ideal speech situation, Papacharissi argues for a nuanced description of digital culture and the political potentials of the Internet.

Axel Bruns attempts to provide this level of nuance through his theory of "gatematching." Drawing on David Manning White's seminal notion of "gatekeeping," Bruns argues that the web provides a new practice of news production and distribution that relies on the participatory journalism of Internet users to create an alternative type of news source. Rather than relying on editors and reporters to determine the content that is allowed through the "input," "output," and "response" gates as traditional news outlets, online news is distributed through readers who act as "Internet librarians," watching "the output gates of as wide a range of traditional and nontraditional publishers of information as possible, with a view using this information as source material in news reports."⁴³ Bruns envisions a culture of participatory journalism in which

“producers;” “users of news websites who engage with such sites interchangeably in consumptive *and* productive modes” and perform participatory journalism.⁴⁴ Through several case studies of online news distribution models, Bruns explores how Internet users engage in open-source news, collaborative editing, and participatory journalism. He concludes that the collaborative news productions explored in his book “enable, extend, and enhance public discovery, discussion and deliberation of the news.”⁴⁵ Thus, Bruns sees online, collaborative news production as an alternative to “mainstream” news by drawing on Herbert Gans’s “two-tier” model of media, in which traditional models of media are differentiated from new media, which provide a “multiperspectival” and “annotative” reporting style similar to alternative media.⁴⁶ Thus, for Bruns, the public sphere presented through the digital technology of the Internet may indicate an alternative news source that contests the hegemony of traditional models of information distribution found within television, newspaper and radio news.

THEORIES OF TECHNOLOGY, CULTURE, AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

Having established the traditions of critical theory and the virtual publics and counterpublics, I now turn to my theoretical conception of the forces that influence these cultural forms. In this section, I explicate theories of technological affordances, cultural practices and political economy; in my findings, I draw on these traditions to analyze reddit’s publics and counterpublics.

TECHNOLOGICAL AFFORDANCES

As Habermas notes when describing the shift of the liberal, bourgeois public sphere to the late capitalist mode, technologies of production help determine the style and political

effectiveness of any given public sphere. Thus, the decentered structure of the Internet (which offers anybody with access the ability to produce mediated content) represents a dramatic shift from the technological limitations of television, film, print publishing and radio. Canadian theorist Marshall McLuhan claims that “the medium is the message,” effectively arguing the technologies of media are the determining element for media content, and production.⁴⁷ New communication technologies, he contends, would further extend humans sense across the world and create a interconnected “global village.”⁴⁸ Thus, McLuhan is often seen as a spiritual predecessor for much of the utopian discourse that surrounded the development of the Web in the 1990s. However, as British cultural theorist, Raymond Williams argues, McLuhan unambiguously separates technology from the institutions in which it was developed, thus placing technology in a deterministic relationship with social hierarchies, cultural practices and political economies. By contrast, Williams envisions technology as “at once an intention and an effect of a particular social order.”⁴⁹ Ultimately, although Williams considers technology as part of an indissoluble, dynamic cultural whole which defies the reductionism of McLuhan’s technological determinism, Neil Postman effectively institutionalizes McLuhan’s thought as “media ecology” in the 1980s at New York University. In his philosophical polemic *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Postman argues that electronic technologies fundamentally changed the epistemological foundations of public discourse by “encouraging certain uses of the intellect, by favoring certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom, and by demanding a certain kind of content.”⁵⁰ While Habermas sees the economic influence of capitalist advertising as cause for the decline of rational debate within the public sphere, Postman points to the technology of electronic media. However, like McLuhan

before him, Postman falls into the same trap of technological determinism and dehumanizes individual agency by promoting conceptions of passive, mass audiences.

Nevertheless, as Robert McChesney notes, Postman's work creates "space for critical work" within media studies that included a theory of technology.⁵¹ For my work, I intend to avoid McLuhan and Postman's technological determinism by drawing on James J. Gibson's theory of "affordances." To understand the role of the human sensory system as perception, Gibson argues that early human senses acted as as tentacles and feelers by seeking out information about the environment surrounding them, and the environment, in turn, afforded early humans with the ability to construct a new cultural environment through tools, fire, and speech.⁵² Gibson's theory of affordances marks a radical departure from traditional theories of meaning and value;

the perceiving of an affordance is not a process of perceiving a value-free physical object to which meaning is somehow added in a way that no one has been able to agree upon; it is a process of perceiving a value-rich ecological object. Any substance, any surface, any layout has some affordance for benefit or injury to someone.⁵³

Unlike McLuhan and Postman who imply a certain inherent value to technology, Gibson imagines the environment as full of potential affordances, if the individual within the environment can perceive it. Throughout the rest of this dissertation, I rely on affordances as Gibson describes them, but I extend them into the cultural and political economic practices that have shaped reddit's public spheres. Just as the affordances of the environment provided early man certain abilities once they were perceivable, the technologies, cultures, economies and politics that inform reddit's public spheres afford users certain capabilities once they can be perceived.

CULTURAL STUDIES AND PRACTICE

Like the Frankfurt School, Raymond Williams draws on the traditions established by Western Marxists to establish a model of society that escaped the reductionistic tendencies in Marx's base/superstructure model. While vulgar Marxists argue for a social theory that reduced the entire cultural superstructure of society to the economic base as the sole determinant; in opposition, Williams pursues a cultural theory that understands individual praxis within an indissoluble whole.⁵⁴ A member of the British *New Left* movement during the 1960s and 1970s, Williams rejects traditional theories of culture like, Matthew Arnold's famous aphorism that culture is "the best that has been thought and said in the world."⁵⁵ Rather, Williams claims that "culture is ordinary" and refuses to accept the binary between high and low culture, previously implicated by social theorists.⁵⁶ He advocates for the analysis of "structures of feeling" that represented "the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life."⁵⁷ Williams chooses these words carefully, making sure to avoid ideological contentions by exploring "meanings and values as they are actually lived and felt" while still acknowledging that "structures of feeling" represent a complex set of "specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension."⁵⁸ However, because he refuses the reductionism of vulgar Marxism, Williams adopts Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to explain "the processes by which ruling classes and groups shape popular consent through the production and diffusion of meanings and values by the major ideological institutions in a society."⁵⁹ With the addition of Gramscian hegemony, Williams establishes the theoretical ground for his cultural materialist method that avoids the economically deterministic elements of vulgar Marxism and becomes a fundamental building block for Stuart Hall's development of the *Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham*. For Hall, Cultural Studies represents the combination of Williams's culturalism

with the structural Marxism promoted by the French theorist, Louis Althusser. Like Williams, Althusser breaks from the traditional Marxist base/superstructure scheme in favor of analyzing forms and structures of ideology. Ideology, he argues “*hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of the subject.”⁶⁰ By decentering the agent as the center of analysis in favor of the relational analysis between ideological forms and structures and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), Althusser’s concept of interpellation is emblematic of the antihumanistic nature of structuralism.

While the two traditions of structuralism and culturalism often match well, they also expose each other’s limitations. Through Williams’s incorporation of Gramscian hegemony, culturalism provides autonomy for human praxis and balance between forces of determination and freedom; structuralism provides a balance to culturalism’s humanism by focusing on the determinate conditions of social formation. As Hall states, structuralism and culturalism maintain a centrality to media studies because they couple culture and ideology, problematize the specificity of form and practices, and

They are correct in insisting that this question—which resumes all the problems of a non-reductive determinacy—is the heart of the matter: and that, on the solution of this problem will turn the capacity of Cultural Studies to supercede the endless oscillations between idealism and reductionism. They confront—even if in radically opposed ways—the dialectic between conditions and consciousness.⁶¹

Hall hopes that by balancing each other out, structuralism and culturalism can center Cultural Studies between essentialist and relativist viewpoints that can be used to attack an individual paradigm’s theoretical core. Hall sees Gramsci as “an antidote to criticisms of Althusser, a bridge to culturalism, and a possible path beyond the limitations of both.”⁶² Gramsci’s notions of hegemony and the common sense of ideology reinforces Althusserian Marxism, and this treatment of the base/superstructure links with culturalist Marxism.

With the combination of these three traditions in mind, Hall recommends that Cultural Studies “think forward” with the best traits of culturalism, structuralism and Gramsci in mind.

Under his theoretical guidance, a plethora of research adopts a Cultural Studies framework.

Graeme Turner breaks Cultural Studies research into three categories:

- Textual studies of the mass media and the ways that these operate to reproduce hegemony and ideology
- Ethnographic explorations of everyday life, especially those of subcultures.
- Studies of political ideologies such as those of Thatcherism and racist nationalism.⁶³

Audience analysis becomes a prominent goal of media research, specifically within television studies after Hall introduces his encoding/ decoding model.⁶⁴ These often include ethnographic analyses of audiences alongside textual details about programming. Additionally, Hall’s proposition of oppositional, negotiated and dominant readings increases the agency of audience members and inspired resistive understandings of power. Hall’s resistive understanding of audience agency and power helps inspire research into media representations of bounded cultures, identities and politics.⁶⁵ Research on commodity racism in advertising,⁶⁶ gender and ideology,⁶⁷ and moral panics⁶⁸ lead to increasing scrutiny of political legislation and policy within Cultural Studies.

Across the Atlantic, several scholars began to follow Hall’s cultural turn by using his framework to explore American culture.⁶⁹ However, as Alan O’Connor notes, the early American adopters of Cultural Studies struggled to escape the rubric of postmodernism in which “the sense of culture as practice, form, and institution has been lost. This has resulted in confused thinking about how Cultural Studies might look as institution, practice, and cultural form in the United States.”⁷⁰ While O’Connor critiques American cultural theorist, Henry Jenkins’s work on fandoms and participatory culture, this work still represents a useful paradigm for analyzing

reddit because Jenkins focuses heavily on analyzing the “everyday practices” of media audiences. Following the French philosopher Michel de Certeau, Jenkins examines fan practices in the early 1990s by focusing on how they engage with media through “textual poaching.”⁷¹ By playing with media texts, fans challenge the authorial power of the text by “constructing their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media.”⁷² In 2006, Jenkins expanded his notion of participatory culture in his later book, *Convergence Culture*, exploring how the discursive circulation of cultural content created in participatory culture represents “a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content. This book is about the work—and play—spectators perform in the new media system.”⁷³ Within convergence and participatory culture, Jenkins argues, individual practices can represent challenges to the power dynamics of a producer/consumer relationship while maintaining a critical view of their resistive capabilities.

While Jenkins’ work represents early and continuing efforts to focus on online cultures, more recently, Nick Couldry has expanded the notion of cultural practices and argued for their analysis as the central object on which media researchers ought to focus. Through the paradigm of “practice,” Couldry argues that media scholars can find “a vast array of things to explore and a useful source of tension with the instinct to theorize about media in the abstract.”⁷⁴ By analyzing how people actually use media as a practice, scholars can avoid claims that

the basis of media institutions’ capacity for ritual lies first in the claim that, beneath society’s real pressures of centralization, is a core of ‘truth,’ a ‘natural’ centre that we should value as the centre of ‘our’ way of life, ‘our’ values. This is *the myth of the centre*, and while it can be appropriated exclusively by the state (as in Nazi Germany), it is also open to wider definition and appropriation, for example by media institutions.⁷⁵

By drawing on Couldry’s paradigm of practice, I aim to avoid universalizing the cultures of reddit as monolithic entities in order to provide a thorough analysis of reddit’s publics that

resists reductionism. Couldry emphasizes four primary advantages to adopting this model of practice from sociology. First, by focusing on practice scholars can narrow in on the “regularity of action” and the patterns of daily routines and schedules of web users.⁷⁶ Secondly, like Habermas, Couldry draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of language as action to expose the socially-constructed nature of media practices and their “capacities, constraints and power.”⁷⁷ Third, practices point to a set of unfixed “human needs” for “coordination, interaction, community, trust and freedom;” and finally, practice provides a model for thinking normatively about “how we should live with media.”⁷⁸ Thus, by considering how individuals act with regards to media, analyses of media practices are “interested in actions that are *directly oriented* to media, actions that *involve* media without necessarily having media as their aim or object; and actions whose possibility is *conditioned* by prior existence, presence or functioning of media.”⁷⁹ By considering the everyday practices of redditors on the site, I explore how reddit’s publics act within the context of the reddit interface without reducing their actions to functions of technology and political economy. Rather, digital practices exemplified on reddit act in coordination with the technology and political economies of the Internet to inform the style of public spheres found on reddit and the communities engaging them.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MEDIA

Despite Cultural Studies success in escaping Vulgar Marxism, some scholars reject the new field’s critique of Marx’s base/superstructure model. Fundamentally, political economists of media understand the capitalist economic base of most contemporary media systems as the most important factor for understanding media industries and messages. Dallas Smythe

cements the schism between the two fields after he contends that Marxism had habitually maintained a blindspot to the analysis of communication.⁸⁰ Because Cultural Studies scholars focused on interpreting textual ideologies, they often ignore how networks actively sold audiences to advertisers packaged as demographics and ratings.⁸¹ For Smythe, mass media represents yet another system of domination in which

all non-sleeping time of most of the population is work time. This work time is devoted to the production of commodities-in-general (both where people get paid for their work and as members of audiences) and in the production and reproduction of labor power (the pay for which is subsumed by their income). Of the off-the-job work time, the largest single block is time of the audiences which is sold to advertisers.⁸²

According to this treatise, the content of television is irrelevant because networks only offer it as a “free lunch” to entice audience’s to watch ads, which is how they labor.⁸³ Under this framework, the political economy of media focused on “the study of *the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources.*”⁸⁴ This definition includes (among other versions) the classical political economy of Adam Smith, the radical critique of Marxist socialism, neoliberalism, neoconservatism, neoMarxian and feminist political economies.⁸⁵

As the field of political economy began to grow during the 1970s and 1980s, accusations of pessimism and reductionism continually dogged their work. As Robert McChesney notes, “political economy of communication was always on thin ice due to its willingness to ask the sorts of questions that antagonized people in power.”⁸⁶ Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s claim that national news services delivered propaganda for the elite was met with cries of “conspiracy” and accusations that their work positions the audience “dupes.”⁸⁷ Likewise, Chomsky’s continuing crusade against “neoliberalism” in American politics has also proven politically controversial. Beginning with the Reagan administration in the US and the Thatcher administration in the UK, deregulation became the guiding principle for federal

financial and cultural policies in both countries. These neoliberal programs aimed to “liberalize trade and finance, let markets set price (‘get prices right’), end inflation (‘macroeconomic stability’), [and] privatize.”⁸⁸ As global ownership of banks and media industries begins to concentrate into the hands of fewer corporations, wealth also begins to concentrate in the hands of the elite few; according to Oxfam, by 2016, the wealthiest 1% of the world will control half of the world’s wealth.⁸⁹ Chomsky argues that “the ‘corporatization of America’ during the last century has been an attack on democracy—and on markets, part of the shift from something resembling ‘capitalism’ to the highly administered markets of the modern state/corporate era.”⁹⁰

While Smythe and Chomsky’s theories provide an effective framework for analyzing the political economy of contemporary media systems, the field of political economy provides little room for audience agency and individual acts of resistance under neoliberal capitalism.

As Eileen Meehan argues,

influence is not the same as control. Engaged viewers can regard television with a critical consciousness that does contest, challenge, and struggle with its visions [...] Our ability to achieve critical consciousness remains rooted in the intersection between the political economy in which we live, the collectivities with whom we live, the sense that we make of lived contradictions, and the agency that we exercise together.⁹¹

Unlike Smythe and Chomsky who posit that the culture industry exerts power by manipulating the mass audience from above, Meehan argues that although they are, in fact, commodified, audiences can still critically engage with media texts, and therefore, texts must also be analyzed in relation to the audience commodity.

Although political economists of media purposefully separate themselves from the textual and audience-based scholarship found in Cultural Studies, I believe that both fields provide necessary theoretical approaches and methods for my analysis of reddit’s publics and counterpublics. McChesney points to the work of Toby Miller, Janice Peck, Janet Wasko, Larry

Grossberg, Jim Wittebols, Eileen Meehan, and Vincent Mosco as examples of scholarship that draws “from elements of both the political economy and Cultural Studies.”⁹² Likewise, I hope to bridge the schism between the two fields by integrating the work of Harvard law professor, Internet activist and campaign finance reformer, Lawrence Lessig. Lessig’s early work (until 2008 when he began to focus on campaign finance reform) explores on the paradigmatic shift between “read-only” (RO) culture that dominated during the era of analog technology, and the “read-write” (RW) culture that developed with the advent of digital technology. Analog technologies limit the reproduction of texts because the copy is inherently inferior to the original; thus, products of the analog culture industry are limited and non-reproducible which makes “the content industry possible. For this nature limit[s] the opportunity for consumers to compete with producers (by ‘sharing’).”⁹³ However, as computing becomes ubiquitous during the late-20th and early-21st centuries, copying becomes easy, cheap and flawless; in RW culture, copying becomes an everyday practice for computer users and challenges the culture industry’s hegemonic grip over cultural production. Cultural products once considered “rivalrous” (a resource which is permanently removed from economic circulation once consumed) quickly become “nonrivalrous,” as identical copies can be created without taking anything away from the original.⁹⁴ Thus, in RW culture, nonrivalrous products can be held “in common” by the public and be consumed and reproduced by anyone without succumbing to the “tragedy of the commons” wherein individuals deplete a limited resource that is held by all.⁹⁵ Rather, Lessig contends, the Internet affords an “innovation commons” wherein users can access and reproduce nonrivalrous resources to “develop and deploy new applications or content *without the permission of anyone else*,”⁹⁶ which do “not compete with or weaken the market for the creative work that gets remixed. These markets are complementary, not competitive.”⁹⁷

Unlike any other communication technology, the Internet potentially affords users access to an innovation commons through three communicative layers: the physical infrastructure, the computer code, and the actual content on the web.⁹⁸ While the infrastructure and content of the web are based within the commercial economies of telephone companies and the culture industry, the code layer is heavily influenced by the open-source software movement that emphasizes a “sharing economy” in which new software developments are held in common by members of the open-source public. Although these economic models may appear oppositional, Lessig argues that the Web affords a platform for a “hybrid” economy “that aims to leverage value from a sharing economy, or it is a sharing economy that build a commercial entity to better support its sharing aims.”⁹⁹ Publics found on *YouTube*, *Flickr*, and *Slashdot* combine sharing and commercial economies to engage in the logics of the Web while compensating users for their labor (unlike the commodification of the audience by television producers and advertisers). Ultimately, Lessig asserts that although the Internet affords a platform for the development of an innovation commons online, it will only come to fruition

when each economy—the commercial and the sharing—validates the other. If those within a sharing economy hate commerce—if they’re disgusted with the idea of anyone profiting, anywhere—then the prospects for healthy hybrids are not good. Likewise, if those within the commercial economy ignore the ethic of sharing—if they treat members of the sharing economy like customers, or kids—then the prospects for a healthy hybrid are not good either.¹⁰⁰

An innovation commons is only “healthy” if the two economic frameworks buttress each other and support the other’s economic model. However, Lessig’s hybrid formulation implicates a spectrum of economic hybridity, on which most websites find themselves. Nearly every website draws on the traditions of sharing economies and commercial economies to survive in the digital marketplace; however, the “health” of the hybrid economy differs, depending on the receptivity of both sides to incorporating the other within their economic framework. Depending on the

receptiveness of the workers in each economy (sharing and commercial) to incorporating elements of the alternative economic model, the hybrid found on a website will, or will not, provide the affordances necessary for an innovations commons. However, while Lessig limits his discussion of hybrids to their capacity to generate innovation, my work in this dissertation explores their influence on the digital publics and counterpublics found on reddit.

REDDIT LITERATURE

Although the concept of the public sphere and critical theory, in general, have been applied to discourse about the potentials of the Internet for political engagement, literature about reddit has largely avoided this question. Some researchers use reddit as a case study for modeling online crowdsourced content and discourse,¹⁰¹ analyzing uses for microblogging,¹⁰² exploring and improving user-interface and information retrieval design,¹⁰³ along with investigating energy efficient data storage and transmission.¹⁰⁴ Other scholars adopt approaches from the social sciences, and apply qualitative methods to focus on the development and maintenance of online communities on reddit,¹⁰⁵ the social psychology of altruism through social networking,¹⁰⁶ and the construction of social roles and identity in online environments.¹⁰⁷ Librarians Mar Buigues-García and Vicent Giménez-Chornet interrogate redditor's roles as information curators in the digital age; likewise, Becker Bernd interrogates how Web 2.0 technologies have affected the role of libraries in the 21st century.¹⁰⁸ Several other scholars explore how teachers can use social news sites, like reddit, in the classroom,¹⁰⁹ and for evaluating scientific research through social media.¹¹⁰ Health researchers Navid J. Zamani, Graham S. Smith, and Gerald Monk draw on the discourse on reddit to examine ceremonies surrounding mental health.¹¹¹ Often, researchers draw on reddit's population because it represents an easily accessible population that has already

declared their interest in a given topic by subscribing to a subreddit. For example, although Jesse Fox and Wai Yen Tang recruit the majority of their participants from reddit for their study on sexism and video games;¹¹² likewise, Gary Hsieh, Youyang Hou, Ian Chen and Khai N. Truong surveyed over 1,000 redditors to better understand “parasocial relationships” and “volunteer socializers” online, and offer practical advice for online communities that encourage pro-social engagement by their members.¹¹³

Other studies analyze various elements that are specific to reddit.¹¹⁴ Philipp Singer et al. investigate how content submitted to reddit has changed over time by crawling reddit’s API between January 2008 and December 2012, in addition to administering surveys to willing redditors.¹¹⁵ While the authors determined that reddit has experienced structural diversification, as the number of subreddits has grown exponentially since 2008, they also show that links submitted to the site have become more concentrated, and reddit’s content now comes primarily from self-posts and pictures from the Imgur domain. Given the shift away from diverse content, Singer et al. claim that “Reddit has been experiencing an increasing, fundamental shift from ‘out-reference’ to more ‘self-reference’ [. . .] Reddit has transformed from a dedicated gateway to the Web (“The front page of the Internet”) to an increasingly self-referential community.”¹¹⁶ Eric Gilbert shows that although reddit touts itself as the “voice of the Internet,” 52% of the most popular links on the site were overlooked the first time they were submitted, suggesting “that many potentially popular links (i.e., ones the Reddit community would value) are ignored, jeopardizing Reddit’s core purpose.”¹¹⁷ Likewise, Tim Weninger Xihao Avi Zhu and Jiawei Han show that comments submitted earlier on reddit tend to be rated more highly than comments submitted later.¹¹⁸ Himabindu Lakkaraju, Julian McAuley and Jure Leskovec’s analysis of over 130,000 images and their titles show the importance of a properly titled post on reddit by

developing community and language models to help gauge how much of an image's success "is due to the quality of the content, and how much is due to having used a good title, at the right time, in the right community."¹¹⁹ Sangmin Oh et al. also investigate the distribution of images across reddit (as well as Twitter and Flickr) as a "personalized image economy;" by examining user "supply and consumption profiles," the authors conclude that different users exhibit different behavior while supplying and consuming images, and they advise social media optimization from both viewpoints.¹²⁰

Although most of these studies primarily represent scholarship from computer science related disciplines, the social sciences also hold clear relevance for understanding reddit's development. As Fabian Flöck notes, reddit's role as an online social news source could have theoretical implications for the development of theories of agenda-setting as proposed by McCombs and Shaw,¹²¹ along with George Gerbner's cultivation theory.¹²² Following Flöck's idea, Ben Wasike analyzes how reddit frames the news through a content-analysis, concluding that science, technology, human interest and entertainment are, in general, the dominant frames for the top-voted content on reddit.¹²³ Other researchers follow this lead by using reddit in collaboration with other websites like Digg, Del.icio.us, or 4Chan to begin exploring the influence of social news sites on news distribution; these studies often focus on how reddit and other social news sites have covered disasters¹²⁴ like Hurricane Sandy,¹²⁵ and the Boston Bombings.¹²⁶ Likewise, a number of scholars have begun exploring the political implications of reddit's interface through examinations of reddit's role in the protests against the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Protect IP ACT (PIPA),¹²⁷ along with President Obama's 2012 AMA session.¹²⁸ In 2011, Mark Deckert, Abram Stern and Warren Sack proposed that the US government utilize reddit's platform as an open-source alternative to their problematic website, which supports the

President's Council of Advisers on Science and Technology.¹²⁹ Other researchers use reddit to address various legal concerns, including redditors' amateur media productions and its implications for copyright,¹³⁰ free speech online,¹³¹ and reddit's influence on the influential Persian social news site, Balatarin.¹³²

Finally, scholars have turned to reddit to address numerous contemporary cultural issues that arise within the Web 2.0 platform. Adrienne L. Massanari interrogates the participatory nature of reddit's culture through the framework of "game studies;" she concludes, "the 'game' of Reddit is not unproblematic, as who can play, how they can play, and what they play play often reinscribes many hegemonic tendencies of (Internet) culture more broadly."¹³³ Maren Wilger also explores issues of access by examining discourse on reddit after the "Delhi Gang Rape" in 2012, and exploring how Western discourse online can deconstruct imperialist narrative from the mainstream media outlets.¹³⁴ Kelly Bergstrom investigates the reddit user "Grandpa Wiggly" as a case study for understanding cultural expectations of identity and anonymity online and what happens to those who violate those standards.¹³⁵ Jaqueline Vickery also explores reddit's cultural practices by focusing on the "Confession Bear" meme that grew out of r/AdviceAnimals; Vickery concludes that these anonymous mimetic practices often

"allow users to transgress social boundaries, for instance by allowing victims of violence, rape, and homophobia, to share their stories in an unexpected and 'inappropriate' space. In this way, users appropriate the 'funny' Confession Bear meme by challenging its form and conventions, but also their own positions as silenced victims. The affordances and limitations of anonymity situate Confessions Bear as both resistant and limited."¹³⁶

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While the current literature on reddit is useful and important, the lack of focus on critical theory and the public sphere as a framework implicates an important absence in scholarship

about the site. Thus, this dissertation addresses the following three research questions through the theoretical approaches described above:

- (1) What are the cultural practices, technological affordances, and political economic forces that influence reddit's public sphere?
- (2) How are publics and counterpublics formed on reddit, and how do they circulate discourse across reddit's larger public sphere?
- (3) What are the political implications and ramifications of reddit's public sphere, and what do they mean for the potential of democratic participation through the Internet?

By drawing on the culturally-oriented work of Nick Couldry, the legal-based analyses of Lawrence Lessig, the queer-theory centered work of Michael Warner, and the Marxist critiques of Jodi Dean, this dissertation attempts to answer these research questions through both cultural and political economic perspectives. While I agree with the critiques of Habermas discussed earlier in this chapter, and I am not convinced that the Internet will afford an idealized public sphere, reddit's platform seems to indicate a potential for this ideal, liberal bourgeois public sphere. My findings explore these various dimensions of reddit's public sphere, but rather than offering a solution for the issues addressed here, I have oriented this dissertation as purely descriptive and critical, refraining from prescribing anything beyond diagnostics.

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CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

Now that I have established the historical background from my research on reddit and my primary theoretical foundations, I now lay out the methodology for analysis. I begin this chapter by discussing the rise of interpretivist ethnography, as advocated by Clifford Geertz, and show how researchers interested in digital culture have applied ethnography in their scholarship. I then introduce Richard Kozinets's method of "netnography" and show how interpretivist-oriented netnographies are useful for describing and engaging the cultural practices found on reddit's platform. Then, I explore how the addition of Cultural Study's-oriented textual analysis and political economic-oriented document analysis provide access to important aspects of the technologies, economies and politics of reddit's public spheres. After establishing the three primary methods that inform my research on reddit, I turn to how I reflexively engage my practice as researcher and redditor, discuss how my subjectivity has influenced my approach to research and explore my ethical considerations that have informed my study. Finally, I detail Kozinets's criteria for a quality netnography and compare my approach to studying reddit with Kozinets requirements for a successful netnography.

THE RISE OF INTERPRETIVIST ETHNOGRAPHY

To provide a thorough and critical description of reddit's publics, practices, and politics, I drew upon the anthropological tradition of ethnography following Emile Durkheim's early interest in how cultures and communities are connected. By distinguishing between mechanical

solidarity (“rules with repressive sanctions”) and organic solidarity (“rules with restitutive sanctions”), Durkheim argues that “law and morality are the totality of the ties which bind each of us to society which make a unitary, coherent aggregate of the mass of individuals.”¹ The ties that bind society are the structures of morality. When these social regulations fail to check-rein individual passion, Durkheim sees a rise in anomic suicides, which “results from man’s activities lacking regulation and his consequent sufferings.”² Thus, for Durkheim, the social ties that connect, but also limit, human activity are productive, holistic forces. To understand the rituals through which culture reaffirmed its unity, Durkheim argued for a sociology based on “social facts” as “realities external to the individual.”³ However, Durkheim’s focus on cultural consensus and the idealist privileging of the social also marginalized more traditional cultures and lacked in-depth interpretations of power and hierarchy.⁴ Durkheim’s nephew, Marcel Mauss follows his path with his own seminal ethnographic work on gift exchange in Polynesia, in which he determines that gifts are not “disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested. The form usually taken is that of the gift generously offered; but the accompanying behaviour is formal pretence and social deception, while the transaction itself is based on obligation and economic self-interest.”⁵ Likewise, Bronislaw Malinowski provides detailed ethnographic accounts of trade routes of the South Pacific.⁶ Such studies provide valuable first-hand accounts of foreign culture, but they also extend forms of colonial domination through a reductionist understanding of power.

Nevertheless, early ethnographic interest in human ritual, social solidarity and structure influence the structuralist, and poststructuralist turns during the 1950s and 1980s. Claude Levi-Strauss applies structuralist linguistics to ethnographic analyses of myth and totemic classification to expose the problems of previous ethnographies, which were hampered in their

quest for knowledge about social systems by “the assumptions they made about the simpleness and coarseness of ‘primitives.’ It did not occur to them that there could be such systems in societies of so low an economic and technical level since they made the unwarranted assumption that their intellectual level must be equally low.”⁷ However, the structuralist limitations Levi-Strauss imposes upon himself provide no help in unraveling the meanings of the cultural ritual he had successfully categorizes. As Tim Dant explains, “in effect, Levi-Strauss is making structuralism do more work than it is equipped for without making considerable development.”⁸ Levi-Strauss’s struggle with the totalizing and universalistic conceptions of structuralism echoes a growing rejection of the tradition throughout academia, in general, and France, in particular. The poststructuralist wave rejects the essentialist binary categories of structuralism in favor of a relational social theory that targets the relations between power, knowledge, truth, and meaning. This shift presents a “crisis of representation” that problematizes the nature of authorship, objective observation, and power relations as established within the colonialist foundations of anthropology.⁹ By reversing the colonialist gaze of ethnography upon themselves, poststructuralist anthropologists reflexively engage in debates of about how “ethnographers interrogate research about their relationships to fieldwork and to larger political, economic, and social structures.”¹⁰ As a result, poststructuralist critical theories, like postcolonialism and feminism, become central to the “*polyvocal, heteroglossic, dialogic and intertextual*” writings that followed the crisis.¹¹ These new theoretical influences on ethnography move the methodology away from the reductionist, colonialist gazing at the Other to a more theoretically advanced method that reflexively engages with its own history, as well as the history of the object under analysis.

While Durkheim's moral view of binding social ties flourished in Europe, his view of *sui generis* social systems inspired the American functionalism practiced by Talcott Parsons.¹² Like structuralist anthropology, Parsons understands social and action systems as totalizing forces of organization and categorization. On the other hand, his student, Clifford Geertz, finds functionalism limiting because it lacks "anything more than the most rudimentary conception of the processes of symbolic formulation."¹³ Instead, Geertz proposes that social anthropology is the practice of ethnography, and "it is in understanding what ethnography is, or more exactly *what doing ethnography is*, that a start can be made toward grasping what anthropological analysis amount to as a form of knowledge."¹⁴ Like the poststructuralists in Europe, Geertz examines localized instances of power relations within cultural settings. Each societal microcosm is a text open to its "own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them."¹⁵ Thus, he promotes a view of power as local, and networked. However, as Philip Smith notes, Geertz is a strict modernist "in that he believes anthropology to be a discipline that can generate improved understandings and interpretations."¹⁶ He rejects poststructuralism's anti-humanistic decentering of the individual. Instead, drawing on Max Weber, Geertz promotes a semiotic conception of culture, in which "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, [Geertz] take[s] culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."¹⁷ Cultural ethnographies based within Geertz's interpretivist paradigm focus on rich, descriptive language to describe localized, cultural practices and webs of signification.

NETNOGRAPHY

As communities began to form in early Internet forums, scholars began using ethnography as a way to access the digital cultures. As Robert Kozinets notes, “from its beginnings, the online social environment was viewed with suspicion and cynicism, as a context that created task-oriented, ‘impersonal’, ‘inflammatory’, ‘cold’, and ‘unsociable’ interactions.”¹⁸ This reductionist viewpoint persisted for most of the 1980s, but by late in the decade, “computer-mediated communication” (CMC) scholars began to challenge these traditional formulations of digital culture during the 1990s. By problematizing assumptions about the egalitarian conceptions of digital culture and the reduced social interactions, these academics examine “what people actually did with CMC in their own social worlds, over the longer-term, as they wove webs of affiliation.”¹⁹ By focusing on the end-user practices of the technology, CMC research approaches digital culture inductively. However, CMC also envisions a strict separation between the digital and the “real.” Howard Rheingold’s analysis of the online message board, the WELL, promotes this conception of digital culture, arguing that the development of virtual communities constituted a “third place” between work and home in which people “gather for conviviality.”²⁰ Other digital ethnographic work during this period explores online typologies, community participation, notions of experience, and meaning-making practices within virtual worlds and communities through participant observation.²¹ Rheingold’s (and other) early theorization of online communities engage in utopian rhetorics of liberation and equality in his discussions of the virtual “community.”²² Instead, Nancy Baym presents an ethnography based on the analysis of digital “communities of practice”²³ through the combination of participant observation, discourse analysis and audience interviews. Baym aims to present “ways in which to think about online communities that are grounded in close study rather than personal reflection.”²⁴

Baym's work also emphasizes the role of "fandom" within the community practices found on a Multi-User Dungeon (MUD), drawing on the work of Henry Jenkins. Dubbed "the 21st century McLuhan" by Howard Rheingold, Jenkins often uses ethnography and textual analysis to study what the participatory culture he saw developing in the digital context.²⁵ By focusing "on media fandom as a discursive logic that knits together interests across textual and generic boundaries,"²⁶ Jenkins provides a powerful view of how engaged fandoms systematically, and sometimes institutionally, rework cultural texts as individual practice, action and resistance. Methodologically, Jenkins explores various dimensions of fandom cultures through ethnographic participation in conventions and case studies of Usenet message boards.²⁷ These predecessors to contemporary forums prove to be a vital source of information for Jenkins's conclusion that practices of digital communities are often just extensions of previous cultural practices in new forms. While ethnography provides a means to access fandom, Jenkins acknowledges the risk of over-identifying with the fandom he is investigating. However, Jenkins defends his methodological position by claiming to write in a dual role, both as a fan and as an academic. He positions himself as an "aca-fan" as a response to two feelings: "as a fan, I feel that most previous academic accounts of fan culture are sensationalistic and foster misunderstandings about this subculture [...] as an academic, I am dismayed by general theories of television spectatorship that gave little attention to the specificity and complexity of the practices I experience as a fan."²⁸ Thus, Jenkins identifies his representational approach to fandoms as being among them, but apart from them; he tacks from the emic to the etic, from the academic to the fan in order to explore participatory culture. While maybe not a "fan," I am a regular reddit user as well as a PhD candidate, and the figure of an "aca-fan" accurately describes my research on

reddit; I am invested in the site on both intellectual and personal levels, and my research stems from nearly a decade of visiting the site.

Numerous other scholars have used the ethnographic method to analyze digital culture. While Rheingold's ethnographic investigations of online identity and interactivity represents an early attempt at applying ethnography to digital culture, more recently, scholars like Tom Boellstorff and Bonnie Nardi, have ethnographically examined online massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG), like *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*.²⁹ For my dissertation research, I drew primarily on Robert Kozinets's method of "netnography," which draws on Geertz's interpretivist ethnography. Kozinets's argues that like ethnography, netnography offers the researcher a

naturalistic technique. In many cases, netnography uses information publicly available in online forums [. . .] When employed in a rigorous fashion, netnography can provide the researcher with a window into naturally occurring behaviours, such as communal discussions, and then enhance that understanding with more intrusive options such as communal participation and member interviews.³⁰

Kozinets's netnography adopts a bricolage approach, promoted by Levi-Strauss's figure of the *bricoleur* who "builds up structured sets, not directly with other structured sets but by using the remains of debris of events."³¹ By continually adapting its methods, theories, field sites, researcher preferences, field sites, and research questions, ethnography "is continually being refashioned to suit particular fields of scholarship."³² Thus, ethnography is suited for adaptation towards the digital realm and provides this research with a methodological framework that helps decipher the cultural practices and symbols that have developed across reddit "by adding valuable interpretive insight, by building, through careful focus and analysis, what is available publicly on the Internet into a known and respected body of codified knowledge."³³ Fundamentally, netnography is the application of interpretivist ethnographic methods to the

analysis of digital culture, and thus, it proves particularly fruitful for my investigations in this dissertation.

INTERPRETIVIST ETHNOGRAPHY, NETNOGRAPHY AND REDDIT

Before beginning my research on this dissertation, I previously conducted a content analysis of r/Politics, explored the mythological structures of memes on r/AdviceAnimals, and interviewed redditors about their experiences on the site. Although I did not use the data gathered in these previous studies during this dissertation, they represent nearly four years of academic inquiry into the cultures and politics found on reddit. When I first encountered the site in 2008, I felt compelled by the in-depth commentary and engaging content that circulated across the publics of the site. As reddit grew, I began to see its potential for engaging users in the political process, but I also noticed the inherent contradictions in the affordances of reddit's interface; increasingly, larger subreddits turned into a "circlejerk" in which popular, but problematic comments were reinforced, and criticism was downvoted. As I began to observe redditors use the platform to communicate their political opinions to the highest levels of government (e.g., SOPA/PIPA, President Obama's Ask Me Anything), the more problematic aspects of the site began attracting mainstream media attention (e.g., Anderson Cooper's story about r/JailBait on CNN). The inherent contradictions between the political potential in reddit's publics and counterpublics, and the reality of the discourse across a wide swathe of comment sections compelled me to use the site as a primary site for my research into the digital public sphere.

Geertz's interpretivist ethnographic method provides me with two critical methodological tools for analyzing my experiences and discoveries on reddit. First, Geertz argues that "what defines [ethnography] is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in [...] 'thick

description’.”³⁴ Through detailed field notes describing the actions, practices and discourses of the culture under investigation, Geertz’s interpretive act of ethnographic thick description aims “to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured fact; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics.”³⁵ While gathering data and engaging in participant observation, I wrote thick descriptions of the cultural and symbolic practices of redditors, their historical and cultural contexts, along with reflections of my own personal experiences while on the site. I wrote notes in both a composition notebook, and more often, in Microsoft Word documents on my computer. These notes not only included direct quotes from comment sections on reddit, but also thick descriptions of overarching themes within the comments and the aggregated themes from across multiple threads discussing similar topics. I also took screenshots of various threads, comments and side bars that pertained to my research questions, and I capped screenshots to capture the visuals of the user interface on reddit and the specific CSS themes certain subs used to enhance their community.

Secondly, Geertz argues that ethnographers act as interpreters for the reader by translating cultural meaning into alternative discourses through the “continuous dialectical tacking between the most local and local of detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view.”³⁶ These two positions supply the “emic” (insider) and “etic” (outsider) positions that compete for ethnographic representation. While emic ethnography can supply a thorough understanding of how a local culture understands itself, etic analysis can provide broader implications about how those cultural practices relate with practices of other nations. However, although “the outsider (etic) analyses of researchers are valid and informative—we do not expect that those we study will interpret their own lives exactly as we

might in a scholarly context.”³⁷ With this in mind, I actively kept track of outside media that addressed redditors’ practices while simultaneously immersing myself deeply in reddit’s culture. By examining outside texts, I investigated how redditors, and their various subcommunities, are viewed etically by “mainstream” media outlets. I contrasted that emic view, with redditors’ “emic” view of themselves, often as an “alternative” source to mainstream media, and the larger subreddits on reddit. To begin accessing an emic perspective of the site, I visited r/all nearly every day for over a year, exploring the top content hundreds of subreddits. While every subreddit has the potential to reach the top of the front page, content on r/all generally came from the default subreddits which often have the largest subscriber base. I also traced news stories that developed on reddit across the subreddits that appeared on r/all and in smaller subreddits that had specific relations to the story at hand (e.g. after a terrorist attack in Australia, I frequented r/Australia and r/Sydney to see the local response on reddit). By browsing comments on r/all on a daily basis, I effectively explored the cultural practices and the development of publics across the most popular portions of the site. I also achieved local perspectives by combing through various user whose comments related to my research in order to see what else they posted, in addition to, their practices on reddit; likewise, I also explored the profiles of the users with the most karma.

I further engaged reddit cultures at the local level by carefully exploring several subreddits in detail and taking thick field notes about their local practices and discourses.³⁸ I chose these subreddits inductively by focusing on subreddits with strong, participatory communities and active moderation. Since I participated with some of these subreddits prior to my research, I purposefully included subreddits that I had not found until my research period in order to control for my personal choices. Many of these subreddits also had networks of “child”

subreddits that spawned from the original “parent” subreddit; to access these extended publics, I used reddit’s “multireddit” function to create individualized front pages for each case study that included the extended public sphere formed by the child subreddits.³⁹ I also specifically included several subreddits that redditors have categorized as “meta” in order to understand how redditors understand others’ actions and practices on the site, and critically reflect on their own practices as Habermas would predict in his normative public sphere.

These meta-subreddits often function through the “entextualization” of content from other areas of reddit. Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs argue that when discourse is decontextualized from its original context and recontextualized, the discourse is separated from “its interactional setting” and becomes performative;⁴⁰ through performance, discourses are put on display for evaluation by the audience, extracted from their original context and engaged by the audience, who often make their own meanings about the entextualized discourse. The entextualized performance is:

The reflexive capacity of discourse [. . . which] is manifest most directly in the metalingual and poetic functions. The metalingual (or metadiscursive) function objectifies discourse by making discourse its own topic; the poetic function manipulates the formal features of the discourse to call attention to the formal structures by which the discourse is organized.⁴¹

Throughout my research, I used these meta-subreddits to understand redditors’ reflective and performative practices, which show the emic perspective of the cultures and publics developed on the site, as well as the critical potential for public spheres on reddit.

While Geertz’s methods of thick description and tacking between emic and etic are influential for my method, Kozinets’s netnography also provides several other important methodological approaches for my ethnography of reddit. First, netnography relies heavily on “participant observation” as the primary method for collecting data and beginning data analysis;

Kozinets states, “the core of netnography [. . .] is that it is a *participative approach* to the study of online culture and communities.”⁴² Having been a redditor for several years before beginning my research, I had already actively participated in several different subreddits and I continued to participate as I had before by posting comments. To clarify any ethical concerns, I received permission to conduct my research and speak with other redditors from the Internal Review Board (IRB) at the University of Colorado, Boulder. In order to interact with other redditors, I used an account which I developed over three years ago for a different project:

u/reddit_researcher. This account was restricted to use for this research and helped establish my credibility as an active redditor who was familiar and active on the site. Most of my interactions with other redditors occurred in comment sections of various subreddits. Occasionally, I spoke with someone over private message about a certain topic; any content reported in this dissertation is either publicly accessible, or reprinted with informed consent from the redditor.

Secondly, in addition to participating with other redditors, I created a subreddit to archive my research. Kozinets states that “archival cultural data provide what amounts to a cultural baseline. Saved communal interactions provide the netnographer with a convenient bank of observational data.”⁴³ While Kozinets mainly discusses other archival data that may aid the netnographer, I chose to create an archive through the reddit interface.⁴⁴ Not only does this archive offer an easy and accessible collection for my dissertation, it also gives my data a level of transparency not available in traditional ethnographies. Every comment that I quote throughout this dissertation can be found in a thread posted to my archive. While I used the website, archive.today, to make permanent archives of some threads, for the most part I only linked to the reddit comment section as I archived. I often added links to other related comment sections within the comments of the post in my archive, in addition to pasting important quotes

or external links within my comments. I also developed the side-bar on my archive to direct interested parties to my website for more information about my research. Although I was the only person allowed to post content to my archive, redditors could, and did, comment on my posts, providing me with additional participatory data.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

As Kozinets argues, although participant observation is the core of netnographic research, the resulting study

will extend almost naturally and organically from a basis in participant-observation to include other elements such as interviews, descriptive statistics, archival data collection, extended historical case analysis, videography, projective techniques such as collages, semiotic analysis, and a range of other techniques.⁴⁵

Fundamentally, Geertz's interpretivist paradigm of ethnography challenged the epistemological bases of grand theories by destabilizing their conceptions of text. Alternatively, Geertz describes the culture of a people as "an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong."⁴⁶ By textualizing cultural meaning through thick description, Geertz challenges the role of the researcher as the univocal voice of ethnography and expanded conceptual boundaries of textual analysis. Alan McKee's poststructural exploration of the theories, interpretations and methods of textual analysis defines text as the "material traces that are left of the practice of sense-making—the only empirical evidence we have to show how other people make sense of the world."⁴⁷ Like Geertz, he promotes an interpretive understanding of cultural meaning by defining a text as "something we make meaning from."⁴⁸ Thus, Cultural Studies scholars primarily use textual analysis to analyze cultural practices as they are represented through cultural texts. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication proves particularly effective for conceptualizing

power relationships between texts, producers and consumers. Producers encode texts within “meaning structure,” but it is not until the “symbolic vehicles [is] constituted within the rules of ‘language’” that the text begins to circulate within discursive forms.⁴⁹ Once the text has finished circulating, the individual audience decodes the message within varying degrees of textual coherence. Thus, for the field of Cultural Studies, texts act as a discursive realm where signification is not fixed until interpreted by an individual. While circulating as a free-floating sign, texts “intersect with deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions.”⁵⁰ The textual analysis of cultural texts on reddit provided me a method to interrogate cultural practices that “do not register as explicitly political”, exposing the hegemonic ideologies implicit in their cultural circulation.⁵¹

I used two specific textual analysis techniques to approach reddit’s cultural texts. First, to interpret reddit’s cultural texts and practices, I employed Barry Brummett’s technique of “close reading:” “*the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings.*”⁵² Brummett concludes that the close reading of texts can be used to answer four essential questions:

- What should the audience think or do?
- What does the text ask the audience to assume?
- How does the audience know what the text claims?
- Who is empowered or disempowered?⁵³

During my research on reddit, “close reading” provided a critical method with which I interrogated the comment sections and addressed these types of questions in my field notes. Brummett promotes a number of methodological techniques for studying form, narrative, genre and other important elements of fictional texts; while these are not specifically relevant to redditors’ comments, close reading’s emphasis on audience, context, ideology and argumentation

provided great methodological frameworks for my analysis of comments in different contexts and with different intentions.

Secondly, to interrogate the visual components of the reddit interface, I practiced what Gillian Rose calls “compositional interpretation.”⁵⁴ Rose argues for analysis of visual culture based on “the site of an *image itself* in order to understand its significance” and on the image’s “compositional modality.”⁵⁵ She clarifies that although compositional interpretation can be limited by only engaging the image within its own context, when applied in conjunction with other methods “the good eye” can provide a useful approach for analyzing an images content, color, spatial organization and “expressive content.”⁵⁶ As such, I have used Rose’s technique for my analysis of images and videos posted across reddit; and, in coordination with close reading and netnography, compositional interpretation offers a useful approach for understanding the practices of visual culture in which redditors participate. However, to avoid the strict phenomenological approach of “the good eye,” I also followed Rose’s advice and approached images and videos semiologically in order to understand the cultural practices evinced by the circulation of images on reddit. Rose states that semiological approaches to the analysis of visual culture can “offer a range of tools for looking at images carefully; they are centrally concerned with the ways in which social difference is created; and at least some of their practioners advocate a reflexivity in their deployment.”⁵⁷ Through a semiological analysis of the visual texts found on reddit, I focused on the dominant representations, mythologies and connotations within reddit’s visual culture. Ultimately, Rose’s method of compositional interpretation provided a decontextualized approach to understand the texts outside of the social contexts of reddit, and semiological analysis helped contextualize the images as parts of the social circulation of visual texts through reddit’s public spheres.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

The previous methods primarily helped me to explore the cultural practices, discourses, and ideologies of reddit users from an emic perspective; document analysis provides the method for an etic understanding of the practices by analyzing how the administration of reddit views their users, how the press discusses redditors, and how redditors are restricted by external forms of regulation. While netnography and textual analysis generally gravitate towards the field of Cultural Studies, document analysis is primarily used by scholars interested in the political economy of communication and media. Since Dallas Smythe's assertion that the actual commodity of media industries is not ideology, but audiences, the field of political economy has moved away from examining the same texts as Cultural Studies.⁵⁸ Rather than conducting close readings to expose semiotic relations, hegemonic ideologies, and cultural meanings of a text, scholars in political economy instead focus on issues like labor, regulation and economics, which govern audiences engagement with media. For example, Eileen Meehan combs through ratings data to show how the television market excludes the viewer;⁵⁹ Toby Miller and George Yüdice draw legislative texts from the State, NGOs and intra-state bureaucratic organizations for a clearer understanding of contemporary cultural policy;⁶⁰ William Kunz analyzes the financial interest syndication rules that govern television programming.⁶¹ For my research on reddit, I followed Vincent Mosco's proposition that political economists start by interrogating issues of commodification, spatialization, and structuration.⁶²

Thus, my document analysis examined the texts of production on reddit in order to understand the commodification of redditors' free labor on the site, the spatialization of reddit to disseminate content across geographical and national boundaries, and the structuration of the cultural policies and technological developments that have informed the public spheres that have

developed across the site. I began my document analysis by carefully reading reddit's official user agreement and privacy policy in order to understand how the administration used unpaid labor of redditors. I also tracked reddit's ownership structures and economic strategies for profit generation in order to understand the economic imperatives of the site. Furthermore, I combed through the official reddit blog in order to see how the reddit administration was constructing their website for outsiders and potential investors; I specifically focused on economic and technological changes within reddit's structure to understand the administration's goals for the site. Finally, I explored the cultural policies and federal legislation that fundamentally affect the nature of reddit's public spheres. Following Lawrence Lessig, I examined the federal documents involving changes in copyright policy, as they affect online creativity and innovation; I also explored various technological and economic foundations that influenced reddit's development and continue to influence the publics developed on the site. Ultimately, my document analysis focused on technological, political and economic structures that afford redditors certain abilities, while also limiting others. Mosco argues that by examining the "*process by which structures are constituted out of human agency, even as they provide the very 'medium' of that constitution,*" we can better understand the "relationship between structure and agency."⁶³ By combining this politically economic based document analysis with an interpretivist netnography and textual analysis, I effectively explored the diverse and often competing forces that influence reddit's public sphere and political potential.

RESEARCHER AS INSTRUMENT AND THE SHIFTING FIELD SITE

Now that I have established my primary methods for investigating the cultural practices, technologies, economies and politics that both inform and are informed by reddit's public

spheres, I conclude by establishing how I understand reflexivity and my role as an instrument for research, along with other ethical considerations for research in the digital realm. Specifically, I am following Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln's assertion that through reflexivity, a researcher may critically engage the "self" and "come to terms not *only* with our choice of research problem and with those with whom we engage in the research process, but with our selves and the multiple identities that represent the fluid self in the research setting."⁶⁴

Ultimately, Guba and Lincoln's vision of "researcher as an instrument" provides a useful framework for centering my practices as a researcher and their role in shaping the results of my netnography. Essentially, Guba and Lincoln are reacting to the objective claims to truth found in structuralist anthropology; therefore, the idea of a "researcher as instrument" foregrounds the subjectivity of the researcher and advocates for the researcher's reflexive engagement with the power relationships that exist within the assumed power relations between the researcher and the researched. Furthermore, by critically reflecting on my methods as a researcher and my role in constructing reddit's public spheres for an academic audience, I hope to avoid colonialist interpretations found in early ethnographies that rejected colonized nations "struggle for self-determination."⁶⁵

While some may argue that my position as a member of the reddit community jeopardizes my findings, I actually understand my indigenous position within the reddit community as a integral to my research. Because I witnessed the growth and changes to reddit before starting my dissertation work, I better understood the context in which my current research is situated; as a research instrument, my personal knowledge and experiences on the site afforded a historical and invaluable knowledge of the cultural practices and discourses that circulated across its publics and counterpublics. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues:

indigenous methodologies tend to approach cultural protocols, values and behaviours as an integral part of methodology. These are ‘factors to be built in to research explicitly, to be thought about reflexively, to be declared openly as part of the research design. To be discussed as part of the final results of a study and to be disseminated back to the people in culturally appropriate ways and in language that can be understood.’⁶⁶

Thus, while my insider status within the reddit community could be seen as a drawback, through reflexive engagement with my own role on the site, and my role as a researcher of the site, I aim to openly acknowledge my position and use it to share my work with the reddit community, in addition to transparently showing how my experiences can prove valuable for exploring the dynamic cultures of the site.

In addition to critically reflecting on my own subjectivity as a research instrument, I also critically engaged the shifting boundaries of the ethnographic field site within the digital realm. Given Geertz’s textualization of culture, ethnographic “field sites” within the digital realm become contested areas for analysis.⁶⁷ What was previously regarded as the material conditions of “the general intersections of the topic and the territory in which research takes place” quickly became an innumerable series of interlinking texts across a web of networks.⁶⁸ “Hypertext,” as Theodor Nelson terms it, allows individuals to erratically jump between texts whenever they want, blurring “the boundaries between reader and writer” by the decentering the text and transforming “any document that has more than one link into a transient center, a directory document that one can employ to orient oneself and to decide where to go next.”⁶⁹ The development of hypertext means that the digital field-site can be a nearly infinite, disjointed network for analysis.

By considering myself a research instrument, I gain the flexibility to critically engage with the shifting notions of textuality in the digital environment and address new and pressing ethical issues about how research is conducted online. Issues of anonymity, privacy, and consent

became critical within digital ethnography.⁷⁰ Likewise, concepts of truth, accountability, authenticity and validity become major concerns in the ethnographic descriptions of digital culture.⁷¹ Thus, when constructing my netnography, I considered a variety of ethical concerns: First, as the division between “public” and “private” erodes, the “what may be seen as private or sensitive to an observer is not necessarily apprehended so by the individual” and vice-a-versa; “what is seen as public and not sensitive by the researcher may in some cases be seen as private and sensitive by the people who use the online environment.”⁷² Negotiating the publicness of a text within digital cultures then requires more consideration than simply whether or not it is accessible. Privacy policies of the site hosting the content must be considered; fair use laws regarding copyright also play a role in determining whether to use a text. Ultimately, as Kozinets notes, “if the researcher does not record the identity of the communicators and if the researcher can legally and easily gain access to these communications or archives” they are not engaging in human subject research.⁷³ Nevertheless, we must always consider questions like: Can consent be given anonymously? How do we determine if the anonymous subject is part of an at-risk community (i.e. children or the mentally disabled)? How can the researcher verify their credentials both as a scholar, and as a member of the digital culture? While larger issues of access may derail a digital research project (e.g., gatekeepers may not allow access to their populations; communities may not be willing subjects of analysis), processes of informed consent are generally required considerations prior to the beginning of a project.⁷⁴

Other ethical concerns will certainly arise during the development of my netnography, but as Kozinets states, “the foundation of an ethical netnography is honesty between researcher and online community members.”⁷⁵ Following this basic formulation, Kozinets supplies a brief guide to ethical netnography. Researcher’s should “*never, under any circumstances, engage in identity*

deception,” and they should supply a complete identity to the community under investigation, such as a website.⁷⁶ My name and university association were readily available on my archival subreddit, as well as a link to my personal website. Additionally, Kozinets argues that the decisions researchers make about citing, crediting and anonymizing research participants should consider: “(1) the need to protect vulnerable human participants who may be put at risk from the exposure of a research study, (2) the accessible and ‘semi-published’ qualities of much of what is shared on the Internet, and (3) the rights of individual community and culture members to receive credit for their creative and intellectual work.”⁷⁷ Therefore, redditors mentioned in this dissertation are referred to by their reddit user handle, unless noted otherwise.

I chose the combination of interpretivist netnography, textual analysis and document analysis as my primary methodology for three reasons. First, during my previously conducted research on reddit, I found that quantitative analysis failed to answer many of the questions I posed. Instead, qualitative methods seemed much more adept for describing reddit’s publics and counterpublics because they allowed me to explore the nuanced, open-ended questions and answers I hoped to answer. Secondly, having been a member of the reddit community for such an extended period, I knew that my insider status could be interpreted as a major conflict. However, netnography offered a methodology in which my subjective and historical knowledge of the site played a critical part in my findings and increased the value of my research. Finally, I included all three of these methods in order to attempt a holistic approach to researching reddit, which included methods that address the cultural, technological and economic aspects of the politics found across reddit. Combining these three methods afforded me an invaluable approach to interrogating the publics and counterpublics found across reddit.

NETNOGRAPHIC EVALUATION CRITERIA

Kozinets provides ten vital criteria to determine the quality of a netnographic project: coherence, rigour, literacy, groundedness, innovation, resonance, verisimilitude, reflexivity, praxis, and intermix.⁷⁸

COHERENCE

Kozinets defines “coherence” as “the extent to which each recognizably different set of interpretations in the netnography is free from internal contradictions and presents a unified pattern.”⁷⁹ In my project, the primary struggle for coherence results from the collision of the fields of Cultural Studies and Political Economy, both theoretically and methodologically. To maintain coherence throughout this dissertation, the first two chapters draw primarily from one tradition. Lindlof and Taylor note, “the use of *any* concept or theory to explain field data—alone or in combination—is one more example of the flexibility found in qualitative research.”⁸⁰ Thus, the final two chapters coherently merge the two theories and methods, allowing for the exploration of the public spheres found within reddit’s platform.

RIGOR

Kozinets states:

rigour [sic] is the extent to which the text recognizes and adheres to the standards of netnographic research [. . .] It means that he or she understands what is required in order to conduct a netnography, following principled protocols of entrée, data collection, analysis and interpretation, research ethics, and representation itself.⁸¹

I entered the field primarily through my 2011 MacBook Pro which I also used to archive posts on my subreddit. I also frequently used the AlienBlue app on my iPhone 6 as a primary method

of access. Officially acquired by reddit in 2014, AlienBlue has been one of the primary apps for browsing reddit on the iOS operating system. I often used this app to access reddit when I was away from my computer, and I regularly saved threads through to my u/reddit_researcher account, later posting them to my archive. My data consisted primarily of comment threads that I archived on my subreddit after collecting them from various subreddits as I discussed previously. I guided my data analysis and interpretation through the theoretical frameworks of Cultural Studies and political economy. Finally, as I addressed in the previous section, ethical considerations of privacy, anonymity and transparency were fundamental foundations for approaching reddit and representing the cultural practices and discourses from the site will reflect these concerns throughout this dissertation.

LITERACY

In the context of netnography, Kozinets argues, literacy is best understood as

the extent to which the netnographic text recognizes and is knowledgeable of literature and research approaches that are relevant to its inquiry. To be useful, research should be linked to central issues, problems and debates in its field. An exhaustive understanding of the constructs, issues, frameworks, problematics and contentious issues in a field, or related to a specific topic is a key signal that one is communicating meaningfully to a given community of scholars.⁸²

As I discussed in the previous chapter, my research on reddit is situated within the fields of Cultural Studies and the Political Economy of media, which are fundamental to the field of Media Studies. Likewise, given my lengthy background and regular academic engagement with reddit over the last seven or eight years, I am also thoroughly versed in the issues and debates surrounding the site and digital culture at large.

GROUNDEDNESS

Kozinets defines his fourth criterion

as the extent to which: (1) the theoretical representation is supported by data, and (2) the links between data and theory are clear and convincing. Groundedness is not only a demonstration of the degree of empirical veracity, but a provision of sufficient and relevant evidence to back up the netnography's theoretical claims of contribution.⁸³

Because of my transparent approach to archiving, my representation of collected data accurately reflects the practices, technologies, economies and politics found on reddit's platform; furthermore, throughout this dissertation, I have also carefully avoided any sort of generalizations or reductionism by relying on specific textual evidence to support any assertions I make.

INNOVATION

If a netnography is effectively embedded within theoretical traditions, along with current literature, and grounded within the data discovered within the field, Kozinets argues that a "quality researcher" will extend current knowledge by providing "new and creative ways for understanding systems, structures, experience or action."⁸⁴ Each chapter in this dissertation relies on previously established theories of culture, technology, and political economy to describe the practices that inform reddit's public sphere. Once I have shown how reddit's public spheres fit within these previous theories, I explore how reddit extends or contradicts those theories and draw theoretical conclusions about what that means for reddit's public sphere.

RESONANCE

To avoid stereotypically constructing the “cultural Other,” Kozinets insists that netnographers ask

about the extent to which the netnography conveys to its readers a personalized and sensitizing connection with the online community or cultural phenomenon it studies. Is the work enlightening and evocative? Does it sensitize readers to concerns and lifeways of others? Is there a phenomenological insight conveyed such that a more personal understanding or empathy is gained? [. . .] Netnographies can and should also attend to the non-rational, non-verbal, emotional lives of both the culture members and researcher. By keeping emotions in the foreground of fieldnotes and cultural interactions, by not deprivileging feeling in favour of reason, and by not enforcing an orderly and ‘objective’ categorization scheme upon lived cultural experience, a measure of veracity can be obtained that remains absent from more barren accounts.⁸⁵

Although Habermas’s normative public sphere relies on the theory of communicative rationality, through which public opinion is reached, I have made sure to avoid any objective claims about the public opinions expressed by various publics on reddit. Rather, I often refrained from making certain personal assumptions about the content of arguments in order to explore publics with which I personally disagree. I felt it necessary to attempt to separate my emotions and moral judgments about a given topic from my analysis of publics counter to my personal opinion. I often required respite from some of the more oppositional publics as the discourse circulating throughout them deeply offended some of my most deeply felt beliefs. Nevertheless, my results better reflect these public’s opinions about various issues because I rejected objective methods of categorization and moral judgements in favor of reflexive and critical approaches.

VERISIMILITUDE

Referring to the researcher’s “ability to reproduce or simulate, and map, the ‘real,’” the criterion of verisimilitude gauges the netnographer’s talents for constructing a narrative that represents a “believable and lifelike sense of cultural and communal contact” through which the reader feels “as though they have actually contacted the community, culture, and its members.”⁸⁶

Essentially, through careful writing and analysis, this dissertation represents redditors and reddit at large within this tradition. Specifically, I have consciously avoided monolithizing redditors as a whole and attributing certain characteristics to every redditor; rather, my representations of redditors are representations of publics to which certain redditors subscribe and others do not. By including textual and document analysis throughout my work, I sought to avoid reductionism and generalizations about redditors. I also hoped to provide the reader with an engaging representation of reddit's public spheres that accurately portrays the diversity of practices found within them.

REFLEXIVITY

Following the crisis of representation, reflexivity represents a technique through which a netnographer effectively “acknowledges the role of the researcher and is open to alternative interpretations [. . .] Related to this presence of the researcher in the netnographic text is an openness to the presence of others. The authoritative, monolithic, single, unified voice of the author has been increasingly interrogated in post-crisis anthropological writing.”⁸⁷ By engaging my research practices and by considering myself a research instrument, I regularly reflected on how my role as researcher and academic influenced my descriptions of the publics found on reddit's platform. To avoid over-assertions about reddit's publics, this dissertation acts as a relatively “open” netnographic text

where the facts and findings are presented along with the rationale and argument for drawing them into particular conclusions [. . .] Open texts allow and even encourage active, critical, responsive readership [. . .] The criterion of reflexivity is based upon a mature response recognizing the desirability of providing some acknowledgement of the researcher's own role in the conduct and analysis of fieldwork, portraying multiple voices and viewpoints, and welcoming other interpretations.⁸⁸

Thus, given the open nature of my research and my continued reflections, this dissertation avoids universalized claims to knowledge of reddit's public spheres in favor of localized representations and explanations.

PRAXIS

Given the traditional ethnographic emphasis on “the emancipatory, empowering, consciousness-raising ability to inspire social action,” netnographic texts should also pursue praxis as methodological guide for research.⁸⁹ While Kozinets advises netnographers to avoid the cyber-utopianism propagated by early theorists of digital culture, he still argues that netnographic research “must continually strive to understand how technology might not only impassion, but actually empower, social action and activism, and to help through our scholarship to bring this about in positive ways.”⁹⁰ While I have consciously avoided any sort of prescriptive conclusions to my research here, by theoretically grounding my work within the framework of the public sphere, I have effectively maintained a connection with praxis that could potentially be lost within another framework. This research provides valuable data for researchers interested in using reddit, and the Internet at large, to advance critical engagement between the political and civil spheres. Once published, this dissertation will act as a critical text for organizers of social action and political engagement who want to inform public opinion through digital technology.

INTERMIX

Finally, Kozinets argues that netnographers need to

take account of the interconnections of the various modes of social interaction—online and off—in culture members' daily lived experiences, as well as in its own representation. [. . .] The notion behind the intermix criterion is that online and offline cultural worlds intermingle and that this very intermingling is among the most

interesting and important areas that we must understand. Netnographers who relegate themselves to what they can download from postings in forums may miss much of what is interesting and critical about the phenomena they purport to study.⁹¹

While the importance of offline interactions and practices of redditors cannot be understated, this dissertation centers on the virtual public sphere afforded by various aspects of reddit's platform. Because I am interested in describing the publics found on reddit, and because I am interested in explaining reddit's potential to represent a normative, Habermasian public sphere in the digital realm, offline interactions play a less significant role to my current research than if I had used an alternative theoretical framework. However, while I am not approaching the offline interactions in this study, I am approaching the notion of intermix through my transparent approach to data collection, displayed on my archival subreddit. Kozinets concludes that

fascinating studies could be performed that would provide a living netnography through ever-growing hypertext links to cultural data, and their emerging and collaborative interpretation. Intermix thus entails attending to the various manifestations and interconnections of human social interaction as well as minding these manifestations and interconnection in the forms we use to represent online cultures and present our netnographies.⁹²

My public presentation of data through my online archive represents an active attempt to construct my research within the framework of intermix; several redditors have already begun productive discourses with my archive. By representing the inherent connections between my research, the reddit community, and its cultures, publicly and transparently, I hope to actively engage with the intermixed manifestations and interconnections that are fundamental for analyzing digital cultures.

CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on explicating my method for analyzing reddit's public sphere through interpretivist netnography, that relies on thick description, tacking between emic and etic

descriptions of cultural practices, participant observation, and archival data collection and representation. I also showed how the addition of textual analysis based within close reading, the good eye and semiological analysis provides important grounding for engaging texts on reddit, and I showed how political economic-oriented document analysis will provide useful insights for understanding the various forces that inform reddit's public spheres and how reddit's public spheres are understood by the rest of the population. Having established the primary methods for my research, I explored my role as a research instrument, along with the ethical considerations pertinent to my research. Finally, I concluded by establishing my dissertation's claims to quality by showing how my work follows Kozinets's ten criteria for determining a quality netnography. Now that I have established reddit's historical context and background, my theoretical foundation and frameworks, and my combined methodology of netnography, textual and document analysis, the following chapters discuss the findings of my research.

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE CULTURAL PRACTICES OF REDDIT'S PUBLIC SPHERE

Using the previously introduced methodologies and theories, I now detail a variety of cultural practices found on reddit. Drawing on Nick Couldry's theoretical construction of media practices, this chapter provides a thick description of how searching, showing, presencing, archiving and other complex media-related practices are represented on reddit. And, by describing events, interactions and conflicts between reddit users, moderators and administrators, I introduce practices of "gatewatching" found on the site. Ultimately, this chapter establishes how redditors actively participate within reddit's public sphere by exploring the influence of these cultural practices on reddit's publics and counterpublics.

SEARCHING AND SEARCH ENABLING

Couldry states that to find content within the overabundance of information online, users have resorted to "searching" as their primary mode of navigation. Couldry argues that searching

affects social ontology [. . .] it is embedded in our practices. Even our 'favourite' default sites are the results of our earlier 'searches.' [. . .] From searching, other practices quickly develop: practices of exchanging information by forwarding weblinks to family, friends or work colleagues, warehousing sites that collect recommendations from users so other users can narrow down their search practice (Digg etc.), and tools for pre-ordered searches (RSS feeds and other alerts).¹

Searching and search-enabling are fundamental practices within the digital realm and have not only changed the way we consume information, but also the role of information in constructing social meanings and values. Likewise, reddit's searching and search-enabling functions also afford users the technology to arrange their information through community voting. Reddit's

sorting algorithm provides a fundamental affordance for determining how an individual's front page is ordered. Redditors can order content as "top" (the top voted content on the subreddit), "hot" (the newest and most popular content based on how recently they are submitted), "new" (the newest content on the sub), "controversial" (content with the most upvotes *and* downvotes), and "rising" (newish content that is gaining notable activity). Redditors can also sort comments, but unlike links, comments are sorted by default under "best." In 2009, Randall Munroe contended that when the administrators made "best" the default method for comment sorting, the made top-content

heavily biased toward comments posted early. When a mediocre joke gets posted in the first hour a story is up, it will become the top comment if it's even slightly funny. [. . .] The reason for this bias is that once a comment gets a few early upvotes, it's moved to the top. The higher something is listed, the more likely it is to be read (and voted on), and the more votes the comment gets. [. . .] this system means good comments will jump quickly to the top and stay there, and bad comments will hover near the bottom.²

By assigning "best" as the default sorting method for comments, the reddit administration hoped to technically diversify comment sections, so newcomers to a thread no longer have to search for new comments that have not garnered enough votes to reach the top of the page under other ranking algorithms. Throughout my research, I consciously switched my ordering of large threads to effectively view more than just the top, best, or new comments. I often selected the "controversial" sorting algorithm to explore low-rated comments and divisive opinions across the public discourse found on reddit.

While reddit's administration implemented the "best" affordance to organize comments in 2009, content remained categorized under the default organization of "hot," which Ian Greenleaf contends presented a fundamental flaw. As he explains in 2013, if someone on r/BirdPics

despised puffins, they could effectively banish pictures of puffins by watching the new submissions closely and downvoting any puffin related content:

If the attacker gets to the picture first, it will go negative and be utterly exiled, never again touching the front page. The only thing the attacker needs to worry about are the people watching the “New” ranking, which ignores votes. Our hypothetical subreddit only averages 10 people on the New page, so our attacker can defeat them simply by maintaining 10 sock puppet accounts, instead of the ~300 that would be needed to defeat the front page users. Just like that, our attacker has scrubbed the subreddit of all puffin pics, and the world is a poorer place for it.³

Users in r/Technology reinforce Greenleaf’s conclusions. U/pianobadger wrote,

I was running an official function of the subreddit before I became a mod and after the first time it happened I started sending the mods a message every week with a link to the post so they could see it and sticky it. I’ve started browsing by ‘new’ on small subreddits since I noticed that happens.⁴

Also concerned, u/carolinapunk argues that this flaw “makes the gaming (by vested political interest) usually seen in r/politics r/news r/worldnews far more plausible if it is true.”⁵ These redditors echo Couldry’s concern about the manipulation of search-enabling sites by “institutional predators, who know very well the potential of peer-to-peer recommendation to enhance their marketing goals.”⁶

Social media marketers certainly use reddit as an advertising tool outside of “Ask Me Anything” (AMA) sessions, hoping to promote viral marketing campaigns within the large public reddit provides. The subreddit, r/HailCorporate, acts as a forum for documenting advertising campaigns and viral marketing practices found on reddit. Moderator u/Skitrel stated, “Ultimately, the point is to encourage people to become more aware and to really ask why they like a particular product or feel the need to tell others about it.”⁷ Thus, across the subreddit redditors actively point to users and content that disguise corporate entities attempting to market their product subversively through reddit’s platform. Users have pointed out Microsoft employees who only wrote only positive comments about Microsoft products,⁸ identical

comments from different users commenting about the benefits of Facebook's purchase of Oculus,⁹ and McDonalds's purchasing of upvotes to promote their advertisements on r/funny.¹⁰ While the users of r/HailCorporate have been helpful for critically engaging the influence of capitalist enterprises within reddit's publics, many users also criticize the subreddit for its overly paranoid and unproductive discourse; as u/sundance1028 wrote,

all I have seen is witch hunt after witch hunt. An endless parade of smug, self-satisfied posts calling people out as shills based on little more than a corporate logo that happens to appear in the picture they submitted. And god forbid any newbies to reddit try to share a cute picture of their kitten crawling in a Pringles can, HailCorporate will be all over your ass in a minute—with zero evidence mind you—to out you has the corporate shill you are!¹¹

While social media marketers and advertisers use reddit's platform to promote products and access a public, u/sundance1028 questions redditors on r/HailCorporate who fail to address the problems associated with subversive marketing practices. Essentially, given the popularity of the subreddit, u/sundance1028 contends that many posts on r/HailCorporate are not corporate manipulations of reddit, but individual users who happen to post a picture with a corporate logo, find an advertisement entertaining, or genuinely like a product.

Finally, the site's popularity has increased its placement within Google searches, as well. Many redditors began trying to manipulate Google's search algorithms by posting and upvoting images to correspond with specific Google searches. Although the Google results were quickly altered, redditors successfully made a Nazi swastika appear when users searched "Comcast" on Google,¹² in addition to making a potato appear if someone searched "gaming console."¹³ In a similar effort, redditors in r/ImGoingToHellForThis upvoted u/Ganeshaha's post in order to associate a picture of an angry-looking, overweight woman with "Feminist, Feminism, or Social Justice Warrior."¹⁴ However, their attempt to manipulate Google's results proved unsuccessful because every post in the subreddit is tagged as "not-safe-for-work" (NSFW) content, which

Google does not rank. Nevertheless, redditors' successful manipulation of Google's searching practices indicates the power of publics on reddit, and represents the problems found within digital practices that rely on searching and search-enabling. When corporate entities can manipulate content on reddit, and when redditors can manipulate content on other sites, how can members of digital publics trust the veracity of the information garnered from these practices? Ultimately, this question is too large for this dissertation, but as the previous section has shown, the practices of searching and search-enabling via reddit can be both productive and problematic.

SHOWING AND BEING SHOWN

While reddit functions as a search-enabling site that affords social media marketers a platform for advertising and branding, it also provides a platform for individuals to practice "showing." As Couldry explains, "The term 'showing' helps us grasp the mass of media-related acts that make something publicly available: many of those acts were unknown in a pre-digital age."¹⁵ Publicly exhibiting original content and personal story-telling skills are fundamental forms of showing practiced by many redditors. Comments on r/AskReddit often involve personal stories that relate to the question at hand, while subreddits, like r/WritingPrompts and r/NoSleep, encourage redditors to write and distribute content through the site. Often, fandom-based subreddits offer forums to publicly display fan-art and fan-fiction. Likewise, redditors often submit and upvote cosplay actors recreating their favorite fictional characters at conventions; furthermore, many of the most upvoted cosplay images are pornographic versions of favorite video game characters or other popular female characters.¹⁶ In fact, pornographic practices of showing exist across numerous similar subreddits devoted to redditors exposing. However, because redditors have frequently abused these subreddits by posting images of someone else,

moderators of many subreddits like this (e.g., r/GoneWild, the most prominent example of this type of subreddit) insist that participants verify their naked bodies through posting a nude image of themselves with a hand-written sign that includes their reddit user name and date.¹⁷ Once verified by the mods, r/GoneWild participants receive a “flair” next to their username confirming their verified status. Redditors from various subreddits use flair to “show” their affiliations with regards to the content of the subs. Although users cannot upload their own flair, many subreddits have made extensive flair collections available to redditors who frequent their community. On sport-oriented subreddits (e.g. r/NFL, r/MLB, r/CFB), regular users attach the logos of their favorite team next to their names. Likewise, in other subreddits, users can chose their own flair from a selection of images related to the content of the subreddit; for example, on r/HipHopHeads (r/HHH), users can chose from a number of pictures of famous rappers, or images cropped from album artwork. Flair on r/HHH also designates mods who often have larger images next to their name, as well as important contributors who post quality content. In many subreddits within the “ask” network (e.g. r/AskScience, r/AskHistorians, r/AskSocialScience), redditors can apply for flair to prove their specific expertise within the field, “showing” authority to claims of truth and knowledge within the subreddit. Finally, flair also includes simple written lines next to a user-name; often, in city subreddits (e.g. r/Seattle, r/NYC, r/Denver), this type of flair can designate the specific neighborhood in which the redditor resides, and in other contexts, flair is used to reflect an individual redditor’s opinions (e.g. r/GamerGhazi, r/KotakuInAction, r/TumblrInAction).

While redditors often use the site to practice “showing” themselves through publicly exhibiting their creative work, their nude bodies, or by attaching flair to their user-name, these practices are inherently intertwined with “showing” *others* on the site, as well, often in a

negative light. Couldry states, “*Being shown* (being put into wider circulation) is a latent dimension of almost every act today beyond the home, and often within the home. Whatever you are doing, there is usually someone around with a recording device that can be connected now or later to the Internet.”¹⁸ In subreddits, like r/CringePics, r/FacePalm, and r/TumblrInAction, redditors entextualize texts from other social networking sites, and often from other redditors, for karma;¹⁹ although the rules of reddit require the removal of all identifying information from the images or screencaps, non-redditors are clearly “being shown” to the reddit public. While some of these subreddits devoted to showing others are relatively harmless, a large network of subreddits aimed at “fat-shaming” have also developed; on r/FatPeopleStories, r/FatPeopleHate and r/FatLogic, redditors ridicule and shame overweight individuals whose images or stories have been entextualized into the reddit platform.

The practices of showing and being-shown others represent continued pressure on the traditional delineations between public and private that are challenged within the digital sphere. As Couldry notes, Internet users “often face a basic ambiguity to *where* we may be shown. Many contemporary media are characterized by this ambiguity between broadcast and closed communication.”²⁰ While reddit represents a *public* forum, the pictures and stories that are “being-shown” on the site have highlighted this collision between public and private communication; this ambiguity became especially evident during the controversial opening, and subsequent closing of r/TheFappening during August 2014. After several hackers leaked explicit images of various celebrities (Jennifer Lawrence, Kirsten Dunst, and McKayla Maroney) which had been stolen from Apples’ iCloud, reddit, as well as Imgur and 4Chan, became a de facto distribution center for these illegally obtained images through r/TheFappening. u/johnsmcjohn created r/TheFappening to distribute these private images and videos; however, after some of the

pictures being-shown were revealed to depict minors, the reddit administration closed r/TheFapping and other related subreddits a week after they began.²¹ Many redditors questioned why the administrators banned r/TheFapping while allowing other subreddits devoted to stolen nude photos remain (e.g. r/PhotoPlunder); as u/ieatkittensandpups wrote, mocking reddit's administrators, "Celebrities can't be seen naked, but the thousands of men and women who get hacked and exposed everyday are fair game."²² Some redditors questioned why other, more offensive subreddits, like r/CuteFemaleCorpses, r/SexyAbortions or r/PicsOfDeadKids stayed up on the site,²³ while others questioned whether the upcoming release of the "Ask Me Anything" (AMA) app or frequent celebrity endorsements of the site motivated the administration's decision.²⁴

While these responses critiqued the inconsistencies of the administration's response to the problematic communities within their platform, some redditors felt that the images were destined to emerge from the private communication channels because the affordances of digital technology challenges the binary between public and private. u/eSsEnCe_Of_EcLiPsE responded, "Celebrities don't have privacy. They are public figures and they willingly risk that [sic]. That's why they make that money. I don't think their leaked pics were an invasion of privacy."²⁵ Likewise, u/ZoltonII contended, "Honestly I think that if celebrities are stupid enough to take and save nude photos of themselves, then they kind of have it coming."²⁶ While these do not represent the opinions of all redditors, this discourse surrounding "The Fapping" represents how practices of "showing" and "being-shown" challenge the traditional boundaries of public and private. Furthermore, the reddit administration's delayed response indicates similar questions of ambiguity concerning public and private within the digital public sphere, and only

ceased the circulation of these “private” pictures because they began breaking an “official” rule of reddit: “no child pornography or sexually suggestive content featuring minors.”

PRESENCING

In addition to searching and showing, Couldry argues that “presencing” represents another primary practice of social media and digital culture. Within the concept of presencing, Couldry includes “a whole set of media-enhanced ways in which individuals, groups and institutions put into circulation information about, and representations of, themselves for the wider purpose of *sustaining a public presence*.”²⁷ To maintain transparency during my research, I “presenced” myself on reddit through my r/reddit_research subreddit by clearly stating my background affiliation, my research goals, and by linking redditors to my personal website, which contains details about me and my work.

Other subreddits are devoted to establishing a public presence for digital celebrities, like YouTube game critic, “TotalBiscuit” (r/CynicalBritor) and artist “NoobTheLoser” (r/NoobTheLoser). Likewise, members of celebrity-fandoms often presence their favorite movie star (e.g. r/EmmaWatson, r/JenniferLawrence, r/Mila_Kunis), musician (r/Beck, r/KanyeWest, r/Metallica), or scientist (e.g. r/NeilDeGrasseTyson, r/BillNye, r/CarlSagan) on their own subreddits. However, most often, celebrities, authors and politicians practice presencing by hosting question-and answer-sessions on r/IAMA to advertise upcoming releases and to structure their public presence on reddit. Redditors often critique these practices of presencing, and several AMA sessions have failed because they were too obviously geared towards marketing a product, rather than interacting with fans and the reddit community. Woody Harrelson’s 2012 AMA rustled many redditor’s feathers when he refused to address u/AndyRooney’s question about his

bedding of a high school student after a prom; instead, Harrelson, or perhaps his public relations manager, insisted on maintaining a discussion focused solely on his new film, *Rampart*, responding, “Let’s focus on the film people.”²⁸ Redditors downvoted nearly every answer from Harrelson because, as u/isspecialist explained,

I think you were sent here under the wrong pretenses. Someone on your staff (or with the movie Rampart) likely billed a Reddit ‘AMA’ as just another interview. That isn’t what these are for. These AMAs are a chance for your fans to interact with you directly, and usually ask some pretty random questions. It’s also considered bad form to make them brief, though I can imagine your time is valuable. I just wanted to apologize for the misunderstanding.²⁹

Yet, AMA sessions used to promote upcoming projects can also prove incredibly successful if the interviewee engages genuinely answers questions and respects the public to which they are speaking. Some celebrities have become consistent redditors after their AMA successes, and actively participate on the site outside of any official capacity (e.g. Arnold Schwarzenegger [u/GovSchwarzenegger], Snoop Dogg [u/Here_Comes_The_King], or Verne Troyer [u/vernetroyer]).

While this celebrity presencing represents one form of the practice on reddit, Couldry clarifies that “presencing” is more than digital marketing. Rather, he explains, “presencing is not primarily a practice ‘about’ media. It is a project of the self.”³⁰ While anonymity remains the primary mode of identity on reddit, redditors use a variety of presencing practices to create a “self” within reddit’s interface. Primarily, user-names are the most consistent method for establishing an identity on reddit, but their specific practices can vary significantly. User-names also offer a method for users to establish an identity diachronically based on their overall submissions. For example, currently u/pepsi_next currently has the most link karma on the site at over five million points) received primarily from posting pornography across a network of NSFW subreddits, including r/MILF, r/Lesbians and r/Anal.³¹ u/way_fairer, the redditor with the

most comment karma with over 2.5 million points, achieved much of his success by posting short responses to questions in r/AskReddit. With over 4,000 points, u/way_fairer's most successful comment is a satirical reply to u/Gexsta's assertion that "oil" would be "the most controversial object to find on Mars," simply stating "OPERATION MARS FREEDOM" in bold implying that the US would invade Mars for the planet's oil.³²

In addition to crafting a digital version of the self through comments and links, users can be awarded "trophies," which appear in the "trophy case" in their user profile. Potential trophies include: "bellweather" for users who "hang out on the new queue and flag carefully," "best comment" for a user who writes a "great comment," and "shutterbug" for a user who "contributes a photo to the sidebar."³³ Redditors also receive trophies for each year of their membership on reddit, as well as for contributions to the source code of the site, participation in an April Fool's Day event, or translations of a part of the site for non-English users. Yet, other users practice presencing through novelty accounts used to repeat a trope of some sort across reddit. Although over four years old, u/novelties_assemble's request for "NOVELTY ACCOUNTS ASSEMBLE" provides a useful glimpse into how these practices of presencing function. u/-captain-hindsight- responded to this call, posting, "Looking back it was stupid to make this account," to which u/BREAKING_NEWS replied, "THANKS FOR THAT, CAPTAIN HINDSIGHT. NOW HERE'S TOM WITH THE WEATHER;" u/FoxNewsVersion then reformatted u/BREAKING_NEWS's statement, writing "SOCIALIST OBAMA CAUSES HAIL AT PARAPLEGIC VEITNAM VETRAN SOCCER GAME."³⁴ u/Shitty_Watercolor is perhaps the most famous novelty account on reddit; starting in 2011, Hector Janse van Rensburg began illustrating comments and content on reddit with watercolors. Although "shitty" at first, Rensburg's work became better with practice, and his 2012 portrait of President Obama was

subsequently hung in the Obama 2012 campaign headquarters. Now officially hired by the BBC, and commissioned by numerous other media outlets, Rensburg credits his success to redditors encouragement, admitting “I would have stopped a long time ago if the paintings that I did weren’t well received on Reddit.”³⁵ By presencing himself through a novelty account on reddit, Rensburg began his artistic career.

ARCHIVING

While user-names and subreddits afford redditors spaces for presencing themselves and others, many redditors use the platform as a space to practice archiving. As Couldry explains,

Archiving is presencing’s equivalent in time. While the effort of presencing is directed at the difficulties of maintaining a presence in public *space* (being visible to others across social space), ‘archiving’ (as I use the term) is the individual’s practice of managing *in time* the whole mass of informational and image traces s/he continually produces, so that, *over time*, they add up to something acceptable and perhaps even graspable as a history.³⁶

My archival practices on r/reddit_research represent one way that reddit affords users archival capabilities; by entextualizing hundreds of threads into my archive, I hope to provide a source for understanding the practices of redditors, moderators and the administration across time. The reddit administration has stepped in to archive posts and subreddits; most notably, in 2011, the administration stopped allowing submissions of links or comments to the subreddit, r/reddit.com because it had become “a confusing, ill-defined catch-all, which was not really moderated like all the other subreddits.”³⁷ However, the subreddit remains publicly accessible to those interested, and its content remains a snap-shot of some of the top content on reddit four years ago. Other subreddits also act as archival spaces for different pieces of content that redditors might want to access quickly. Redditors on r/SeinfeldGifs collect brief moving pictures from the 1990s sit-com classic; these gifs are then often posted as responses within comment threads. In

r/MRSelfPostCopies, a bot archives and reposts every self-post on the r/MensRights subreddit after several people wrote self-posts, received “supportive comments from /r/MensRights” and then edited these posts “to make it appear that the comments support something abhorrent.”³⁸ Likewise, redditors active on subreddits that are in conversation with each other use outside archiving tools, like archive.today, to permanently capture the comments in the other thread in case the user deleted them.³⁹ This practice has become so commonplace that redditors have developed bots, like u/slickworm-bot and u/PreserverBot, that archive any links entextualized from other subreddits

Essentially, Couldry argues that archiving practices, like these on reddit, represent “a socially evolved way of combining personal memory, collective bonding and communal history production.”⁴⁰ Threads in r/AskReddit often reflect this communal construction of history when redditors pose a question about histories of the site, like “What do you consider to be Reddit’s finest moment?”⁴¹ or “What are the legends of Reddit everyone here should know?”⁴² or “Reddit, what are some of the most mysterious posts ever put on the site?”⁴³ These threads offer crowd-curated archival content that represents a connection between various historical events and the present practices found on the site. Additionally, redditors on r/MuseumOfReddit, focus on “cataloguing the posts and comments that will go down in reddit history;” r/TheDailyHerald offers a daily newspaper that recaps “what’s been happening on reddit over the past 24 hours;” and, finally, r/TopOfReddit automatically collects every post that reaches the number one spot on the front-page of r/all. By collecting and curating these images, stories and histories, redditors effectively generate a self-constructed, communal history of their various practices on the site.

COMPLEX MEDIA-RELATED PRACTICES

In addition to the previous individual practices already addressed, Couldry introduces four additional practices found throughout digital culture. “Some media-related practices,” Couldry argues, “are, not surprisingly, best understood as *complex articulations of many media-related practices* and sometimes of non-media-related practices too.”⁴⁴ In the rest of this chapter, I examine how redditors keep up with the news and comment on it while simultaneously allowing all channels to be open and provide users the affordances to select out certain types of content.

KEEPING UP WITH THE NEWS

First, Couldry argues, individual methods of keeping up with the news through a variety of complex practices have fundamentally altered traditional media industries’ business models and economic policies. As mobile technology continues to change how users consume the news, Couldry states that “the complex practice of keeping up with the news is of international interest and contributes to even more complex practices of narrating one’s life through news or orienting oneself to a public world *through* news consumption.”⁴⁵ In opposition to the “gatekeeping” practices of traditional newsrooms, which rely on journalists and editors to determine the newsworthiness of a story, reddit relies on what Axel Bruns terms “gatewatching” to determine the importance of content. According to Bruns, redditors who participate in submitting and voting on news content act as “Internet librarians” who watch “the output gates of as wide a range of traditional and nontraditional publishers of information as possible, with a view using this information as source material in news reports.”⁴⁶ Thus, Bruns envisions a culture of participatory journalism in which “producers,” “users of news websites who engage with such sites interchangeably in consumptive *and* productive modes,” can engage in participatory

journalism.⁴⁷ Ultimately, reddit affords users the potential to actively participate in the determination of what is considered news within reddit's public sphere by leaving little room for censorship at the input level, and curatorial capabilities at the output gate through voting and commenting.

Redditors practice gatewatching in several ways. First, the technological affordances of the site (specifically upvoting and downvoting) offer individual redditors methods to determine the content of their news based on popularity. Thus, the top-voted content on reddit is often image-based; in fact, as Singer et al. show, images receive around 85% of the total votes on the site;⁴⁸ the top-voted content on reddit often circulates mimetic image-macros from r/AdviceAnimals, pictures of cute animals from r/Aww, or funny pictures submitted to r/funny or r/pics. In addition to pictures, various news stories from the default subs often populate the front-page. Default subreddits, and former defaults, like r/Politics, r/Worldnews, and r/News, often appear on the top of r/All, or at least within the top several pages of articles covering current events; likewise, alternative news stories are also promoted through default subs, like r/NotTheOnion and r/UpliftingNews. Although r/Politics is no longer a default sub, political content also often appears on the front page, primarily from the USA. However, content pertaining to international politics often makes the front page, especially when it concerns terrorism, censorship, or intellectual property policy.

While voting offers individual redditors the opportunity to help determine the news found on the front-page, the gatewatching practices of moderators are also essential for determining how redditors "keep up with the news." While the reddit administration rarely intervenes with content submitted to the site, unpaid moderators often interfere or remove submitted content if it does not follow the rules of their subreddit. For example, moderators of r/Politics remove any content

submitted from social media sites, advocacy sites, and satirical publications, as well as content submitted from Wikipedia and the Gawker network; mods of r/InTheNews censor all non-opinion or analysis articles; meanwhile, moderators of r/AnythingGoesNews allow “any article you please. From politics, science, technology, gaming, entertainment, world news, sports and anything else your mind can think of.” Outside of news specific subreddits, content and comments are regularly regulated based on the needs of the specific community. Moderators of r/AskScience often remove questions that do not meet the strict guidelines they have established, and they can also remove comments that supply incorrect or unrelated answers; moderators on r/Music have banned all images, music from the “hall of fame,” and any linked song that not following the proper title formatting (“Artist-Title [Genre]”).

COMMENTARY

While redditors keep up with the news through gatowatching practices, Couldry argues that practices of “commentary” provide another critical element for online news consumption practices. Couldry states:

Because of the almost infinite proliferation of things to read and look at, we need to send signals to help each other *select* from the flux. At the same time, and for related reasons, our ability to send comments and signals has been massively extended by digital media: we take it for granted that by mailing or uploading a link we can *point at* something interesting we have just read and so alert someone on the other side of the world. The scope of commentary as a practice has been massively enlarged.⁴⁹

Because reddit only hosts self-posts and comments on its servers, most of the content produced on the site’s comment threads are designed to afford a space for commentary on entextualized content. As noted in Chapter Four, when discourse is extracted from its original context and recontextualized it within a new discursive space, the discourse becomes the center for a “metadiscourse” that helps generate meaning and calls attention to the discursive structures

inherent within the original discourse.⁵⁰ Thus, when redditors submit external content to reddit, they are creating a performative space in which they practice commentary about the original text.

Redditor's commentary on news articles often follows specific patterns that create more meaning from the entextualized article. Firstly, redditors often contextualize the entextualized article with additional information that may be missing from the original. For example, after Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott conceded that a terrorist attack in January 2015 could have been prevented, u/RochelleH added much needed context to the initial story by clarifying that Abbott's remarks were not a call "for increasing government spying on citizens, infringing personal privacy," but instead only noticing that "alarm bells were going off for years, and yet government department after government department cleared the way for this guy to do what he did [. . .] all while on unemployment benefits to finance it all."⁵¹ By recontextualizing the content of the headline in the comment section, u/RochelleH provided needed contexts for the entextualized articles that create new meaning not present in the original article and headline. Likewise, under a link to an article titled, "Fox News Posts ISIS Execution Video. Terror Expert States that Fox is 'literally—working for al-Qaida and Isis's media arm,'" u/Meich12 reminded the public of r/News that although "this is Reddit and people hate Fox, [. . .] pretty much every major media outlet is serving as a platform for these fucktards."⁵² Here, u/Meich12 recontextualized the news content within the larger scope of US media; in addition, by using profanities, this redditor actively identifies their commentary as separate from television news commentary, which does not afford commentators the ability to say "fucktard." Secondly, some comments underneath news articles effectively contradict the main gist of the entextualized story. For example, when Reuters reported that protests over Eric Garner's death at the hands of police were "gaining momentum," u/Alcoholigan wrote

I'll believe that it's gaining momentum when it evolves from a protest to action. People are saying the DA was ineffective and presented a weak case to the Grand Jury. If that's the case then the next step after protests is to file recall paperwork and get this elected official removed from his position for not doing his job.⁵³

By reminding the public of r/Politics that protests are meaningless without action, u/Alcoholigan effectively crafts a critique of the entextualized article through commentary and extending the discourse started in the article within reddit's public sphere.

Finally, redditors also comment to clarify a point or aspect of the text for another redditor who has expressed confusion. For example, under an article about politicians receiving over \$8 million from major cable companies, u/minoshabaal asked, "Can someone explain to me why lobbying isn't simply called corruption and bribery and isn't punishable?"⁵⁴ While some redditors responded helpfully with YouTube links and a brief discussion about the problems with contemporary campaign finance law, others proved less helpful; u/schoocher simply replied "guess who is in charge of making the laws,"⁵⁵ while u/CJKay93 replied with the meme, "'Murica."⁵⁶ While the commentary on reddit can often be helpful for recontextualizing information, supplying additional narrative elements or contesting embedded meanings from other news sources, this commentary often struggles to answer questions and actively engage with the publics it is meant to engage.

KEEPING ALL CHANNELS OPEN

To construct effective commentary and keep up with the news, Couldry argues that "digital natives" actively try to maintain open lines of communication from all direction. "We can now," he writes, "be permanently open (and potentially responsive) to content from all directions. Many writers see the practice (or even compulsion) of continuous connectivity as characteristic of the 'digital native' generation."⁵⁷ As a gatewatching site, many redditors fundamentally perceive the

site as a space for free speech which allows information from all channels. CEO Yishan Wong reinforced this notion after closing r/TheFappening:

We [the administration] uphold the ideal of free speech on reddit as much as possible not because we are legally bound to, but because we believe that you—the user—has the right to choose between right and wrong, good and evil, and that it is *your responsibility* to do so. When you know something is right, you should choose to do it. But as much as possible, we will not force you to do it.⁵⁸

Gatewatching fundamentally relies on a censor-free input gate and when moderators begin removing content at the point of input redditors often feel like their open channels of communication have been compromised. For instance, after Glenn Greenwald revealed files from Edward Snowden’s archive that proved how the British *Joint Threat Research Intelligence Group* (JTRIG) “are attempting to control, infiltrate, manipulate, and warp online discourse, and in doing so, are compromising the integrity of the internet itself,”⁵⁹ moderators of r/News and r/WorldNews actively removed all submissions of Greenwald’s article because it represented an opinion piece which is forbidden by the established rules. Members of the r/News public lashed back at the moderators, fearing that moderators of these subreddits (and others like r/Technology and r/Politics) had been infiltrated by NSA agents who were purposefully censoring Greenwald’s findings. u/Fhwqhgads argued that Greenwald’s piece was deleted by the mods “because they’re the ones the article is talking about,”⁶⁰ likewise, u/SomeKindOfMutant claimed that “this tactic has been used to keep other similar stories from rising, such as the one about the NSA sharing information with Israel.”⁶¹ Moderators defended their actions, telling *Salon* that because Greenwald’s article was “primarily analytic and non-objective in nature, it wouldn’t be allowed in r/news [. . .] The story itself is irrelevant, it’s simply how the story is presented—which is why any unbiased, objective and wholly factual news article on the event would be (and is) allowed in r/news.”⁶² This conflict between moderators and members of the r/News public evinces the

fundamental contradictions within the practices of gatewatching on reddit; simply because input gate for content submitted to the site lacks a filter, does not mean that content is inherently deregulated. Content is curated on every subreddit, and if not by moderators, by the cultural, technological or commercial forces that define reddit's publics.

SELECTING OUT

Given the ever-increasing amount of news sources and commentary with which to keep up, Couldry concludes that digital natives exercise one more practice of "selecting out" content. He states,

Keeping all channels open creates severe problems. Such responsiveness is only possible on the basis of a considerable amount of background selection. [. . .] Selecting out is close to a survival skill in today's media environment. [. . .] The necessity of selecting out derives not only from the volume of information and communications reaching us, but also from contradictions between the *types* of different information flow that reach us at the same time, contradictions that require extra time to resolve.⁶³

Primarily, redditors select out through their subreddit subscriptions, which determine their personalized front-page. By subscribing to subreddits that appeal to them, redditors effectively select out content they might find unappealing, uninformative, or contradictory to their worldviews. u/CatalystCoin provided a useful archive for understanding "selecting out" processes on reddit when asking r/AskReddit, "What subreddit did you recently unsubscribe from?"⁶⁴ Many redditors had recently unsubscribed from newly appointed default subreddits, like r/NoSleep, r/GetMotivated and r/Fitness. u/LeBatEnRouge felt that r/NoSleep had changed since becoming a default in 2014: "It used to have really creepy stories, now it's just 'my brother/best friend/new neighbor/teacher is being really weird and let me take 18 different submissions to tell you why.'"⁶⁵ A number of other commenters echoed u/LeBatEnRouge's complaint about other subreddits. u/-Intuition- wrote that r/ShowerThoughts "used to be

amazing, but people now just post random shit that doesn't fit there and they ruined the subreddit."⁶⁶ u/BridgeBoy95 unsubscribed from r/aspergers because it "became totally about how people without aspergers were evil and 'aspie master race.'"⁶⁷ Likewise, u/NuklearAngel unsubscribed from r/TumblrInAction because although they found it "funny at first, but it made me too angry when I processed that the people showcased on it are completely serious,"⁶⁸ u/JayceOfSpaces also unsubscribed from r/TumblrInAction, but

for an entirely different reason. Most of the blogs people post on there are fucking miniscule, like those screenshots have like 5-10 notes each yet Reddit hypes them up like they're some HUGE and influential people that are ruining the world!!!! or, they're just trolls from /pol/ that make up dumb shit and r/TumblrInAction laps it up. On top of all of this feminism has been demonized on Reddit and in the eyes of many people (almost all men) because they think a tiny proportion of weirdos getting shared on a wider platform represents an entire concept. Just a stupid sub in my opinion.⁶⁹

I will return to problematize discourses surrounding feminism on reddit in the final two chapters of this dissertation, but for now, u/JayceOfSpaces' comment represents yet another reason one might select out of a subreddit.

Many of these comments reflect redditors's concerns about changes to the site that increase the number of subreddits some redditors feel obligated to select out. u/bothanspy1337 approached this conundrum on r/TheoryOfReddit, claiming that reddit's "concepts works very well when its population is within the hundreds to thousands. But as it's gotten more and more popular, it's a lot harder to have your voice heard and carry on discussions."⁷⁰ u/bothanspy1337 proposed eliminating default subreddits as a potential solution, but u/18andover disagreed, arguing that "infinite subreddits is the solution. And it's probably the reason reddit has continued to grow. Yes, it's hard to have your voice heard in a default sub. But go into a sub with 10,000 or fewer subscribers and you'll have no problem at all."⁷¹ As Singer et al. determine, the number and diversity of subreddits have steadily increased since their introduction in 2008; however, as

they clarified, “many topics and discourses might have existed previously as part of one of the broader themed subreddits, especially *r/Reddit.com*, which served as the default posting space in the early phase of Reddit.”⁷² Several subreddits have developed as sections of an original subreddit, which split-off to create a new public with new regulations and guidelines. After *r/HipHopHeads* banned images, *u/murdahmurdahmurdah* created the new subreddit, *r/HipHopImages* to collect hip-hop related pictures no longer accepted on the main subreddit; likewise, when *r/Movies* gained a sizable subscription, *u/Nixon74* created *r/TrueFilm* for cinephiles in order to “encourage and support intellectual discussions, not memes or one sentence responses.” Subreddits created as responses to changing policies and practices in the original subreddits do not always diversify content, but often fragment publics; rather than encouraging redditors with an intellectual interest in film to engage other redditors on the *r/Movies* subreddit, *r/TrueFilm* represents a public “selecting out” of the moderation practices found within the larger subreddit.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, I have described a variety of cultural practices found within reddit’s multitude of publics and counterpublics. Ultimately, the aim of this chapter was threefold. First, drawing on Nick Couldry’s theoretical framework, I described how some redditors practice searching, showing, presencing, archiving, and other complex mediated-related practices. Through thick descriptions of these practices, I introduced the dominant cultural practice of most redditors: gatewatching. Finally, I introduced several conflicts between the users, moderators and administrators of reddit that implicate many political aspects of reddit’s publics and counterpublics discussed further in Chapters Seven and Eight. In Chapter Six, I continue to establish the foundational elements of reddit through a careful analysis of the technologies and

economies that undergird the site's public spheres.

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CHAPTER SIX

TECHNOLOGIES AND ECONOMIES OF REDDIT

In addition to the cultural practices of redditors, the technological and economic decisions made by the reddit administration also prove fundamental to the formation of publics and counterpublics across the site. In the following chapter, I explore the relationship between the technological advancements and economic models that undergird the publics and counterpublics on the site. Drawing on Lawrence Lessig's theory of a "hybrid" economy, I describe how the reddit administration has implemented both "commercial" and "sharing" economies within the site's business model. This chapter interrogates the nature of reddit's hybridity through a detailed description of *reddit inc.*'s corporate documents and official blogposts, as well as redditors' responses to announced changes. While this analysis indicates that the reddit administration actively engages some aspects of a hybrid economy, it also reveals the continuing commodification of reddit's publics through advertising, intellectual property and the labor of its public.

REDDIT'S COMMERCIAL ECONOMIES

Drawing on his colleague, Yochai Benkler's work on "information economies,"¹ Lessig defines a "commercial economy" as

an economy in which money or 'price' is a central term of the ordinary, or normal exchange. [. . .] The exchange is defined in terms of the price. This does not mean price is the only term, or even the most important term. But it does mean that there is nothing peculiar about price being a term.²

Given this definition, reddit's foundation is fundamentally rooted within a commercial economy. As college students, reddit co-founders, Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman, applied for and received funding from the newly founded "experiment in seed-stage investing,"³ Y Combinator, which has helped develop numerous online start ups, including Dropbox, Airbnb, and Twitch TV.⁴ Having raised \$82,000 in funding, Ohanian and Huffman sold reddit in 2006 to magazine conglomerate Condé Nast for an undisclosed amount of money.⁵ Under the guidance of Condé Nast, reddit grew from around 700,000 pageviews per day in 2006 to nearly 700,000 pageviews every 15-minutes in 2011.⁶ Given reddit's rapid growth, Condé Nast's parent company, Advance Publications took direct control of the site in 2011 by incorporating reddit, which then became reddit inc. and reported to a board of directors, including Ohanian. Under the board's guidance, former Facebook "director of engineering," Yishan Wong, became reddit's CEO in 2011. A redditor since 2005, Wong proved instrumental in fundraising \$50 million from a variety of investors including Jared Leto, Snoop Dogg, and Y-Combinator, president Sam Altman in 2014.⁷ Even though reddit's staff had grown to include over 60 people, once Wong completed these fundraising efforts, he informed the reddit public that the administrators were

planning to use this money to hire more staff for product development, expand our community management team, build out better moderation and community tools, work more closely with third party developers to expand our mobile offerings? [. . .] improve our self-serve ad product, [. . .], pay for our growing infrastructure, and all the many other things it takes to support a huge and growing global internet community.⁸

However, within two months of this successful fundraising campaign, Wong resigned, and Ellen Pao was chosen by the board to act as interim-CEO in November 2014; furthermore, Alexis Ohanian returned to a hands-on role as reddit's Executive Chairman.⁹

Although the 2014 fundraising effort temporarily secured reddit's financial future, the site has relied on commercial economies for funding since the introduction of advertisements to the previously ad-free interface in March 2007. Currently, reddit hosts paid advertisements in two

primary areas. First, businesses can purchase “roadblocks” in two places on the front-page [see Figure 1] through online advertising company, AdZerk.¹⁰ Although the price of these spaces is not listed publicly by reddit, in “The Reddit Marketing Field Guide,” Prestige Marketing Inc. asserts that front-page roadblocks like these start at \$20,000.¹¹ In addition to front-page placement, advertisers can also purchase similar roadblocks in subreddits in order to target more specific audiences. These ads must also follow specific guidelines, which forbid flash animation, expanding ads, floating ads, or rich media ads.¹²

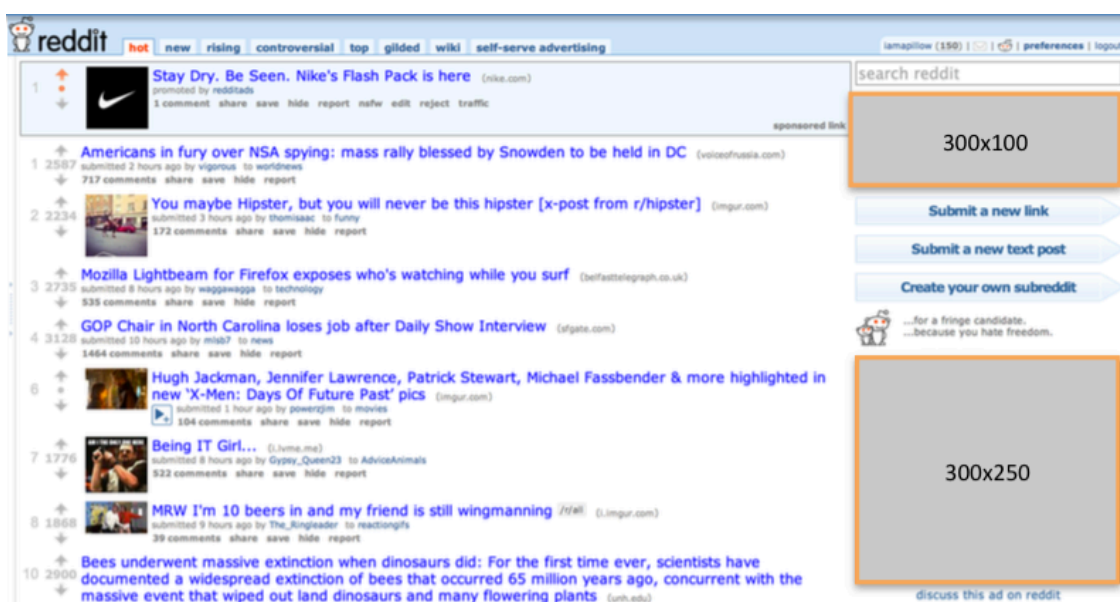


FIGURE 1: Roadblock Advertising on reddit

Secondly, for a smaller fee, advertisers can purchase “self-serve” advertising space on reddit that appears as an in-line post at the top of a subreddit (see “The Pied Piper team is back to represent Silicon Valley” post in Figure 2). The administrators introduced “sponsored ads” in 2009, while acknowledging “users often have animosity toward ads;” however, as Huffman wrote, “We care very much about the user’s experience when reading reddit, and we think this approach to advertising is much more reasonable than what you might see elsewhere online. Our hope is that we can both improve our advertisers’ experience on reddit without diluting yours.”¹³ As such, redditors can vote and comment on ads, providing advertisers and the reddit

administration with further information about the ad's successes and failures.¹⁴ Although advertisers have the option to turn off commenting, the reddit administration recommends against that because (a) limiting interaction with a post could lead to a “negative brand association,” and (b) by “disabling the comments thread of your promotion, you are limiting the success of your ad placement on reddit.”¹⁵ Within six months of implementation, self-serve ads on reddit had successfully generated a “clickthrough rate” between two and ten percent.¹⁶ Given this success, the administration opened sponsored ads to the reddit public for \$20 per day.¹⁷ In April 2010, the administration announced that sponsored links could now target specific subreddits; additionally, advertisers could further develop their ad by creating a “campaign” that pushes the ad across other “potential target reds to extend the conversation.”¹⁸



FIGURE 2: Self-Service Advertising on reddit

Initially, redditors bid on their advertising space, and the number of impressions their ad received was based on the percentage their bid made up of the total money spent on advertisements that day; as Chris Slowe clarified, “if you were to bid \$20, and the total for the day is \$200, you'll get 10% of sponsored link impressions for the day.”¹⁹ Anyone could bid between \$20 and \$9,999. However, as the administration overhauled the sponsored link system in 2013, they began charging a set price for self-serve advertisements. Because the previous system estranged

international advertisers, the new self-serve, sponsored links on reddit cost \$0.75 per 1,000 impressions.²⁰ Under this new model, the reddit administration hoped

to build an ads system that is a community resource — a system for redditors to advertise to each other. We want to include the features of other modern self-serve systems, e.g. enabling discount codes, A/B testing, geotargeting — but we want to design it in a way to serve the reddit community’s own particular needs. For example, users may want to use it to inform others about causes they’re promoting. Or to try and find more subscribers for a new subreddit they’ve just created. Or just to wish someone a happy birthday in a tiny community. We want people to be able to spend as little as \$20 and be able to run an ad in their favorite subreddits.²¹

Thus, although advertisements exist across the site, many redditors “appreciate how unobtrusive the ads are on reddit. They just look like another link, nothing flashy and obnoxious.”²² To maintain this feeling of unobtrusiveness, the reddit administration has created “brandiquette— reddiquette for brands” as a guideline for companies wishing to advertise through these sponsored links. While marketers are encouraged to “respond to comments,” “keep it real,” and “research your brand on reddit,” they are also instructed not to “ignore the value of criticism,” “be rude,” or “falsify votes, cheat, or shill.”²³ When the administration announced their conversion to AdZerk in 2013, u/jenakalif also alerted the reddit community to the new ‘thumbs up’ / ‘thumbs down’ overlay” on top of ads; if a user clicks the “thumbs down” button, reddit “won’t display it to you again, and you can give us feedback to improve the quality of reddit ads in the future.”²⁴ In addition to this user-centered feature, advertisers can now target specific interest groups,²⁵ geographical locations, as well as specific subreddits.²⁶

In addition to advertising, reddit acquires much of its funding through “reddit gold.” Although reddit had grown to around 280 million pageviews by 2010, the site was still run by only four people, and the advertising revenue was not significant enough for Condé Nast to support new staff.²⁷ Therefore, the reddit administration introduced reddit gold as a way to increase the site’s revenue through the support of a membership-based premium model. For

\$3.99 per month, or \$29.99 per year, users can become a reddit gold members, affording them access to a number of special features on the site that are unavailable to the general public.²⁸ Initially, reddit gold afforded users the ability to turn off the roadblock and/or sponsored advertisements, sort user-pages like comment sections, and add comments next to the name of reddit friends.²⁹ Gold benefits now include the ability to create gold-members-only subreddits and custom avatars based on reddit's alien mascot, Snoo (see Figure 3); in addition, new comments appearing since a user's last visit to a thread can be highlighted, subreddits can be filtered from r/all, links can be remembered across devices used to access reddit, saved comments and threads can be categorized, more comments can be viewed in a single page, and finally, gold-members also receive access to r/lounge and a user-page trophy.³⁰ Likewise, gold members are able to "beta test" new features on reddit before they are released for public use. Redditors can also purchase other users' reddit gold either directly, or by "gilding" a comment. Additionally, the reddit administration introduced "gold partners" in 2013 through which businesses offer special deals to reddit gold members; for example, reddit gold members can receive a 20% discount on Bridgford Jerky, \$60 off of a Casper mattress, or three months of free service from Backblaze Online Backup.³¹ Initially, the reddit administration used the money collected from reddit gold to stabilize their servers, which had been crashing on a regular basis;³² now, the revenue is used for basic site maintenance. Effectively, by gilding other users' comments, redditors pay *reddit inc.* for other users' labor by commodifying their cultural practices.

Finally, reddit also raises revenue through merchandising and licensing. Official reddit t-shirts, hoodies, plush toys, magnets, stickers and buttons are available at www.redditmarket.com. Oftentimes, however, redditors want to create their own reddit-oriented product and must attain a

license to use the trademarked image of Snoo. Likewise, outside parties must acquire a license to produce any product drawing on reddit's open-source code, a topic I will address this in the next section. The reddit administration maintains two obligations with regards to licensing their trademarks: (a) "for anything that bears the reddit brand to be something that enhances the reddit experience—whether that is a knitted blanket or a T-shirt available in our store or web application," and (b) "for these uses to be documented (the way the law is written in the United States and most other countries, you have to defend your trademark continuously or you lose it.)"³³



FIGURE 3: Snoo, reddit's Alien Mascot

With these obligations in mind, reddit trademarks are generally licensed under three models. Firstly, the "personal use license" provides a license for individuals who wish to create one or two items with the reddit trademark; the only requirement is for the individuals to e-mail reddit, possibly with a picture of their product, and sign an official form confirming permission.³⁴ Secondly, web developers wishing to use reddit's application programming interface (API) for commercial purposes must create a third party application ID for authentication, follow reddit's official rules and the API rules;³⁵ furthermore, any third-party applications cannot use the term "reddit" without the word "for" before it. Finally, the reddit administration also offers a

“commercial goods license” for businesses and individuals who wish to sell a product containing a reddit trademark at cost, or for a profit. This license is only distributed after the reddit administration has considered a number of different questions about the company asking for the license:

- Does your company have a history of providing quality products and customer service? [. . .]
- Do you have a product plan and outline? Can you keep pace with varying levels of demand? If a bevy of orders come in, do you have the ability to scale with that? Our big concern here is that you can handle fluctuations and won’t leave customers hanging.
- What are the costs and risks associated with this? Do you have a price estimate? Do you have to sell a minimum amount of units? If more are sold, does the price go down?
- Do we like the product? Can we see it up close and personal? Does a mockup look good? Is there demand for it?³⁶

To establish the answers to these questions, the administration asks for a description of the “business and expertise,” “general product plan and parameters,” and a reason “why you can do it better than anyone else.”³⁷ If the administration decides to grant the license, they generally retain 25% of the gross revenue.

REDDIT’S SHARING ECONOMIES

While the commercial economies of reddit provide a number of important revenue streams for the site, sharing economies also play important roles in the formation of the publics and counterpublics across the site. As Benkler writes, sharing economies are fundamentally rooted within “commons-based peer production” that facilitates

collaboration among large groups of individuals, sometimes in the order of tens or even hundreds of thousands, who cooperate effectively to provide information, knowledge or cultural goods without relying on either market pricing or managerial hierarchies to coordinate their common enterprise.³⁸

Like open source software development, sharing economies draw on the collective intelligence of digital publics to further develop the code, build add-ons, and fix bugs. While open-source software development began during the 1960s and 1970s as universities freely shared their computational developments, Richard Stallman formalized the movement when he announced his new, free software system, GNU (Gnu's Not Unix) in 1983.³⁹ In his accompanying manifesto, Stallman stated,

I consider that the Golden Rule requires that if I like a program I must share it with other people who like it. Software sellers want to divide the users and conquer them, making each user agree not to share with others. I refuse to break solidarity with other users in this way. I cannot in good conscience sign a nondisclosure agreement or a software license agreement.⁴⁰

Stallman saw his open software as “an example to inspire and a banner to rally others to join us in sharing. This can give us a feeling of harmony which is impossible if we use software that is not free.”⁴¹ GNU offered a new alternative for programmers who wished to escape the competitive nature of commercial software development, and enter a community that focused creativity, innovation and sharing.

Although reddit began by using a model of proprietary software development, in 2008 Huffman and Ohanian released the site's code onto Github.⁴² Huffman reflected,

Since reddit's beginning, we have stood on the shoulders of giants in the open source world. Every library, tool and platform we depend on is open. Until now, the only portion of reddit that wasn't freely available is reddit itself. We are proud and excited that we're finally giving back to the community that has given us so much.⁴³

Through a “common attribution license” anyone could now access and modify reddit's source code for their own purposes as long as the modifier used the same license, made their new code publicly available, left accurate annotations to any substantial changes made to the code, duplicated the required notices and licenses, and clearly acknowledged they are running reddit's

code.⁴⁴ Various redditors quickly began developing add-ons for the site; within five months, u/chromakode released the Firefox extension, “socialite,” which displayed

a context-sensitive toolbar above pages linked from reddit, allowing you to vote articles up and down, view comments, and save pages to your profile. In addition, Socialite provide[ed] a streamlined lookup-or-submit button in the location bar that allow[ed] you to check if what you are browsing is posted to reddit and submit it with one click.⁴⁵

u/honestbleeps also created a useful add-on to the site; the “Reddit Enhancement Suite” allowed redditors to, among other things, easily switch between different accounts, highlight users, participate via keyboard, filter out “Not Safe For Work” (NSFW) content or specific subreddits, and open content and comment sections with a single click.⁴⁶ More officially, the reddit administration agreed to partner with Y-Combinator startup Embed.ly after the creators wrote a quicker “media scraper” that was ready to drop into the site before the administrators knew it existed; as Slow wrote, “this is how you pitch your product to an open source company.”⁴⁷ To provide users with the affordances to make productive use of their code, the reddit administration established r/RedditDev to provide a place for interested redditors to discuss their use of reddit’s API and source code. Likewise, they also established r/IdeasForTheAdmins for users who wanted to suggest changes to the reddit interface but did not have the technical know-how to create it themselves.

In addition to encouraging redditors to develop add-ons for the site, the reddit administrators also hoped to employ redditors’s collective intelligence to ferret out bugs in their system. While a primary benefit of open source software development includes increased manpower for spotting bugs, it also proved problematic when, in 2009, a found a bug on reddit and exploited it to crash the site. In response, the administration now rewards redditors who *privately* report bugs they find in the code with a “Whitehat” trophy, which cannot be awarded if the reddit public learns of the flaw and continues exploiting it. However, the administration’s insistence that

redditors report bugs privately contradicts a principle concept of sharing economies: open access and potential for collaboration between members of the economy. The reddit administrative team acknowledged this contradiction, writing

you shouldn't collaborate with others. We know that sucks, but we don't really see any way around it: If you create a public reddit community dedicated to finding exploits, it will inevitably be watched closely by at least one jerk, and so anything discovered there will have to be considered 'known to the general public' and thus ineligible for the award.⁴⁸

Although reddit's open-source code has proven useful in many ways, the administration has also recognized the limits to open-source development, in addition to the need for privacy to fix these bugs. In a similar move, in 2010, the reddit administrators also asked the reddit public to help stop spammers by acting as "deputy moderators" to help train the automated spam filter by flooding it with accurate reports of links that were spam, and were not.⁴⁹ They also encouraged redditors to voluntarily verify their e-mail address to help battle spammers who were less likely to maintain a verified e-mail on the site.⁵⁰

While these technological developments represent of the open source movement's influence on reddit, culturally altruistic practices, fundraising campaigns for non-profits, and gift-giving also show the influence of sharing economies across the site. Lessig states that "gifts in particular, and the sharing economy in general, are thus devices for building connections with people. They establish relationships, and draw upon these relationships. They are the glue of community, essential to certain types of relationships, even if poison to others."⁵¹ Over the past decade, many redditors have garnered positive press for reddit by actively exchanging gifts with each other. On r/RandomActsOfPizza, redditors volunteer to send free pizzas to those who ask and are in need; likewise, on r/RandomActsOfAmazon, redditors create wishlists of products on Amazon, and other redditors volunteer to order them.⁵² Redditors also represent the Guinness

World Record for the world's largest Secret Santa gift exchange. u/kickme444 founded redditgifts in November 2009, after redditors avidly supported his suggestion of starting a Secret Santa gift exchange.⁵³ Over 4,000 redditors participated in the first redditgifts Secret Santa exchange, inspiring u/kickme444 and a small crew to repeat their efforts in June 2010 with the first "Arbitrary Day" gift exchange and organize another Secret Santa exchange in December 2010. In 2014, redditgifts hosted over 50 exchanges throughout the year with different themes, including condiments, pirates, board games, and bags, and over 210,000 redditors spent over \$6.6 million on presents and shipping to other redditors in 189 different countries.⁵⁴ Redditgifts has also promoted fundraising efforts for US troops abroad and for teachers in need of classroom supplies; during the 2014 teachers campaign, redditors donated over \$600,000 worth of supplies to schools around the nation.⁵⁵

Redditgifts's fundraising efforts for soldiers and teachers are also emblematic of a number of philanthropic fundraising efforts over the last several years. In December 2007, redditors raised over \$3,000 for the Electronic Frontier Foundation,⁵⁶ and the following year redditors donated over 3,100 hours to volunteer with FeedANeed.⁵⁷ In January 2010, redditors helped raise over \$180,000 for DirectRelief's efforts following massive earthquakes in Haiti,⁵⁸ in October of the same year, redditors banded together and gave seven-year-old Kathleen Edward, who suffered from Huntington's disease, over \$19,000 for a shopping spree after news surfaced that she was bullied by her neighbors.⁵⁹ At nearly the same time, redditors raised over \$550,000 for DonorsChoose.org to encourage Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart to hold a rally on the National Mall in Washington DC⁶⁰ In December of the same year, u/maggieed challenged r/Christianity to help fund a much needed health clinic through World Vision's Clean Water program,⁶¹ in responses, u/sjmarotta challenged r/Atheism to raise enough money for ten clinics through

Doctors Without Borders.⁶² Altogether, these fundraising drives raised over \$50,000, and over \$180,000 the next year.⁶³ Likewise, over the past four years, redditors have raised over \$270,000 through *Extra Life's* annual gaming marathon.⁶⁴ In November 2011, redditors also raised over \$55,000 for a young boy in need of a bone marrow transplant,⁶⁵ and after u/TheLake asked reddit to help raise \$2,000 for a recently attacked Kenyan orphanage in January 2012,⁶⁶ redditors responded by raising over over \$80,000 for the orphanage within 24-hours.⁶⁷

REDDIT'S HYBRID ECONOMIES

Given that both commercial and sharing economies have proven critical throughout reddit's development, a comparison with Lessig's concept of a "hybrid" economy appears apt. Lessig argues that between commercial and sharing economies, a third type of hybrid economy exists that "builds upon both the sharing and commercial economies, one that adds value to each. This third type—the hybrid—will dominate the architecture for commerce on the Web."⁶⁸ However, while Lessig argues that sites like, *Amazon*, *Netflix* and *Google*, indicate the commercial economy's continued success in the digital marketplace, these sites are also representative of hybrid economies that draw on the sharing and commercial traditions. Lessig points to open-source software development as a premiere example of a successful hybrid model that incorporates both commercial and sharing economies. Richard Stallman's development of GNU in the 1980s culminated in 1991, when Linus Torvalds developed the Linux operating system, which has become the dominant open-source operating system under the GNU General Public License. Since its inception, the Linux kernel has grown consistently. According to *The Linux Foundation*, "since 2005, nearly 10,000 individual developers from over 1000 different companies have contributed to the kernel. The Linux kernel, thus, has become a common

resource developed on a massive scale by companies which are fierce competitors in other areas.”⁶⁹ Specifically, Linux has become a major competitor in the mobile market, as Android phones and tablets, based on the Linux kernel, represent over 75% of the mobile market share in 2014.⁷⁰ The open-source movement successfully established that economic alternatives to commercial investment can also prove fruitful in the market.

While these hybrid economies represent the successful collision between commercial and sharing economies in software development, reddit’s status as a social news site makes its status as a hybrid economy more tenuous. While the site is not a long-term software development project, like Linux, it does represent what Lessig calls a “community space:” an online space

where people interact, sharing information or interests. The people interacting do so for sharing-economy reasons: the terms under which they interact are commerce free, though the motivations for interacting may or may not tie to commerce. Few have been able to translate these spaces into successful commercial ventures.⁷¹

According to Lessig, sites like *Craigslist*, *Flickr*, *Dogster* and *YouTube* have (somewhat) successfully translated the sharing economies of their users into financial success. As a community space, reddit has also attempted to enact hybridic economic practices to varying degrees of success. Beginning in 2011, the reddit administration has attempted to merge the site’s commercial and sharing economies by providing free self-serve advertisements for various causes. In June 2011, the reddit administration gave out over \$16,000 in free advertising to employers looking to hire people in “programming, engineering, managing, teaching, [and] even nursing.”⁷² Later that same year, the administration provided more free advertising space for non-profit organizations looking to target reddit’s public.⁷³ In 2013, the administration gave away ad space for crowd-funded projects, and in 2014, the administrators also gave away ad space to international businesses who wished to use reddit’s new ability to target specific countries and cities.⁷⁴ In addition to providing their advertising space for worthy causes, the

reddit administration also donated ten percent of their advertising profits from 2014 to charities chosen by the reddit community.⁷⁵ After 250,000 votes, redditors chose ten non-profit organizations to which the administration donated over \$82,000 each, furthering the hybridic nature of the administrations gift-giving by harnessing the collective labor of redditors.⁷⁶ In 2009, the administration also employed reddit's sharing economy by convening the "Narwhal Commission," a panel of redditors whose job it was to "discuss advertisers who the community would like to see."⁷⁷ By financially hindering reddit inc. in order to help the users advertise on the site, the administrators incorporated aspects of sharing economies into their development of reddit's commercial economy.

Offering free advertising indicates at least some economic hybridity on reddit, but the site's hiring practices also represent the influence of sharing economies on the administration and governance. While nearly all of reddit's staff participated on reddit before becoming part of the administrative team, several had actively participated in developing reddit's code once it became open source. When reddit officially purchased redditgifts in 2011, founders u/kickme444 and u/5days became official members of the reddit staff;⁷⁸ likewise, u/weffey became a team member after acting as an active moderator and participant in the Secret Santa exchanges.⁷⁹ Before becoming a staff member in 2013, u/Deimorz had created an external site that provided statistics about reddit, moderated r/Games, and created the AutoModerator bot, which helps moderate over 500 subreddits on a day-to-day basis.⁸⁰ Likewise, after creating reddit's Firefox add-on, "Socialite," u/Chromakode joined the reddit staff in 2011 as a user-interface designer and programmer; as he stated, "I'm also a huge supporter of open source reddit—without it, I wouldn't be here!"⁸¹ Likewise, despite privately creating and maintaining a mobile app with the help of the app development company 280 North since 2009 (iReddit), in 2014 the

administration announced that AlienBlue, an open source app, would become the new, official iOS app for reddit. At the same time, the reddit administrators hired the app's creator, u/jase, as an official member of their team to maintain and further develop AlienBlue.⁸² Effectively, these redditors leveraged their free labor within reddit's sharing economy into an official position within the site's commercial economy that provided them with financial compensation (e.g. a paycheck, health benefits). Nevertheless, financial rewards for labor within reddit's sharing economies are infrequent and unfairly distributed among the millions of individuals who freely contribute their labor on the site.

In addition to providing free advertising and hiring members of their sharing economy, reddit also promotes economic hybridity through their terms of service in their "User Agreement." Specifically, the User Agreement stated that the reddit user retains "the rights to your copyrighted content or information that you submit to reddit"⁸³ While reddit maintained "royalty-free, perpetual, irrevocable, non-exclusive, unrestricted, worldwide license to reproduce, prepare derivative works, distribute copies, perform, or publicly display your user content in any medium and for any purpose, including commercial purposes, and to authorize others to do so," ultimately the content created on reddit still belonged to the its creator.⁸⁴ Thus, reddit's User Agreement represented yet another push towards economic hybridity on behalf of the reddit administration; rather than maintaining complete ownership over their content as a television or radio station would, reddit afforded users the opportunity to profit from their free labor on the site. For example, after u/The_Quiet_Earth asked r/AskReddit in 2011, "Could I destroy the entire Roman Empire during the reign of Augustus if I traveled back in time with a modern U.S. Marine infantry battalion or MEU?", u/Prufrock451 responded with a lengthy piece of fiction about a Marine battalion that had been transported back in time and were confronted by

the Roman empire at the peak of its power.⁸⁵ With over 5,000 upvotes, u/Prufrock451's story became extremely popular across reddit and a subreddit (r/RomeSweetRome) quickly developed to host the story and encourage his continued writing. Soon after his initial writing, offers from various producers began flowing into his reddit message box, including an offer for \$10,000 for everything he had already written, and "if it becomes a screenplay later on [. . .] \$100,000."⁸⁶ Within a week, u/Prufrock451 agreed to work with *Mad House Entertainment*, a management firm in Los Angeles to start developing his idea into a full-fledged screenplay, which *Warner Bros.* eventually bought.⁸⁷ While certainly not a regular occurrence, u/Prufrock451's experience with "Rome Sweet Rome" represents the benefits of hybridic ownership over content created within reddit's community space. Both u/Prufrock451 and *reddit inc.* benefitted from the sharing economies on the site, and the commercial practices of the corporate world; u/Prufrock451 received financial compensation for his work, and reddit drove traffic to their advertisers, and increased their online presence based on the positive press covering "Rome Sweet Rome." However, while reddit's terms of service implicate the creation of a hybrid economy on the site, *Warner Bros.* still commodified u/Prufrock451's work, as the corporations still maintains sole ownership of the "Rome Sweet Rome" property. Thus, even if reddit offered a truly hybrid economy that benefitted from both commercial and sharing economies, the commodification and exploitation of free labor within US media continues to be the name of the game. Furthermore, even though u/Prufrock451's successfully translated his free labor on reddit into financial gain, he is a significant outlier to the millions of redditors who write stories and post their own content without compensation; I return to the question of reddit offering an alternative media outlet in Chapter Eight.

While reddit's status as a true hybrid economy is far from certain, many redditors feel that the administration's commercial economic practices are, at least, respectful of the public's wishes. As Lessig argues, to develop an healthy hybrid economy, "you must give the community 'respect.'"⁸⁸ By asking for the community's input to determine the advertisements directed at redditors, the administration has signaled their respect for the sharing economies that inform reddit's community space. In fact, they have been so successful at gathering advertisers that that many redditors have chosen to turn off *AdBlock* for reddit. As u/Albuyeh wrote, "I had adblock on when I first started using reddit because I didn't even notice their ads (because I was having them be removed). But since I realized their ads are not intrusive and are actually ads for cool things, I added Reddit to the whitelist."⁸⁹ By understanding the interests of the community, the reddit administration has effectively encouraged the tech savvy community to actively unblock ads, which they might normally block on other sites. The administration even provides extensive guidelines on how to make reddit an exception.⁹⁰ Thus, although the actual hybridity of reddit's commercial and sharing economies remain contentious, the administration's respect of redditor's wishes for relevant and unobtrusive advertising indicates, at least, an attempt by the administration to embrace a hybrid economic model.

The administration's push was also reinforced after CEO Yishan Wong announced the successful fundraising of \$50 million from investors in 2014. Prior to this infusion of cash, reddit had not been profitable despite having over 70 million unique visitors.⁹¹ In his blog post announcing the successful fundraising, Wong also stated that he, Ohanian and Huffman had "long been trying to find a way for the community to own some of reddit, because it is your contributions that help to anchor the site and give it strength."⁹² With that in mind, the administration and the investors agreed to give ten percent of the revenue back to the reddit

community, asking redditors to help figure out how to distribute these funds.⁹³ Among other suggestions, users proposed that the money be awarded through collaborative competitions for groups of redditors to solve,⁹⁴ be used to conduct their own scientific research,⁹⁵ or be donated to Wikipedia.⁹⁶ However, as Alexis Ohanian announced in early 2015, the administration decided to follow u/saltysails's suggestion and "create reddit shares using a crypto currency and allow all users to mine the reddit crypto currency."⁹⁷ Introduced theoretically in the 1980s and materialized in 2009 as "BitCoin" by pseudonymous programmer, Satoshi Nakamoto, crypto currencies are open source, decentralized payment networks of digital currencies, regulated through public encryption and a public ledger of all transactions called BlockChain.⁹⁸ As Ken Tindell of Business Insider analogizes,

like gold, they have value only because people want them, the supply is limited, more Bitcoins are created only by 'mining' for them and the difficulty in mining grows as they are mined. But rather than being stored in underground vaults Bitcoins are simply entries in a notional ledger held across many computers around the world.

The actual mining of Bitcoins is by a purely mathematical process. A useful analogy is with the search for prime numbers: it used to be fairly easy to find the small ones (Eratosthenes in Ancient Greece produced the first algorithm for finding them). But as they were found it got harder to find the larger ones. Nowadays researchers use advanced high-performance computers to find them and their achievements are noted by the mathematical community.⁹⁹

While BitCoin is the dominant crypto currency at the moment, others can be developed, and, as of January 2015, over 500 different crypto currencies exist.¹⁰⁰ Many redditors have actively participated in the exchange of crypto currencies in recent years, and over 150,000 subscribe to r/BitCoin; the subreddit for "DogeCoin" (a rival crypto currency) has over 85,000 subscribers. However, the reddit administration has not yet officially labeled their effort to give the reddit public ten percent of their funding as a "crypto currency." Instead, they vaguely introduced

“reddit notes” in December 2014 as way to randomly distribute the funds throughout the reddit public. Through their blog, the administrators explained:

To celebrate all of you and your contributions, we plan to give away reddit notes in a random lottery. As of this point, it looks like we're going to have approximately 950,000 reddit notes to divide among active user accounts. There aren't as many reddit notes as there are accounts, so if you get one, lucky you! Eligible recipients of reddit notes will be determined based on activities before 9/30/14 (when we first announced this project), and we plan to give them away in the fall of 2015.¹⁰¹

Although not explicitly a new crypto currency, reddit notes appears to be an egalitarian method through which the administration hopes to infuse some of their fundraised profits back into the community, which could begin the foundations of a reddit oriented market. Responses to this announcement by the reddit public primarily included confusion, but as u/ArchonAlarion clarified,

1. The idea is still being developed 2. Reddit is being intentionally vague so they don't upset the SEC, by possibly becoming an unlicensed public corporation dealing out equities. his post is to tell you that Reddit will soon become a sort of hybrid private/public company and that it's shares will be digital assets secured by the Bitcoin Blockchain (the most likely case) and that these shares or “Notes” will be in part distributed to redditors based on account history before Sept. 30th of this year.¹⁰²

As of this writing, the administration has not announced any further progress on the “reddit notes” project. Nevertheless, if they fulfill the mission of reddit notes, the reddit administration will (a) show the importance of a sharing economy to their fundamental business model, and (b) begin exploring new methods through which hybrid economics can prove fruitful for the future development of digital publics and social networks. Although reddit notes may result in a glorified version of company scrip that can only be used within reddit’s public, reddit’s administrators have indicated a respect for their public and a drive to begin compensating redditors for their continued free labor on the site. In fact, at any point, the administrators could have created a crypto-currency to compensate redditors for their work without attaching it to any

specific cash value. Nevertheless, reddit notes has not yet been implemented and the results of the administration's hints at hybridity its profits cannot be fully understood at this time.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, I have described how reddit's administrators have drawn on both commercial and sharing economic models to grow their site and begin generating profit; furthermore, I explored how the administration has begun merging these two economic models within their advertising models, hiring policies, terms of service, and introduction of reddit notes. Each of these examples still fails to completely exemplify Lessig's ideal of economic hybridity; reddit still commodifies the labor of its public through content ownership, advertising, and reddit gold. While commercial and sharing economies certainly exist side-by-side on the site, their integration is limited at best, and the future of reddit's hybrid economies is uncertain. Despite these limitations, the technologies and economies of reddit differ significantly from traditional news outlets, like television, radio and newspapers, which offer users little control over content and interrupt news and entertainment with obtrusive advertising and marketing. Instead, the reddit administration's gestures towards economic hybridity indicate a certain respect for their public and its potential power. Thus, in certain ways, reddit functions hybridically, but in others, it functions strictly commercially or as a sharing economy; future developments within reddit communities and policy may determine how enmeshed the two economic frameworks can be.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

PUBLICS AND COUNTERPUBLICS ON REDDIT

While the previous two chapters explored reddit's cultural, technological and economic underpinnings, I have only begun to address reddit's public sphere directly. To explore the circulation of discourse between publics and counterpublics on reddit, I began carefully monitoring new subreddits through a multireddit of subreddits devoted to exposing newly formed subreddits. While many subreddits offered potential fieldsites, I found myself regularly returning to the discourse on r/KotakuInAction (r/KIA), the primary hub for discussing #GamerGate on reddit. Coined by actor, Adam Baldwin, #GamerGate became a trending topic across the web in August 2014 after a vocal group of video gamers began criticizing several gaming journalists and critics as unethical. As a portmanteau of the "gamer" label and Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal, #GamerGate resonated with many video game enthusiasts who were concerned with allegations of corruption in the video game industry and collusion between game reviewers and developers. Drawing on the name of an older subreddit (r/TumblrInAction) and the title of a popular gaming magazine (*Kotaku*), r/KIA quickly began circulating discourse that included accusations about unethical practices by various individuals and institutions within video game journalism. Meanwhile, after several women came forward accusing the GamerGate community of online harassment, opponents of GamerGate formed the counterpublic on reddit: r/GamerGhazi (r/GG). Like GamerGate, the GamerGhazi title combines "gamer" with a political scandal. However, by associating their name with the alleged cover-up of the 2012 attack on an American embassy in Benghazi, Libya, members of the r/GG counterpublic interpret GamerGate

as a fake scandal used by certain elements of the video game industry to impede the advancement of progressive, feminist politics within their community. Together, r/KIA and r/GG offered me an ideal case study for exploring the circulation of discourse between publics and counterpublics on reddit.

#GAMERGATE AND r/KOTAKUIN ACTION

The publics and counterpublics found on r/KIA and r/GG organized around a number of interrelated incidents across several Web 2.0 platforms, including:

- allegations of infidelity
- claims that sexual favors were exchanged for a favorable game review
- charges of corruption and censorship in the video game industry
- charges of collusion between video game news organizations
- claims of harassment from female game developers and critics

Members of #GamerGate officially began organizing after Eron Gjonji published, “The Zoe Post” on August 16, 2014, accusing his ex-girlfriend, video game-developer Zoe Quinn, of emotionally abusing him and sleeping with [five men, including](#) Nathan Grayson, a video game reviewer for online gaming magazine *Kotaku*.¹ The next day, YouTuber “MundaneMatt” published a 15-minute video repeating Gjonji’s accusations against Quinn and Grayson, and proposing that Grayson’s positive review of Quinn’s recent independent video game release, *Depression Quest*, was in reciprocation for sexual favors.² After this video disappeared from YouTube, “InternetAristocrat” published the video, “Quinnspiracy Theory: The Five Guys Saga,” alleging that Quinn had issued a DMCA claim against the video for using a screen-shot from her game throughout his video.³ The video was later restored to YouTube. At the same

time, u/MannoSlimmins posted an Imgur album to r/TumblrInAction, claiming that Quinn lied about being harassed earlier in the year by users of “Wizardchan,” “a Japanese-inspired, image-based forum (imageboard) for male virgins to share their thoughts and discuss their interests and lifestyle as a virgin.”⁴ However, when YouTube commenter TotalBiscuit’s post addressing Quinn’s supposed ethical breaches was posted to /r/Games, reddit moderators deleted the post and comments because: (a) “witch hunting and doxing (the reveal or posting of personal information) is against reddit's global rules,” (b) “Quinn’s infidelity itself isn't gaming related,” and (c) in r/Gaming, “we obey [reddit’s] rules for the safety of us and our users.” In response, u/david-me founded r/KIA in order to “to discuss the gaming community, gaming journalism, and issues in the gaming industry.”⁵

On r/Games, redditors began exposing alleged conflicts of interest between several other online gaming journalists and the video game developers whose work they had positively reviewed.⁶ Based on this discourse, and similar discourse across 4Chan and Twitter, actor Adam Baldwin tweeted “#GamerGate” and included links to MundaneMatt and InternetAristocrat’s YouTube videos, coining the name that became the rallying cry for the newly formed public.⁷ On r/KIA, moderators describe #GamerGate as a “consumer revolt” against the collusion, corruption, and censorship of the US video game industry that lacks a “standard of ethics” and proves “unhealthy to itself, and to gamers.”⁸

Meanwhile, with 24-hours, nine major gaming news outlets released articles with the theme, “gamers are dead;” after associate editor for *Breitbart London*, Milo Yiannopoulos, exposed the private e-mails between 140 gaming journalists in which they discussed these articles, members of the GamerGate public found further evidence of collusion between video game journalists.⁹ These articles asserted that the “gamer” identity needed to be discarded in favor of more

inclusive identities that did not fear the diversification of the video game industry. On *Gamasutra*, Leigh Alexander argued the term “gamer” had lost its meaning, as video games had become a mainstream form of entertainment over the last two decades;¹⁰ on *Polygon*, Chris Plante contended that because video games have become ubiquitous, two sides of the gaming world have split as the gaming market has expanded:

One side has folded its arms, slumped its shoulders while pouting like an obstinate child that has learned they are getting a little brother or sister but wants to remain the singular focus of their parents' affection.

The other side has opened its arms, unable to contain its love and compassion, because they understand they are no longer alone.¹¹

While many believed these articles offered valid critiques of the contemporary video game industry and “gamer culture,” members of #GamerGate viewed these articles as attempts to regulate the free market of video games through non-objective reporting and obvious signs of collusion between journalists.

Wider public discourse surrounding #GamerGate has primarily focused on the harassment of Quinn, independent video-game developer, Brianna Wu, and feminist gaming-critic, Anita Sarkeesian. In September 2014, Brianna Wu accused members of GamerGate of harassment after she created a fake Twitter account to mock them.¹² In the meantime, Sarkeesian published the second installment her YouTube series on “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games,” which explored how female characters in video games are represented as “background decoration”:

non-playable female characters whose sexuality or victimhood is exploited as a way to infuse edgy, gritty, or racy flavoring into game worlds. These sexually objectified female bodies are designed to function as environmental texture while titillating presumed straight male players.¹³

Through textual analysis of various video games,¹⁴ Sarkeesian critiqued video game designers for failing to offer critical commentary on the gendered stereotypes they portray or “exploration

of the emotional ramifications of the violence against women on neither a cultural, nor an interpersonal level.”¹⁵

Sarkeesian’s criticism of games struck many members of r/KIA as ill informed; u/gamergater12345 thought that “most (if not all) of her examples are cherry-picked or misrepresented,”¹⁶ and u/darksage69 found “her arguments are only half-researched, and while she displays knowledge of some tropes, I find her understanding lacking.”¹⁷ Following the release of her video, Sarkeesian began receiving death threats through various social media platforms, and after receiving an e-mail by someone threatening to commit “the deadliest school shooting in American history,”¹⁸ she canceled her upcoming speech at Utah State University in October 2014. Although the FBI eventually declared the threat against Sarkeesian to be unsubstantiated, major news outlets framed #GamerGate as an “increasingly nasty culture war between video-game critics like Sarkeesian and a mob of gamers,”¹⁹ and a “campaign to discredit or intimidate outspoken critics of the male-dominated gaming industry and its culture.”²⁰ Members of r/KIA continue to reject assertions that they are anti-feminist or anti-woman, instead insisting that their movement be recognized as a consumer revolt against corrupt and unethical gaming journalists and critics.

THE TEXTS OF GAMERGATE

According to Michael Warner, publics self-organize by circulating texts. Warner states that publics

commence with the moment of attention, must continually predicate renewed attention, and cease to exist when attention is no longer predicated. They are virtual entities, not voluntary associations. Because their threshold of belonging is an active uptake, however, they can be understood within the conceptual framework of civil society; that is, as having a free, voluntary, and active membership.²¹

The virtual public of r/KIA functions much as Warner would predict, and redditors on the subreddit continue circulating texts and commentary, growing r/KIA to over 35,000 subscribers. In contrast, the r/KIA's counterpublic on r/GG only consists of around six thousand subscribers. Nevertheless, because both the r/KIA and r/GG publics have organized within reddit's interface, the texts circulated by their members rely on reddit's technological, cultural and economic affordances; as Warner notes, publics and counterpublics are inherently constrained

both by material limits—means of production and distribution, the physical textual objects, social conditions of access—and by internal ones, including the need to presuppose forms of intelligibility already in place as well as the social closure entailed by any selection of genre, idiolect, style, address, and so on.²²

Whether on r/KIA or r/GamerGhazi, the technological affordances, cultural practices and economic structures constrain the circulation of texts and public discourse on reddit. The difference between publics and counterpublics, in this case, arise from the internal constraints as described by Warner, which are often found within the cultures of the publics on r/KIA and r/GG. On reddit, members of r/KIA are commonly associated with several pre-existing subreddits, including gaming-centered subreddits (e.g. r/BuildAPC, r/TwitchPlaysPokemon, r/MineCraft), several meta-subreddits (e.g. r/SubredditDrama, r/SRSsucks, r/Circlejerk), as well as r/AskHistorians and r/DogeCoin.²³ However, members of r/KIA are predominately associated with r/MensRights (“a place for those who wish to discuss men's rights and the ways said rights are infringed upon”); over 15% correlation has been found between posters on the two subreddits (see Figure 1).²⁴ Furthermore, just over eight percent of the r/KIA public also post to r/TumblrInAction,²⁵ r/KIA's parent subreddit devoted to making fun of topics “discussed by Tumblr Social Justice Warriors (SJWs)” on Tumblr.²⁶ The r/KIA public adopted the SJW figure from their parent subreddit, r/TumblrInAction, which focuses on reposting content from *Tumblr* (and other social media) in which SJWs “pretend they are oppressed, and they are all

professional victims. [. . .] Because complaining about the made up privilege of other groups (or even their own groups) is their favourite thing to do.”²⁷

*FIGURE 1: r/KotakuInAction and r/GamerGhazi Drilldown, 2014*²⁸

Subreddit	Percentage of Users Similar to r/KotakuInAction	Percentage of Users Similar to r/GamerGhazi
r/MenRights	15.54%	5.61%
r/SRSGaming	n/a	22.35%
r/SRSSucks	12.92%	n/a
r/BestOfOutrageCulture	n/a	20.07%
r/SubredditDrama	12.04%	10.59%
r/AgainstMensRights	n/a	19.99%
r/TwitchPlaysPokemon	11.4%	n/a
r/ShitRedditSays	n/a	13.67%
r/CircleJerk	9.91%	6.44%
r/KotakuInAction	n/a	12.48%

**This table represents the top five similar subreddits for both r/KIA and r/GG*

The subscribers to r/KIA’s direct counterpublic, r/GamerGhazi (r/GG) also circulate texts and discourse across the site through specific networks, and they are also limited by the same “material limits” of operating within the reddit interface. Devoted to “pointing and laughing” at GamerGate and r/KIA, r/GamerGhazi represents “Gamergate's critics along with those directly threatened by the mob.” While r/KIA is a fundamental public for the formation of this counterpublic, members of r/GamerGhazi also draw on a number of outside influences that inform its public. Like r/KIA, members of r/GamerGhazi are active in several gaming-centered subreddits (e.g. r/SRSGaming, r/GirlGamers, r/Games), meta-subreddits (e.g. r/BestOfOutrageCulture, r/ShitRedditSays, r/CircleBroke), and subreddits critical of the men’s rights movements (e.g. r/AgainstMensRights, r/TheBluePill, r/MRMorWhiteRights).²⁹ Notably,

over 12% of r/GamerGhazi's public also post in r/KIA (see Figure 1).³⁰ The public of r/KIA (and r/GamerGhazi) creates and circulates discourse through reddit posts and comments, which generally source claims from exterior websites. As noted above, the primary texts in the early phases of GamerGate included blog posts, YouTube videos, threads on 4Chan and reddit, and Tweets. Members of the two publics often screenshotted discourse on other sites, and entextualized it within reddit as a basis to establish claims to truth.³¹ u/GamerGateFan examined the sources cited by the articles within the GamerGate official Wikipedia page and found that Twitter comments represent nearly 50% of the citations (see Figure 2). These continue to serve primary sources of evidence on r/KIA; as of this writing, of the top four upvoted posts on r/KIA, one links directly to a Tweet, two link to screen-caps of Tweets juxtaposed with other pictures, and the other self-post contains screen-caps of reddit posts and comment threads.³²

*FIGURE 2: Wikipedia GamerGate Article Source References*³³

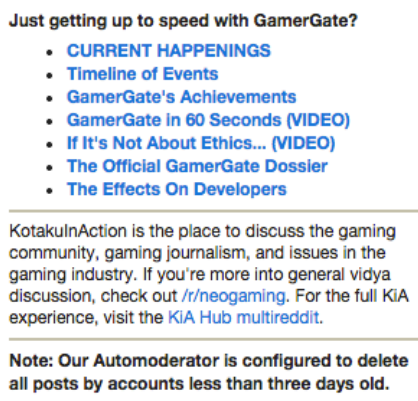
Website	Number of sources referenced by articles covering #GamerGate
Twitter	358
Tumblr	62
Kotaku	47
Gamasutra	39
t.co	37
YouTube	28
Polygon	28
The Washington Post	27
archive.today	27
reddit	26

Often, content on both r/KIA and r/GG includes entextualized posts from the other subreddit that may (or may not) bear relevance to their circulating discourses. For example, when moderators deleted a post in r/TodayILearned about reddit interim-CEO, Ellen Pao, u/dat-ass-uka posted an

archived version of the thread to r/KIA,³⁴ and within twelve hours, that post had been entextualized within r/GG.³⁵ Meanwhile, entextualized posts from r/GG within the r/KIA public became so prevalent that u/kiwikku created an entirely separate subreddit specifically for entextualizing these posts.³⁶ Likewise, members of r/GG regularly entextualize content from r/KIA for critique.

While entextualized content from other publics on reddit (and from across the web) form much of the discourse on r/KIA, archived texts also represent the historical and temporal construction of these publics. The top links in the sidebar of r/KIA function as a list of “current happenings” and a “timeline of events” on their GitGud and Wiki. Similar to r/KIA, sources within these open-source timelines are generally include the same sources found on r/KIA: screen-capped and archived Tweets, comment threads, and blog-posts (see Figure 3). These temporally situated texts circulate throughout the public on r/KIA, as new members join and look to the past to understand the movement and how members of the r/KIA understand themselves.

FIGURE 3: The Sidebar of r/KIA



PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND GAMERGATE

Through the circulation of these texts, the public of r/KIA maintains the attention of its members by producing public discourse that addresses them. I have inductively categorized the primary discourses that form the public of r/KIA into two categories: “ethics in gaming journalism” and “social justice warriors.” In the following section, I address how these discourses inform the GamerGate public and the GamerGhazi counterpublic

ETHICS IN GAMING JOURNALISM

As noted above, the members of /rKIA primary claim that their public centers around fixing “ethics in games journalism.” While the “Quinnspiracy” saga catalyzed the public, users have since accused journalists from multiple online magazines of numerous ethical breaches, some of which date back to 2007. Primarily, members of the r/KIA public have accused these various parties of collusion and corruption when reporting on video games and the #GamerGate public. Gaming journalist began accusing each other of collusion after the release of the series of “Gamers are dead” articles in August, 2014, but they continued after Milo Yiannopolous published a secret listserv, exposing how these journalists discussed what, and when to release these articles, effectively serving to operate “with one voice and collude on major issues to distort coverage of ethics violations and to support figures to whom they are politically sympathetic.”³⁷ Since August 2014, members of r/KIA have often focused on exposing the close-knit relationships between gaming journalists and the developers whose games they review. For example, in October 2014, u/Jace_Neoreactionary submitted a link to r/KIA exposing the previously undisclosed friendship between *Polygon* reviewer, Chris Remo, and Daneille Riendeu, developer of *Gone Home* which received a 10/10 review from Remo in *Polygon*.³⁸ In

the official GamerGate dossier, through a series of Tweets, the GamerGate public showed through a series of Tweets that Kotaku writer Patricia Hernandez and game developer Anna Anthropy lived together while Hernandez reviewed her games; likewise, this authors of this dossier also accused *Kotaku* reviewer Leigh Alexander of positively reviewing games friends' games without disclosing their previous relationship to her editor, or her public.³⁹

While the exact demographics of the GamerGate public cannot be certain, harassment of others under the hashtag primarily targets women. On MSNBC, reporter Joy-Ann Reid described the GamerGate movement as a “battle of the sexes” once Brianna Wu fled her home after receiving thousands of threats on Twitter; on the same program, Wu claimed that nearly all of the women in the gaming industry are “terrified about our jobs. We are terrified we are going to be next, and what we feel is there is a literal war in this industry on women.”⁴⁰ In response to Wu’s (and others’) accusations of sexism within the gaming industry, members of the GamerGate public began promoting new hashtag, #NotYourShield, to encourage women and marginalized populations “who support #GamerGate to speak out in favor of the movement and to criticize those who use them as a shield to deflect criticism.”⁴¹ Critics called the #NotYourShield project a “weaponized minority”⁴² that members of #GamerGate used to deflect accusations of racism and sexism, as well as collection of “sock puppet” accounts made by the white-male members of GamerGate.⁴³ Members on r/KIA often echo u/Goladus’s assertion that #NotYourShield actually debunks the stereotypes GamerGate members as “angry white male neckbeards.”⁴⁴ According to many members of r/KIA, #GamerGate represents a diverse, inclusive group of gamers devoted to eradicating the corrosive relationship between gaming journalists and video game developers. However, as Warner notes, the size and demographics of any public are inherently difficult to establish as anybody can be considered as part of the public

as long they participate in circulating texts; several redditors and other members of GamerGate have tried to conduct demographic surveys of the r/KIA public, but others have disregarded their data, arguing that any data established by such a survey could be easily manipulated by their opponents.⁴⁵

Specifically, many members of r/KIA are concerned with the financial connections made between many of these developers and journalists through the crowd-funding site, *Patreon*. For example, *Polygon* writer, Ben Kuchera, had donated to Zoe Quinn's *Patreon* account since January 2014, and he wrote a positive interview with Quinn that March.⁴⁶ Likewise, journalist for *The Guardian*, Jenn Frank, had donated to Quinn's *Patreon* before reporting on Quinn's continued harassment as a "hate campaign" propagated by members of GamerGate.⁴⁷ However, as Christopher Grant, editor of gaming magazine, *Polygon*, noted, public donations with no private equity may not actually constitute conflicts of interest between developers and journalists. Nevertheless, in response to these accusation, he announced: "I've asked everyone on staff to disclose on their staff pages any outstanding *Patreon* contributions and, additionally, to disclose the same on any coverage related to those contributions under that staff member's byline."⁴⁸ Likewise, Stephen Tolito, editor-in-chief of *Kotaku* published a brief note, stating

We appreciate healthy skepticism from critics and have looked into—and discussed internally—concerns. We agree on the need to ensure that, on the occasion where there is a personal connection between a writer and a developer, it's mentioned. We've also agreed that funding any developers through services such as *Patreon* introduce needless potential conflicts of interest and are therefore nixing any such contributions by our writers. Some may disagree that *Patreons* are a conflict. That's a debate for journalism critics.⁴⁹

While both online magazines adjusted their ethics policies based on the complaints from GamerGate's public, members of r/KIA and other pro-GamerGate boards proceeded to initiate "Operation Disrespectful Nod;" by encouraging the GamerGate public to contact various advertisers to explain their position, present evidence of the problematic business practices found

on these sites, and ask advertisers to discontinue service as soon as possible, “Operation Disrespectful Nod” aimed to attack the revenue streams of multiple online video game magazines.⁵⁰ Likewise, “Operation Baby Seal” encouraged the r/KIA public to embark on another e-mail campaign to online ad aggregators who published on the *Gawker* network of sites (including *Kotaku*) for “violating the guidelines for their advertising programs.”⁵¹ Specifically, they accused *Gawker* writer, Sam Biddle, of encouraging bullying by Tweeting “nerds should be constantly shamed and degraded into submission” and “bring back bullying”⁵² in October 2014. In response, at least ten advertisers, including Mercedes Benz, BMW, Dyson, and Kelloggs, withdrew advertising from the *Gawker* network.⁵³

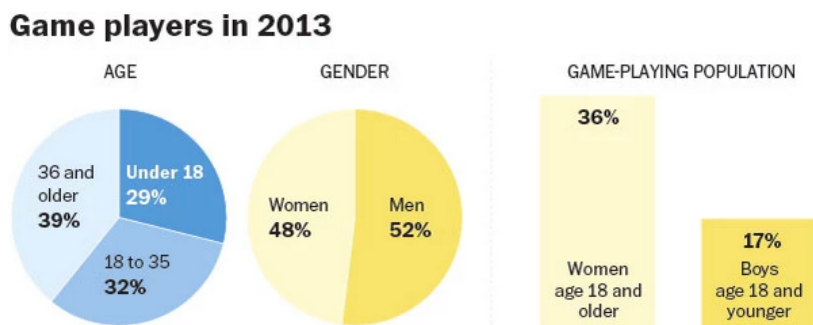
While members of GamerGate continue to insist that their public centers on critiquing gaming journalism, the counterpublic on r/GG “reject the idea that GamerGate is, or has ever been, about ethics in games journalism.”⁵⁴ While most members of r/GG readily acknowledge some online gaming magazines have fundamental problems with how news and reviews of video games are produced, most also echo u/masonicone’s assertion that most of the movement is designed to “piss away everything we built up over the years as they are upset over something that they can't stop.”⁵⁵ For many members of r/KIA’s counterpublic, GamerGate represents a conscious manipulation of gamers by patriarchal and heteronormative forces (cloaked in anonymity); claims of “ethics in gaming journalism” are understood as a guise to harass and intimidate women as they have become more visible in video game industry and market than ever before.⁵⁶ As the gaming industry has grown in recent years, their audience has also diversified, and women now represent 48% of the gaming population, often gaming on their mobile devices (see Figure 4).⁵⁷ As *The Washington Post* notes, citing a now-deleted reddit comment, some members of the video game community believe that people (most often women)

“playing mobile and facebook games arent gamers [sic]. If your [sic] a gamer, your main hobby is playing games. Be it on console, handheld (3ds/psp) or PC.”⁵⁸ However, as *PCGamer* notes, while men still dominate the markets for MMOs (massively-multiplayer online games) and FPSs (first-person-shooter games), women now represent 50.2% of all gamers using a PC and 53.6% of the RPG (role-playing-game) market, refuting accusations that women only play light-weight mobile and social media games.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, even as the gaming public has become more diverse, men continue to dominate the industry with women only representing 21% of developers.⁶⁰

Thus, for members of r/GG’s public, GamerGate inaccurately reflects the shifting dimensions of the video game industry by focusing on tenuous examples of collusion between gaming journalists and developers. In fact, the r/GG public compiled a list of “actual gaming scandals” that are not addressed by the discourse on r/KIA. For example, video game PR firm, Plaid Social, offered YouTube video game reviewers free copies of “Middle-Earth: Shadow of Mordor” in return for agreeing to a contract that instructed them to provide positive reviews, encourage users to purchase the game, avoid mentioning any bugs or glitches, and submit their review to *Plaid Social* for approval 48-hours in advance.⁶¹ More insidiously, on the website for the 2012 edition of “Medal of Honor Warfighter,” Electronic Arts created a “virtual showroom for guns” in order to “help brand perceptions;”⁶² likewise, Activision promoted a number of branded guns in their “Call of Duty” series, even incorporating former Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North into one edition of the game.⁶³ In addition to these connections between gun sales and video games, members of r/GG also accused pro-GamerGate online magazines, *The Escapist* and *Game Informer*, of possessing the same conflicts-of-interest that members of r/KIA directed at *Polygon* and *Kotaku*.⁶⁴ Fundamentally, the discourse about ethics in gaming journalism that circulates

through the GamerGhazi counterpublic does not inherently reject the corruption of gaming journalists and developers, but it accuses members of r/KIA and GamerGate of adopting the motto of “ethics in gaming journalism” as a façade for a continued campaign of sexual harassment and abuse of women in gaming, specifically Sarkeesian, Quinn and Wu.⁶⁵

FIGURE 4: Game Players in 2013⁶⁶



Source: Entertainment Software Association. Graphic: Tobey - The Washington Post.

SOCIAL JUSTICE WARRIORS

According to many members of r/KIA, Sarkeesian, Quinn and Wu represent “social justice warriors” (SJWs) who actively attempt to censor video game production by accusing developers of misogynistic representations of women. Within the context of the public on r/KIA, through accusations of racism and sexism against those with whom they do not politically align, SJWs actively attempt to censor the free expression inherent to video games. After Sarkeesian’s production partner, Josh McIntosh, asserted that “gaming could be a perfect medium to help re-learn values of empathy and compassion but sadly it’s most often used to promote the opposite,”⁶⁷ u/Dwavenhobbie clarified how many on r/KIA feel about SJWs:

SJWs are preaching warped versions of actual psychological ideas and distortions of actual concepts. This means people who don’t look further into their claims will foolishly believe many things being said are true. It’s a form of appealing to authority claiming that psychology says so or that they are an authority on things. The reality is SJWs aren’t half as smart as they claim to be or even as media literate. The reason they want to change

games is not for the better but because they believe everyone else is but children to their far superior knowledge and are for some reason unable to accept they are not some superior group leading people to a better tomorrow. Many caught up with SJW simple fell for their rhetoric and believe they're doing good when in truth they're doing far more hard [sic] to the medium of video games due to their delusions of grandeur.⁶⁸

While McIntosh, Sarkeesian, Quinn, and Wu, among others, see potentials for video games to improve representations of women and encourage empathy for others, the discourse attacking SJWs frames their work as morally authoritative elitism that tricks people into believing their cause through idealistic rhetoric and unfounded claims about the effects of video games on gamers. In many ways, the discourse attacking SJWs echoes attacks on “political correctness” from the political right in the early-1990s. Fearing the implementation of affirmative action policies, hate-speech guidelines, and multicultural efforts in universities across the US, right-wing politicians and pundits argued that “political correctness” infringed on free speech rights and created an authoritarian culture that stifled dissent. However, as Herbert Kohl noted, many of the politicians and pundits that attacked “political correctness” focused on insinuating that “egalitarian democratic ideas are actually authoritarian, orthodox, and Communist-influenced when they oppose the right of people to be racist, sexist, and homophobic.”⁶⁹ Likewise, discourse surrounding SJWs on r/KIA often focuses on how video game critics are attempting to censor creative expression by pressuring developers to diversify their representations of gender and race.

Many redditors on r/KIA agreed with u/Dwavenhobbie’s assessment of the threat SJWs posed to the future of gaming. u/md1957 claimed that “gaming as we know it would be pretty much dead;”⁷⁰ while u/boxlord99 contends that McIntosh “wants to brainwash everyone;”⁷¹ meanwhile, u/wolfofthewest_ concludes that “feminists, and especially male feminists like McIntosh, are some of the least emphatic and compassionate people around.”⁷² Within the definition of SJWs on r/TumblrInAction, the authors make sure to clarify that SJWs are not

inherently feminists because many Tumblr users “have hijacked feminism and used it to claim all women are victims and all men are oppressors.”⁷³ Within the public of r/KIA, though, the SJW continues to be used as a shorthand for feminist video game critics who observe problems with the representation of women in video games. When u/thebeeknee asked r/KIA “what’s the difference between a feminist and an SJW?”⁷⁴ u/HandOfBane posted the most upvoted answer, writing “A feminist will gladly discuss or debate an issue. A SJW will tell you how things should be and why you are a terrible person if you dare disagree with them.”⁷⁵ However, u/savionen argues that SJWs are a product of third-wave feminism, which influence women to claim that the “patriarchy controls the world, getting rid of peer review, white males are scum, rape culture, etc.”⁷⁶ This separation of the “good” versions of feminism from third-wave feminism represents a continued misreading of contemporary feminism as anti-men, anti-cisgendered people, and intellectually unfounded.

Many members of r/KIA began praising self-proclaimed feminist, Christina Hoff Sommers as one of their intellectual influences after she published a YouTube video addressing Sarkeesian and other’s claims that video games are sexist. Sommers argues that although gamers have long faced disapproval for playing violent, action-packed games from “moms, from teachers, and above all, researchers and politicians—concernocrats both liberal and conservative,” since 2010 the “new army of critics—gender activists, hipsters with degrees in cultural studies” have begun critiquing video games as a “hetero-patriarchal capitalist pursuit.”⁷⁷ While Sommers begrudgingly admits that critics, like Sarkeesian, have elucidated some problematic tropes and narratives, she concludes nonetheless that SJWs; “ignore the fact that the world of gaming has become inclusive” and “they want the male video game culture to die.”⁷⁸ Although she correctly asserts that the gaming world has become diverse, and that more women consider themselves

gamers than ever before, Sommers still misrepresents the goals of contemporary feminism by framing them as an all-out assault on men, rather than a critical consideration of how gender and race influence structures of power, media, and social relations. Furthermore, by assuming that video games diversified naturally and without pressure from outside groups, Sommers implies that feminist critiques of media have had no impact on the diversification of media representations across platforms.

Sommers' misrepresentation of contemporary feminism both reflects, and is reflected by, the discourse surrounding SJWs on r/KIA and other subreddits. u/throwaway-gate claims that “

it makes a strange sort of sense that white men of that time would become scapegoats for moral panic, for atrocities committed by ‘cis white male shitlords’ in hyperfeminist America—not that the men themselves had anything to do with tragedies, but they had an anxiety in common, an amorphous cultural shape that was dark and loud on the outside, hollow on the inside.⁷⁹

While “hyperfeminist America” has begun attacking white males, u/ MitsuXLulu writes, “the one group that doesnt care about skin race gender sexuality is gamers because ironically That doesnt make you better at games [sic].”⁸⁰ For many pro-GamerGate gamers, identity politics should bear no relevance on video game design or critique because, ostensibly, an individual’s race, gender or sexuality should play no role in their gaming ability.

This stance is furthered by the anonymity many games afford online gamers; if no one can determine a player’s gender, race or sexuality, one cannot be discriminated against. As u/_Caba_ argued,

gamer culture, and gaming is quite possibly the most inclusive culture I can really think of. There is nothing innate to gaming that erects a barrier to entry for any human based on their attributes, classifications, qualities, handicaps, background, beliefs, leanings, dispositions, physical locations, heritage, vices, interests, professions, hobbies, tastes, preferences, philosophies, or ideology.⁸¹

By assuming that video games contain no barriers to access, u/_Caba_’s comment evinces a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of access to digital products. While video games

do not individually or explicitly discriminate against anyone based on identity, barriers to access are frequent and significant. Video games generally retail for \$60, and often require additional costly pieces of technology to play (e.g. a personal computer, gaming console, or mobile device). Access to the Web is also required to playing games online, and as the US Department of Commerce reported in 2014, 28% of Americans still lacked broadband access at home with 29% of those reporting that it was too expensive.⁸² PEW Research reported that while 19% of non-users reported not being able to afford the Internet, 34% avoided the Internet because it lacked relevance to their lives.⁸³ Globally, 60% of the world's population do not use the Internet; further, 90% of global non-users originate developing countries.⁸⁴ By assuming that video games and gamer culture are inherently inclusive, u_Caba_ fails to recognize the technological and economic limitations that inherently constrain the potential inclusivity of gamer culture across the world.

While discourse about GamerGate's inclusiveness and equanimity circulate throughout r/KIA, many members of r/GamerGhazi contest the SJW discourse on r/KIA and construct members of the GamerGate public as reactionary white males whose formerly exclusive domain of video games is being invaded by women. Archived threads from 4Chan, sourced on r/GG, contain posters discussing how to use the #GamerGate movement to "destabilize SJWs" who promote agendas of censorship and "white guilt [. . .] in an attempt to use the civil rights issue regarding black communities as leverage against conservatives and republicans."⁸⁵ These posters suggested the publics that circulated discourse focusing on Quinn's alleged affair with Nathan Grayson and Joshua Boggs (her married boss), advising certain phrases for Twitter, like "that's disgusting" and "this is a violation of privacy" to discuss Quinn. Another poster suggested that users adopt the language of SJWs (including terms like privilege, objectification, micro-

aggression, triggering), claiming “the language doesn’t matter, all it matters is who says it and how. The language is just like background noise, they don’t use those terms seriously, they might not even know what they mean or care what they mean.”⁸⁶ These anonymous posters echo a common misreading of academic language and style that repeats across GamerGate discourse. While these terms have been repurposed through feminist discourse to express new concepts, they are far from arbitrary or meaningless. By relying on the limited contexts within which these terms appear online, these anonymous posters misrepresent the aims of academic fields, like cultural and gender studies by assuming that: (a) decades of research and theory that ground the new definitions for these words are meaningless, and (b) people using these terms are doing so disingenuously. Cloaked in anonymity, these 4Chan users actively discussed how to use the GamerGate public as a façade to attack women and feminist criticism.

Rhetorically, the GamerGate movement has often adopted military terminology to describe their efforts (i.e. “Operation #NotMyShield,” “false flags,” defeating opponent/achieving victory). u/adaminator1 contends that the SJW discourse is:

flooded with war rhetoric. They're fighting on cries of “gamer oppression” and being “bullied.” They've adopted the words of the SJW's they despise so much and are using them for their own arguments. They are extremists. They are fighting for a wrong-headed sense of social justice about criticism and opinions. They have, quite literally, become that which they hate. Crusading on a campaign for social justice as keyboard warriors, united under warlike propaganda.⁸⁷

While the SJW discourse focuses on how critics infringe upon free expression through censorship, the counter-discourse on r/GG accuses the GamerGate public of exemplifying the same extremism it portends to abhor.

While the general public of r/KIA generally condemns the personal harassment of women, like Sarkeesian, Quinn and Wu, as work of the radical elements in their public, the SJW

discourse continues dominating many of the comment sections across the subreddit. As u/StreetSharkira clarifies,

Rather than focusing on the corrupting influence of monied interests (large game publishers that advertise on gaming sites), GamerGate focus's on the corrupting influence of a traditionally marginalized group (SJW, who represent people with think women, PoC, [people of color] queer persons should have greater voices in video games).⁸⁸

The r/GG public contends, the SJW discourse permeating the r/KIA public promotes a sense of victimization by the “Other.” Rather than fearing the commodification of their leisure time by the monied interests that direct major video game development, the r/KIA public constructs the SJW discourse as such in order to halt progressive agendas in gaming. Effectively, the discourse on r/GG implies that the “ethics in gaming journalism” discourse promoted by members of r/KIA as a front for private parties to attack issues of identity within video game development and design.

THE INTELLECTUAL STYLE OF A REDDIT PUBLIC AND COUNTERPUBLIC

The discourses including SJWs and journalism ethics embody the style of r/KIA’s intellectual public. The remainder of this chapter focuses on describing that style through examinations of the politics and forms of anti-intellectualism that circulate through the discourse across the GamerGate public.

THE POLITICS OF GAMERGATE AND r/KIA

In his survey of the political attitudes of #GamerGate, Allum Bokhari asserts that the public does not primarily identify as a right-wing movement, as 28% of members identifying as liberal even though 83% of the public’s members indicated an increasing distrust of “left-leaning” media outlets, and 63% of members also experienced a decrease in trust of publicly-funded

media outlets. However, “right-leaning” and “libertarian” news outlets received a 29% increase in trust.⁸⁹ Like many conservative millennials, most members of this public still disagree with “right-wing” social issues and identify as pro-choice and pro-gay-marriage. Bokhari also shows that although members of the GamerGate public reject many forms of identity politics; 68% of the public agrees that “movements designed to advance the interests of particular genders, races, and orientations are inherently divisive;” furthermore, 83% of those who took the survey agreed that “words like racism, misogyny, and homophobia are ‘losing their meaning through increasing misuse’,” and 87% of the respondents agreed that “safe spaces and trigger warnings are convenient masks for policing speech, art, and culture.”⁹⁰ In all, Bokhari concludes, that while over 50% of the GamerGate public identifies as some type of social libertarian, their consistent disagreement with many mainstream leftists has highlighted a growing schism between liberals who “are increasingly concerned by what they see as progressives’ embrace of vigilantism” and progressives, who “seem increasingly concerned with the need to change culture by any means possible.”⁹¹ Bokhari’s findings reflect many r/KIA users’ politics that are heavily rotted in common political attitudes that, in some ways, reject the established political dichotomies within the contemporary American political landscape.

While Bokhari’s study indicates political commonalities unite strangers within the r/KIA public, many members of r/GG emphasize alternative foundations for the political dimensions of the public. In a blogpost linked from the r/GamerGhazi sidebar, Andrew Atkinson argues that most members of r/KIA’s public are “naïve young white male[s]” who

genuinely believe the line about Journalistic Integrity. They see the problems that really do exist in game journalism and take up the GG banner in that name. These are hardcore gamers, people who live and breath gaming and have been for most of their lives, and often they have faced pushback from family or society for their gaming habits. The gaming landscape has been changing in huge ways since the start of the last hardware generation and the widespread adoption of mobile gaming, and this change is a colossal

threat to their very self-identity. As game companies shift further and further from pandering to this section of game-consumers, they grow increasingly hostile and defensive of their “turf.”⁹²

Atkinson asserts that members of r/KIA see the growing use and popularity of digital technology as a threat to their anonymous, libertarian politics. He also echoes a number of “mainstream” media articles that frame the foundation of the GamerGate public as a continuing campaign of harassment against women in gaming, instead of a movement about ethics in gaming journalism. Michael Thompson of *Forbes* contends that the “self-appointed” of GamerGate as a “network of anonymous and almost exclusively male group of men to harass a small number of women working in the games industry, a communal effort that seems to have no other goal than making shared space so hostile that none but them would ever want to use it.”⁹³ Jon Stone from *The Guardian* argues that the #GamerGate “revolt needs to be understood in the context of years of attacks on women in gaming, under various guises;” strangers united under the politics of GamerGate are often represented by individuals who, when interviewed, “lost no time in revealing themselves to be gaming’s Rush Limbaughs and Richard Littlejohns, eager to provide and flesh out a mythology that rationalizes hatred towards the feminist/progressive element in games.”⁹⁴ As Warner notes, although publics are self-organized collectives of strangers, they are not inherently organic or devoid of manipulation. Thus, while Bokhari’s analysis of r/KIA’s public proposes that strangers within this public are related through the alignment of members’ liberal-libertarian political identity, the movement’s counterpublics propose that commonalities between strangers in r/KIA’s public are based on a common offline identity (white males) and within a larger right-wing public that is historically anti-progressive and anti-feminist.

ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM ON R/KIA'S PUBLIC AND r/GG'S COUNTERPUBLIC

Given the libertarian political leanings of r/KIA's public and their history with journalists, claims to authority by intellectuals are inherently met with skepticism by many members of r/KIA. For example, after TotalBiscuit asked "Where are the scientists? Where are the psychologists who can tell us 'yes, X media can cause Y behavior?,'" u/AnonySocialScientist posted a brief review of scholarly literature about the psychological impacts of video games to r/GG, concluding that although no direct links between violent video games and violence have been found, "evidence points to aggression, [but the] jury [is] still out but some evidence of influence on gender."⁹⁵ When u/EllipsisMouseCard entextualized his post on r/KIA, members of the GamerGate public immediately began critiquing his findings. u/Chris23235 contested Craig A. Anderson's study, cited by u/AnonySocialScientist as, "correlative" rather than "causal;"⁹⁶ likewise, u/Operative_G rejected Karen Dill et al.'s study of violence against women in video games as "off-handed" and "awful,"⁹⁷ while other users critiqued the sourced studies as "subjective,"⁹⁸ guilty of "cherry picking" subjects for analysis,⁹⁹ and using small sample sizes.¹⁰⁰ Although these criticisms of the literature cited by u/AnonySocialScientist are valuable, a much more pernicious strain of anti-intellectualism plagued many of the responses on r/KIA. u/cathululock argued that academic attention to gaming takes "all the fun out of it. [. . .] Go make your own damn games leave our sexy, violent, and fun games alone. We are adults. I'm so tired of the need to sanitize everything for the 'greater good.' Social science has become social engineering and its a disaster."¹⁰¹ u/Ryukden argued that these studies represent "what happens when people who don't play a lot of games yet have a sociology degree can never seem to get it right. What a worthless major;"¹⁰² u/MySidesTheyAreGone echoed u/Ryukden's sentiment, asserting that these "studies are heavily biased, in your department 'peer review' is another word

for ‘rubber stamping’ and nothing of what you do follows the scientific method at all. [. . .] The time will come when social studies will also be replaced by actual science. Until then, enjoy your wishful thinking and faith-based arguments.”¹⁰³ While these posters inherently the field of social sciences as unscientific, u/hansiisgod’s response offered a more nuanced critique of contemporary social sciences, even quoting Umberto Eco; however, he still flatly rejected the work of the Frankfurt School as “apocalyptic” who bear no relevance on contemporary media. I have excerpted the relevant quotes extensively here.

But let’s talk about the idea that media shapes our behavior. I agree that it does, I just happen to disagree that the logical conclusion to that is to shape media to influence people in a specific way (which is, apparently, what many social “scientists” are implying). Let’s remember that “aggression” means absolutely nothing. “Violence” means something. It happens to be a crime. If someone *really* feels like shooting you, but doesn’t, would it be surprising to learn that, in fact, that person wasn’t doing anything wrong at all? Both morally (if you believe in any such code of conduct) and legally, murder is something wrong. Assault is something wrong. Fantasising [sic] about these things... isn’t. If anyone thinks it is... well, all I can tell you to do is read 1984 or watch Minority Report (I think there is also a book, but I've never read it). If you still think that's a good idea after that, well, I vehemently disagree with you. But shitty opinions aren't something wrong either (if not acted upon), so let’s carry on. I suppose that’s another difference between me and these academics and pseudo-academics (in the case of Sarkeesian and McIntosh), I don’t think other opinions are a fucking crime, even if they are absurdly stupid.

About sexist behavior, it’s different, because if we take those studies on principle, men apparently become more sexist by consuming “sexist” media. Well, that’s no good, is it? What’s the solution, then? To make sure all media is entirely free of “sexist” content? Good luck with that. Are you going to forbid works from the fifties because they might inspire some men to think “those were the good times”? Again, I would urge you to read 1984. Often, people who defend what GG stands for (hint: not harassment of women) are mocked when comparing things to 1984. While I do agree that there's no shortage of tinfoil (on both sides of the “argument”), [sic] comparisons with 1984 would be a lot less necessary if they weren’t so easy to make. I could go on ranting about 1984 vs. Brave New World and how that discussion is relevant to the subject at hand but, frankly, I have no patience.

Instead, I will conjure Umberto Eco’s mockery of the “media scholars” of the XXth Century. Basically, you had the “most things media brings are AWESOME” and the “media is the opium of the masses and is evil” (Eco called them the “apocalyptic”) factions. Maybe unsurprisingly to some here in KiA, the latter were the Frankfurt School.

Their arguments are eerily similar to those being made about games. Just trading a few words for “sexism” would make it basically the same arguments. Amazingly, or not, these arguments aren't taken seriously anymore about what is now “traditional media”, so I really can't see why games would be different, if not by idiocy of the academics studying them as a media form.

Getting back to the subject, sexist people are sexist. If someone behaves in a sexist way towards someone else, call them out. If someone behaves in a sexist way that happens to be criminal (say, not hiring women *because they are women*), fine them or arrest them according to the law. Criminals are criminals. Trying to prevent these things from happening, “to protect people”, won't protect anyone at all. It's fucking moralist bullshit, it's control. Cliché as it may be, it's fucking “thoughtcrime”. Should people trade the shackles of capitalism, consumerism and technocracy for the shackles of any other ideology with its respective tenets “for the good of the people”? What's the difference, really? Shit, by any other name, would stink just as bad. Sorry for ranting (and digressing quite a lot), but this kind of speech from social “scientists” irritates me.¹⁰⁴

While u/haniisgod echoes a number of critics who have accused the “culture industry” thesis of pessimism, to say Adorno and Horkheimer's work would make the same arguments by replacing a few words with “sexism” is fallacious, at best. Furthermore, by claiming that the theoretical power of the Frankfurt School's arguments are no longer relevant purposefully underestimates the importance of the “culture industry” thesis for alternative media outlets like *IndyMedia* contemporary cultural policy. Throughout this critique, the author relies on appeals to tautologies (“sexist people are sexist,” “criminals are criminals”), and vague assertions about language (“‘aggression’ doesn't mean anything,” “‘violence’ doesn't mean anything”), failing to ground any claims about the Frankfurt School's supposed arguments in the text. Ultimately, u/haniisgod misconstrues contemporary Marxist critics as idealistic academics attempting to censor free expression in favor of their own moral compass; meanwhile, the author ignores the Frankfurt School's valuable critiques of institutions of power, capitalism and American society that are vital to understanding the role of critical theory in the contemporary media environment.

u/haniisgod's post represents a pernicious thread of anti-intellectualism that permeates much of the discourse across r/KIA, specifically concerning the threat of “cultural Marxism.” After

Wikipedia editors recategorized the term under the “conspiracy theory” section of the Frankfurt School Wikipedia page, u/SneakyWiki alerted the public on r/KIA to this editorial shift by comparing it with George Orwell’s *1984*: “Yes, the people who are behind all this censorship are cultural marxists. It is not a conspiracy theory that critical theory was developed by the cultural marxists at the Frankfurt School.”¹⁰⁵ While anyone familiar with the Frankfurt School’s western Marxism would question the description of Frankfurt School scholars as “cultural Marxists,” u/SneakyWiki also fails to show the connections between Sarkeesian’s videos on Feminist Frequency and the Frankfurt School. I quote u/SneakyWiki at length to show the attempts to connect the two through the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*’s entry on Critical Theory:

“Critical Theory” has a narrow and a broad meaning in philosophy and in the history of the social sciences. ‘Critical Theory’ in the narrow sense designates several generations of German philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition known as the Frankfurt School.

So we've established that, yes, critical theory was indeed developed at the Frankfurt School. But sneakywiki, I'm not so sure that these SJW's subscribe to this ideology, they're just a small group of hipsters in San Francisco, right? Wrong. If your at all familiar with critical theory, you will recognize them as critical theorists. It's not a fringe opinion, even Newsweek recognized Anita Sarkeesian as a critical theorist. [. . .] She dared to apply critical theory to video games, and gamers didn't like it.

And at last we've established that Anita Sarkeesian and her group of followers are critical theorists.¹⁰⁶

Although u/SneakyWiki noted that “critical theory” exists in a broad and narrow sense, he only provides the narrow definition of the Frankfurt School, and with little detail, failing to address the “many ‘critical theories’ in the broader sense have been developed.”¹⁰⁷ In fact, Sarkeesian’s critiques are based in the feminist politics promoted within critical theories of postmodernism and poststructuralism during the 1970s and 1980s, a far cry from the Marxist economic focus. Nevertheless, members of the r/KIA public jumped on the “cultural Marxism” bandwagon by creating a monolithic public of SJWs who attempt to tone-police

anonymous gamers into censoring their creative expressions through accusations of sexism and racism.

Based on a faulty premise, the discourse against SJWs forms a strong strain of anti-intellectualism among the r/KIA public that rejects certain academic fields without question. As u/scrivenerjones stated in r/AgainstGamerGate (a subreddit devoted to “healthy discussions [that] can be had without the flinging of talking points and rhetoric”), the r/KIA public is “anti-*some* academia. Specifically, it's against the humanities/social sciences. Anyone associated with STEM, however tenuously, is presumed to be correct and logical, while anyone in the philosophy or women's studies departments is an SJW and can safely be ignored or insulted.”¹⁰⁸ While u/AnonySocialScientist’s reception on r/KIA was less pleasant, the r/KIA public received u/_supernovasky_ with open arms after he established himself as a “quantitative, positivist sociologist” who studies “people through numbers, statistics, and the scientific method.”¹⁰⁹ Nearly all of the redditors who responded embraced his positivist approach to sociology. u/Me_ImCounting agreed that qualitative studies populate academic sociological literature;¹¹⁰ u/zahlman agreed with his conclusion about a recent *Slate* article,¹¹¹ and u/itsredlagoon announced, “I think I love you already.”¹¹² Having seen Sarkeesian’s “Tropes vs. Women” video in a postmodernist-oriented, gender graduate seminar, u/_supernovasky_ learned the language of the SJWs: “Internalized misogyny, heteromasculine hegemony, contextuality, intersectionality, and these long sentences that basically amounted to syntactically correct statements that were entirely devoid of meaning.”¹¹³ Like u/haniisgood above, u/_supernovasky_ slips into anti-intellectual arguments by claiming the language of feminism and cultural criticism is “devoid of meaning” and by dismissing entire fields of study and forms of discourse in favor of the positivist style favored by many within the r/KIA public. However, while the discourse on

r/KIA relies on a positivist intellectual style, it is important to note that positivist discourse is not inherently anti-intellectual or sexist; rather, the positivist discourse on r/KIA fails to adequately represent the nuances of their opponents' critiques, misconstruing the aims and discourses of feminism and identity politics.

This positivist discourse echoes the Habermasian style of public spheres, which focus on rational, critical communication, and through rational debate, individuals in the public sphere can conclude some truth about a subject. However, as Warner argues, publics are inherently “poetic;” yet, because poetic expression is difficult to condense and explain objectively, “the poetic or textual qualities of any utterance are disregarded in favor of sense. Acts of reading, too, are understood to be replicable and uniform. So are opinions, which is why private reading seems to be directly connected to the sovereign power of public opinion.”¹¹⁴ Thus, r/KIA public's intellectual style interpellates members through the poetics of quantitative, positivist opinions. However, as Warner contends, “publics more overtly oriented in their self-understandings to the poetic-expressive dimensions of language, including artistic publics and many counterpublics, lack the power to transpose themselves to the generality of the state.”¹¹⁵ The r/KIA public has adopted a poetics of objective and empirical discourse to interpellate larger publics who can more effectively address the “ethical issues in gaming journalism.”

On the other hand, the public on r/GamerGhazi has adopted a postmodern intellectual style that, in many ways, rejects positivist discourse in favor of alternative poetics. For example, when members of r/KIA rejected u/AnonySocialScientist's literature review as valueless, members of r/GG responded to his post with positive feedback. Several commenters echoed u/cykosys, who agreed that “Gamergate is going to set back the perception of gaming, the gaming community, gaming journalism, etc. a decade.”¹¹⁶ u/Slakter responded that the primary reason quality,

quantitative work about the relationships between gender and video games appeared absent throughout the literature is because “most social interactions between people can’t be quantitatively measured which is why we need hermeneutics to understand oppression etc.”¹¹⁷ Like Warner, u/Slakter sees the counterpublic in r/GG as oppositional to r/KIAs positivist through acknowledgement of the poetic nature of the public.

Rhetorically, the poetics of the r/GG public often appear as irony and parody. For example, u/LieBaron linked to a r/KIA post about a 2012 study that found people who believe video games to be racist, tend to be more racist themselves; once entextualized, u/LieBaron parodies the over-reaction of the r/KIA public by titling the post:

BREAKING NEWS: A SINGLE, OBSCURE AND FLAWED STUDY DISPROVES FEMINISM, THE SOCIAL SCIENCES, THE HUMANITIES, ANTI-GG, THE LEFT, POSTMODERNISM, THAT ONE B*TCH WHO DIDN'T GO ON A DATE WITH YOU THAT ONE TIME, PEOPLE WHO SAY YOU WEAR TOO MUCH OLD SPICE, AND BASICALLY ANYONE WHO DISAGREES WITH YOU EVER.¹¹⁸

While this parody of the exuberance of r/KIA’s public represents one poetic style of the r/GG public, the ironic entextualization of quotes from r/KIA users represents another dominant poetic function. For example, when u/SocialJusticeRanger ironically entextualized a quote from an r/KIA member complaining that SJWs ignore their own privileges, they exposed the irony of a r/KIA member “posting on a sub-Reddit moaning about video games that people should not get hung up on ‘first world problems’ where a main contention of the group-think is that gamers are dead articles are ‘offending them.’”¹¹⁹ Fundamentally, members of r/GG actively challenge the positivist discourse on r/KIA through the postmodern politics of irony and parody. By entextualizing texts from r/KIA (and the #GamerGate public at large), r/GG exposes the anti-intellectual foundations inherent within their arguments; however, by relying on ironic commentary, the intellectual style of discourse on r/GG often appears cynical, and many

members have little opportunity for productive discourse or compromise with their counterpublic.

CONCLUSION

As I have shown throughout this chapter, the circulation of texts across r/KIA and r/GG are emblematic of #GamerGate's sustained attention to discourses of "ethics in journalism" and "social justice warriors." However, while these discourses often dominate the comment sections on r/KIA, they certainly do not represent the opinions and beliefs of every member of GamerGate, just as the continued harassment of Quinn, Sarkeesian, and Wu is not condoned by the majority of the GamerGate public. Nevertheless, the political tone set by these reddit boards rejects politics framed within alternative discourses that interpellate publics through the postmodern politics of identity. By misrepresenting the theories and aims of feminist and Marxist cultural criticism, discourse across r/KIA establishes an imaginary boogey-man, the "SJW," who seeks to censor free speech in the name of political correctness. Discourse surrounding SJWs, social sciences and cultural Marxism often relies on anti-intellectual attitudes that discredit discourses from alternative philosophical frameworks. Instead, discourse on r/KIA addresses its public through positivist epistemologies that appear to avoid the poetic entrapping of their counterpublics; yet, members of r/KIA often fail to recognize the inherent poetics of their own public, insisting that interpretations of their movement as sexist, hateful, and inaccurate. As the discourse on r/GG demonstrates, those opposing the r/KIA public cynically rely on irony and parody as their primary responses, evincing their low esteem for the intellectual style of GamerGate.

After spending countless hours combing archived 4Chan threads and Tweets, I began to better understand how digital publics and counterpublics significantly shape claims to truth, value and meaning. As I scoured screen-shots of screen-shots and archived links that led to dead ends, the poetic nature of r/KIA's public became clear to me. r/KIA members bases for claims to truth rest on sourcing nearly every piece of evidence and cataloging them in a Wiki to tell their story. By failing to recognize the poetic nature of their public, members of r/KIA assume that their sources are understood outside of poetics, objectively. As such, when outsiders fail to find GamerGate "evidence" convincing, members of the community often infer that their misrepresentation in outside media results from external impediments to their communication. However, I found that these disagreements stemmed not from impediments to communication, but from fundamentally conflicting epistemologies; outside of the Internet, archives of anonymous Internet posts rarely qualify as valid sources on which to base claims to truth.

When I first encountered r/KIA, I thought the users raised some valid concerns about personal and financial relationships between video game reviewers and developers. As I began exploring their community, I aimed to represent how these redditors understand their practices and discourses as a public. However, as a self-described feminist and critical theorist, the discourse I found within the comments on r/KIA conflicted with many of my worldviews. While I engaged with members of r/KIA community occasionally, after reading some of the responses other academics and critics received from the GamerGate community, I was hesitant to actively confront members of the community. Rather than fostering an "agonistic" relationship with those with whom they disagree, the discourse between members of r/KIA and academics is often adversarial and antagonistic. Despite my initial intentions to avoid moral judgments about the nature of the r/KIA public, I could not ignore my own frustration and irritation with the rampant

anti-intellectualism I observed across the comments. As the misinterpretation of the nature and aims of feminism and critical theory became increasingly evident during my research, their critiques of gaming journalism became less valid.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE NEOLIBERAL FANTASIES OF REDDIT'S PUBLIC SPHERE

The public and counterpublic found on r/KotakuInAction and r/GamerGhazi represent a clear example of how texts circulate across the site, but they are certainly not entirely representative of the politics found within the discourses across other subreddits and across reddit as a whole. The following chapter focuses on examining discourses across the rest of reddit to explore how they exemplify, or challenge Jodi Dean's conceptions of communicative capitalism and the neoliberal fantasies of technology. I begin with a description of Dean's concepts previously introduced in Chapter Three. I then explore how reddit's publics and counterpublics resemble the neoliberal fantasies of abundance, participation and wholeness; following this, I introduce the fantasies of alterneity and anonymity and to explore their ramifications on reddit's public sphere. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on how the practices gatewatching on reddit reify the neoliberal political economic networks of communicative capitalism.

COMMUNICATIVE CAPITALISM

As I discussed in Chapter Three, Dean uses the term "communicative capitalism" to describe a current political-economic form of the public sphere in which discourse forms publics and counterpublics but never affects public policy. As Internet users are conflated with producers, messages can become lost in circulation through publics and counterpublics by occluding "the antagonism necessary for politics, multiplying antagonism into myriad minor issues and events. In relatively close societies, that antagonism is not only already clear but also apparent at and as

the very frontier between open and closed.”¹ Despite increased access to communication networks, which ideally offers marginalized publics a wider voice within the public sphere, discourse within communicative capitalism fails to lead to an increase in the “equitable distribution of wealth and influence, instead of enabling the emergence of a richer variety in models of living practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world’s peoples.”² While the digital technology and advanced communication networks of the Internet afford the potentials for a virtual public sphere that influences official state policy, Dean argues that communicative capitalism emphasizes contribution over content, and “talk without responses, in which the very practices associated with public governance by the people consolidate and support the most brutal inequities of corporate-controlled capitalism.”³ By dividing the circulating discourse that forms publics and counterpublics online, communicative capitalism allows

busy people to think they are active—the technology will act for them, alleviating their guilt while assuring them that nothing will change too much. The responsive, relatively democratic virtual community won’t place too many (actually any) demands on them, fully aware that its democracy is the democracy of communicative capitalism—opinions will circulate, views will be expressed, information will be accessed. By sending an e-mail, signing a petition, responding to an article on a blog, people can feel political. And that feeling feeds communicative capitalism insofar as it leaves behind the time-consuming, incremental and risky efforts of politics.⁴

Within the concept of communicative capitalism, Dean contends that although we have witnessed occasional political action through digital public spheres, ultimately, online discourse fails to engage actual politics in favor of simply contributing to the discourse, rather than becoming truly politically active.

However, Dean’s conception of political action is primarily relegated to collective influence on federal level policy. Within this definition, reddit offers a useful case-study with which to analyze communicative capitalism. First, various actions by the reddit community indicate that,

in fact, the discourse circulating throughout the site has proven politically effective. By shutting down the site in January 2012, and encouraging redditors to communicate with their congressmen, the reddit administration mobilized their public to help defeat the “Stop Online Piracy Act” and “Protect IP Act.”⁵ In that same tradition, as the FCC has considered “net neutrality” regulations over the past year, the reddit administration has regularly asked their public to contact, FCC head, Tom Wheeler, and their legislative representatives to push in favor of net neutrality regulations. In fact, after Wheeler announced that the FCC would reclassify ISPs as “common carriers,” effectively requiring them to treat all content as equal, President Obama published a note online, thanking “redditors who participated in the movement,” which would not have succeeded without “the activism and engagement of millions of Americans like you.”⁶ Thus, the circulation of discourse through the reddit public sphere was influential in specific federal policy decisions.

Despite these developments, discourses across reddit often dismiss the politics of identity and fail to provide the affordances for productive political discourse. If we hold discourse on reddit up to Chantal Mouffe’s concept of an agonistic space, which affords users a community space that fosters productive discussion and discourages adversarial discourse, applying neoliberal logics to discourses of race, gender and sexuality. Given the political discourses explored in the previous chapter, the following chapter discusses the communication of neoliberal fantasies across reddit. By exploring how reddit exemplifies the neoliberal fantasies Dean describes, I address the following question: Does Dean’s model of communicative capitalism indicate a continuing neoliberal influence on reddit’s publics and counterpublics, or does the discourse that circulates across the site act as an agonistic space? The rest of this chapter will address this question by exploring how reddit exemplifies the “neoliberal fantasies” which Dean ascribes to

communicative capitalism, and showing how, despite redditors success affecting federal net neutrality regulations, discourse circulating through reddit's public sphere continues to echo the core tenants of communicative capitalism and inherently reinforces neoliberal agendas through fantasies of alterneity and anonymity.

THE FANTASY OF ABUNDANCE

Given the importance of the continued circulation of content through networked publics for communicative capitalism, Dean argues that the abundance of information acts as a primary neoliberal fantasy of modern technology, both for optimists and pessimists. Because more people than ever can make their opinion known, optimists insist that the Web provides an inclusive public sphere for millions of formerly marginalized voices; meanwhile, pessimists fear the inclusion of millions of voices and the lack of filters will lead to information overload, leaving individuals unable to establish establish the truth.⁷ Nevertheless, as Dean clarifies, both parties view “networked communications in terms of exponential expansions in opportunities to transmit and receive messages.”⁸ Within communicative capitalism, the value of understanding messages is sidelined in favor of pure contribution; “the use value of a message is less important than its exchange value, its contribution to a larger pool, flow, or circulation of content. A contribution need not be understood; it need only be repeated, reproduced, forwarded.”⁹ The content of a message is no longer important, as long as it is permitted to be circulated across communication networks. Therefore, as Dean concludes, despite the expansion of faster, better, cheaper, inclusive and more accessible communication networks, this abundance of communication

occludes the resulting devaluation of any particular contribution. It presumes that all contributions, all sites, are equal, equally likely to be heard or to make a difference.

Enthusiastically reiterating the idea that anyone and everyone can participate, contribute, express themselves, and create, the fantasy of abundance also prevents us from recognizing the underlying inequalities inextricable from complex networks.¹⁰

Within communicative capitalism, the ever-increasing number of communication networks, media-oriented publics and counterpublics, along with the circulation of information, messages may become lost or distorted, and individuals may fail to understand the inherent limitations of democratic action within a digital environment, and the contemporary neoliberal political economy, which dominates both sides of the US political system.

The fantasy of abundance is apparent across various practices, technologies and discourses on reddit's platform. Principally, comments on reddit are effectively rewarded for exchange value rather than use value as easily accessible comments that echo common site-wide discourses are most often upvoted. Many redditors practice "karma whoring," as it is popularly known; by submitting content and comments with little use value but high exchange value i to receive upvotes and karma. For example, within two years, u/way_fairer became one of the top comment karma earners on reddit by posting short, catchy, and amusing comments within r/AskReddit threads. Rarely does u/way_fairer answer with more than one or two lines of text, often referencing popular culture that is notably appealing to redditors, like *Seinfeld* or *Game of Thrones*, as well as in-jokes and memes that circulate across various subreddits in numerous forms (e.g. "checkmate atheists," "tips fedora," or "happy cakeday").¹¹ u/way_fairer's success in achieving reddit karma indicates the importance of the exchange value of a message to the reddit public over the use value. Likewise, content that is reposted over-and-over again to reddit also represents how exchange value has trumped use value within the reddit interface. Although "reposts" are discouraged by mods across many default subreddits (e.g. r/Pics, r/Funny, r/History), content is often "cross-posted" across different subreddits. As u/bendynachos pointed

out as early as 2011, content posted to one subreddit early in the day may again appear later in the day on a different subreddit, but titled with the top-voted comment from the previous post; in this instance, u/hyperuppercut's submission of a bird interrupting a newscast to r/Gifs, titled, "Sign of the Apocalypse" was later cross-posted to r/Funny by u/beernerd who paraphrased a comment from the original for the title: "I, for one, welcome our new avian overlords."¹² However, as u/ass_herpes replies to u/bendynachos complaint, "I, for one, am tired of people bitching about reposts and then posting posts of reposts, thus reposting reposts. Downvote and move on. Stop crying and flooding reddit with reposts of reposts of bitching reposts."¹³ The practice of reposting, and u/ass_herpes' response demonstrate of the importance technological affordances for the circulation of content across reddit's public; rather than stopping reposts, redditors are encouraged to discourage messages with high exchange value through the site's affordances, downvoting, rather than through critique and analysis.

THE FANTASY OF PARTICIPATION

In conjunction with the fantasy of abundance, Dean argues that another primary fantasy of communicative capitalism relies on the belief that participating in online discourse is politically meaningful. Of course, she notes, online participation has proven effective in changing official political policy occasionally (as in reddit's support of net neutrality), but far more often discourse online contributes

content that is linked to other content but never fully connected. Linking or citing stands in for reading, which stands in for engaging. At each juncture, there is a gap. Networked communication and information technologies are exquisite media for capturing and reformatting political energies. They turn efforts at political engagement into contributions to the circulation of content, reinforcing the hold of neoliberalism's technological infrastructure.¹⁴

After the political left abandoned the welfare state in the 1960s and 1970s, social conservatives and economic neoliberals united under the Reagan administration in the US, and the Thatcher administration in the UK, and identity politics became a corporate enterprise; consumerism became the primary mode of identity expression as citizens expressed themselves publicly through branded clothing and technology. Under these new, neoliberal political economic conditions, left politics fractured under accusations of “political correctness” and the right’s emphasis on deregulation; Dean argues that the splintering of the left represents a trauma for which “technology fetishism [. . .] let[s] [the left] feel as if they are making a contribution, let[s] them deny the larger lack of left solidarity even as their very individualized and solitary linking and clicking attests to the political conditions.”¹⁵ Within the fantasy of participation, Dean argues that members of the political left substitute technological innovation and contribution to mask the impotence of leftist politics within the neoliberal application of market forces to federal US policies across the political spectrum. For Dean then, the technological fetishism that covers the trauma of fractured leftist politics functions primarily through condensation and displacement.¹⁶

CONDENSATION

Dean argues that condensation occurs when “technology fetishism reduces the complexities of politics—of organization, struggle, duration, decisiveness, division, representation, and so on—to one thing, one problem to be solved and one technological solution.”¹⁷ On reddit, condensation often occurs within the “meta” discussions of the site that reflect on practices and events occurring throughout the community. u/Addyct addressed condensation directly, asking the members of r/TheoryOfReddit, “Why is reddit often seen or referred to as one cohesive entity when other social media sites don't have the same issue?”¹⁸ While some respondents disagreed

with u/Addyct's assertion that individuals condense redditors' various politics and practices into a monolith more than other digital media outlets (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, 4Chan), others argued that the voting system made opinions within reddit's public sphere seem unified. "Minority opinions are buried on reddit," u/18andover stated;

On Twitter and Facebook blatant trolls or people with controversial opinions can get wide distribution. Differing opinions are totally normal. Not so on reddit. If you want your submission or top-level comment widely viewed on reddit, the herd has to agree with you. So people confuse the herd for all of reddit. What they really mean (though they may not realize it) is the majority.¹⁹

For u/18andover and others agreeing with him, the participatory action of voting affords users an accessible grasp of generally agreed upon opinions, and minority voices are limited to the lower half, and lesser read areas of the comment section. u/abowlofcereal contends that condensation of redditors typically results from "avid users self-identifying as Redditors and the fact that the main way new users experience the site is through the broadest most popular content leads, to the view that the site and its users are more homogeneous in terms of values and opinions."²⁰

Because new users are introduced to reddit through default subreddits, and those describing reddit often rely on upvoted opinions found within these defaults, the diversity and nuances of opinions formed within the reddit public sphere are difficult to determine and fix, even if the technological limitations of voting could be addressed without changing the fundamentals of the site.

DISPLACEMENT

While condensation describes the mode of communicative capitalism through which political complexities are overly simplified, through displacement, media theorists place politics onto the everyday practices of internet users. Dean asserts that

the emphasis on networked communication strategies displaces political energy from the hard work of organizing and struggle. [. . .] without the organized and sustained action, without building relationships with caucus attendees in Iowa, say, Internet politics remains precisely that—a politics of and through new media, and that’s all.²¹

Thus, the effectiveness of reddit’s public sphere to convey public opinion about the regulation of its own technology proves to be yet another neoliberal construct. Yes, redditors actively engaged in sustained political action that resulted in policy change regarding the classifications of ISPs. However, while President Obama praised the effectiveness of reddit’s public sphere for political action, political engagement through reddit’s public sphere in issues outside of digital technology policy is rare, and primarily, uninfluential. Outside of the SOPA/PIPA blackout and the related net neutrality debate, redditors have only politically mobilized behind Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart’s “March to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” in October 2010 by helping to fundraise over \$550,000 for DonorsChoose.²² Although certainly entertaining and marginally critical, this march had little effect on public policy, and instead it simply continued the circulation of messages through ironic and satiric commentary

THE FANTASY OF WHOLENESS

While the fantasies of participation and abundance influence much of the discourse surrounding the political potentials of digital technology, Dean argues that the “fantasy of wholeness” furthers facilitates communicative capitalism as it asserts that messages circulate for a global audience. Specifically, Dean imagines the internet as what Claude Levi-Strass calls a “zero institution”: “it has no determinate meaning but instead signifies the presence of meaning. It is an institution with no positive function. All it does is signify institutionality as such.”²³ By constructing an imaginary space for publics and counterpublics, the Internet provides the

affordances of a global medium through which individuals can communicate and participate in global political action. However, through the circulation of content online, Internet users

create the expectations and effects of communicative capitalism, expectations and effects that necessarily vary with the setting. Because the global is whatever specific communities or exchanges imagine it to be, anything outside the experience or comprehension of these communities either does not exist or is an inhuman, otherworldly alien threat that must be annihilated.²⁴

While the Internet seems to afford the communication networks to effectively create Marshall McLuhan's "global village," the limitations of neoliberal capitalism structurally inhibit the access and use of the Internet reinforcing already-in-place structures of domination and exclusion with few emancipatory potentials.

The fantasy of wholeness also appears within the publics and counterpublics on reddit. Principally, reddit represents a zero institution through its libertarian infrastructure, which promotes a free market of information, including content that represents global interests that are important to the community. Ohanian reinforces this notion when describing many redditors' strong libertarian leanings, stating, "Maybe libertarians especially like reddit because it is a perfect marketplace of content [. . .] Every Redditor is created equal, whether you're the highest karma Redditor or a brand-new Redditor with 10 karma points."²⁵ By asserting that (nearly) any and all content is allowed to be, at least, submitted to reddit, the platform affords a fantasy of deregulated content, curated only on the merit of the post. However, as both Dean and Lessig note, this libertarian free-market of ideas is, in fact, yet another fantasy. Drawing on Albert-László Barabási's description of four primary digital "continents" from which users rarely deviate, Dean concludes that open-access and equal opportunity constitute a formation of the fantasy of wholeness because users are presented with the ideology of the whole, while remaining isolated on one digital continent.²⁶ Lessig, on the other hand, perceives the entire

concept of a free-market online as a “‘libertarian failure’ when the push to do nothing will produce not no regulation at all, but regulation by the most powerful of special interests. Or in a slogan: When it’s wrong to push for regulation, only the wrong will get regulation.”²⁷ Thus, the fantasy of wholeness is represented on reddit through the inherent infrastructure of the site, which invites global input, but is practically limited by the technological affordances of the reddit interface, the dominant languages (English) written in the comment sections, and the cultures that have developed across the site. Specifically, as Singer et al. find, despite the ever-increasing variety of subreddits, content on reddit has increasingly converged to rely primarily on self-posts and Imgur links. Thus, Singer et al. determined that reddit has shifted away from acting as the front-page of the internet in favor acting as a “self-referential” community.²⁸ Fundamentally, reddit affords users a public sphere for global interaction, but in actuality, reddit is a self-referential community with few sources that challenge problematic social norms.

THE FANTASY OF ALTERNEITY

Alongside Dean’s established neoliberal fantasies (abundance, participation and wholeness), the publics and counterpublics on reddit also implicate two additional neoliberal fantasies of technology. First, through fragmentation and segmentation, the fantasy of alterneity reinforces the mechanisms of communicative capitalism. On reddit, the over-abundance of information has often resulted in the fragmentation of publics as some members wish to exclude certain materials while others do not. For example, moderators on r/HipHopHeads stopped allowing memes and images in 2012 in order to streamline content, subsequently establishing r/HipHopImages as a new forum that only allows image-based submissions.

However, oftentimes, the inherent biases and interests of a user-base limit upvoted content on a subreddit. For example, r/Politics has a long-standing liberal subscriber base, and upvoted content generally leans to the left in the political spectrum, even if discourse is also critical of left policies on occasion; although r/Politics condenses the entirety of “politics” into their subreddit, redditors from the right, as well as those who identify as libertarian, socialist, anarchist, and various other political affiliations, have created their own subreddits to circulate content that might fail to reach the front page of r/Politics. Thus, subreddits, like r/Conservative, r/Libertarian and even r/Liberal, represent the fragmentation of the reddit public interested in political discourse. These “alternative” subreddits provide users the affordance to continue circulating content outside of the r/Politics public; however, the alterneity of these subreddits is a fantasy because they offer no further opportunities for political action than r/Politics. Furthermore, commenters on r/TheoryOfReddit consider the expansion of alternative subreddits as a potential solution to the increasing amount of problematic discourse circulating across reddit’s publics and counterpublics. u/18andover wrote that “infinite subreddits is the solution” to how reddit can expand while maintaining its original user base; “Yes, it's hard to have your voice heard in a default sub. But go into a sub with 10,000 or fewer subscribers and you'll have no problem at all.”²⁹ Likewise, fragmenting publics into new subreddits has also been proposed as the answer to the rise of extremely large, and often unwieldy subreddits; as u/bothanspy1337 notes, although r/Games was the primary subreddit for gaming news and discussion, r/Gaming quickly “rose to replace it” after moderators began filtering out content that was not designed for “informing or initiating a discussion, not just with the goal of entertaining viewers.”³⁰ While fragmented publics represent one formation of the fantasy of alterneity on reddit, overarching discourses that

circulate through reddit's publics and counterpublics also indicate how the fantasy of alterneity reinforces neoliberal ideologies.

For the rest of this section, I explore a brief case study of r/TheRedPill (r/TRP) to analyze how this public discourse reinforces the fantasy of alterneity while applying the hegemonic structures of neoliberal ideologies to sexuality and gender. With over 100,000 subscribers, moderators of r/TRP market the subreddit as a space for the "discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men."³¹ In a 2012 introductory post, moderator u/pk_atheist clarifies the mission of the subreddit:

I am here to say, for better or for worse, the frame around public discourse is a feminist frame, and we've lost our identity because of it. [. . .] But this isn't the end of the world. The world is changing, but men are still part of it. We just need to make sure we're changing with it. [. . .] Feminism is a sexual strategy. It puts women into the best position they can find, to select mates, to determine when they want to switch mates, to locate the best dna possible, and to garner the most resources they can individually achieve. The Red Pill is men's sexual strategy. Reality is happening, and we need to make sure that we adjust our strategy accordingly.³²

Under the guise of male self-improvement, members of r/TRP view contemporary masculinity as under attack by feminists who are actively oppressing and manipulating men through "misandry." To re-establish masculinity, members of r/TRP shun traits of "betas" (men who display low sexual value to women)³³ in favor of "alpha" mindsets which, they believe women find sexually attractive.³⁴ By adopting alpha traits, members of r/TRP aim to increase their value in the "sexual marketplace," which is based on the commodification and exchange of the sexual needs of men and women; within this ideology, women desire the attention, validation, and respect that men can provide them in exchange for sex.³⁵ Thus, according to u/verus_mas, within the contemporary feminist-dominated sexual marketplace, women demand attention, validation, and/or respect without reciprocating the exchange through sexual favors, which has created a unbalanced sexual marketplace in favor of women.³⁶

While the false-constructions of women, men, feminism, masculinity, and sex promoted by redditors on r/TRP are fundamentally flawed and problematic, I focus here on the application of market-based logics to contemporary sexuality and gender to determine how this discourse represents the neoliberal fantasy of alterneity. r/TRP's public discourse frames feminism as the dominant US discourse, thus representing itself as an alternative; ultimately however, this assertion is a product of communicative capitalism. While reddit is not a principle hub for feminist discourse online,³⁷ many users have echoed u/metaredditcancer's 2015 assertion that a "cabal of users and moderators" have colluded to censor and ban "any discussion that goes against their social justice and feminist belief."³⁸ According to u/metaredditcancer, moderators of r/ShitRedditSays, which is devoted to entextualizing racist, sexist, homophobic, and bigoted content from across reddit, and several other moderators from related meta-subreddits (e.g. r/CircleBroke, r/SubredditDrama, r/TheBluePill) have infiltrated the moderation teams of several large subreddits and aim to "take over and control as many subreddits as they can in a clear and indisputable attempt to control the flow of conversation so that conversations in any given subreddit always lean and kowtow to radical feminism and a perverted form of social justice."³⁹ While these accusations are shaky at best,⁴⁰ u/metaredditcancer received over 3,000 upvotes on the original post, which was cross-posted on various subreddits, including r/TRP. Within the 363 comments on r/TRP, no one contested u/metaredditcancer's assertions, despite the lack of evidence; nearly all agreed that the feminist/social justice warrior (SJW) mindset dominated discourse on reddit, evidenced through "controlling discourse, speech policing and sniffing out 'thought crime.'"⁴¹ Although u/metaredditcancer only recently publicized these accusations, the r/TRP user's response represents their continued belief that feminist discourse dominates reddit,

and US media. Thus, members of r/TRP understand their contribution of anti-feminist discourse as fundamentally alternative to reddit's dominant discourse, and US culture at large.

However, under the framework of communicative capitalism, *even if* reddit moderators have conspired to censor content, and *even if* mediated discourse represent feminist ideologies, these discourses only circulate without producing any actual effect on the neoliberal institutions that govern their discursive patterns. In fact, by applying the logic of markets to notions of sexuality, members of r/TRP are not offering an alternative discursive public that contests structures of domination, as they often claim, but simply reinforcing neoliberal structures of domination within a domain that is often used to contest institutionalized structures of power. Thus, members of r/TRP's public presuppose the alternativeness of their discourse based on the perceived dominance of feminist discourse on reddit, and across the web; however, by conflating the neoliberal fantasies of communicative capitalism with the neoliberal policies that undergird this discourse, r/TRP's public exposes the fantasy of its own alterneity by reifying and institutionalizing neoliberal logics as a method for sexual conquest.

THE FANTASY OF ANONYMITY

While members of r/TRP reinforce neoliberal structures of domination under the guise of female-on-male oppression, reddit, at large, also reifies neoliberal conceptions of freedom as deregulation through the fantasy of anonymity. In general, reddit affords users a façade of anonymity because no identifying information is required to create an account; however, as one redditor noted in an r/AskReddit thread about anonymity, "reddit has the IP address you posted that question from, and they are one search warrant or subpoena away from giving that to any law enforcement agency that has authority to ask for it, unless they have very deep legal pockets

to fight it on principle.”⁴² Likewise, Edward Snowden’s revelations about the National Security Agency’s (NSA) extensive data collection, along with privacy intrusions across the Web, indicating an increasing lack of anonymity online. Nevertheless, public discourse on reddit relies on anonymity as a form of deregulated identity, which is considered necessary to maintain the democratic principle of “free speech” to be maintained. In the rest of this chapter, I examine this fantasy on reddit by exploring the discourse surrounding the deregulation of identity and speech through anonymity.

THE DEREGULATION OF IDENTITY

Fundamentally, Dean argues, neoliberalism relies on the fantasy of “free trade” through an “obstacle-free marketplace in which everyone benefits. [. . .] As free rational agents armed with full information, people will make the right choices—but, again, only so long as nothing biases or constrains these choices, so long as nothing fetters the freeness of the market.”⁴³ Within the neoliberal ideology, markets should be free of external constraints and regulations. Thus, the fantasy of anonymity supports communicative capitalism by removing the constraints on discourse posed by identity markers, like race and gender; instead, everyone is theoretically anonymous, and thus, everyone is theoretically equally capable of accessing and circulating content. Anonymity fulfills the neoliberal “restructuring of political possibility” by directing political discourse away from personal identities as they become “too fleeting and unstable to serve as sites of politicization.”⁴⁴ Instead, by unifying all of the fragmented aspects of identity under the framework of “no identity,” the fantasy of anonymity becomes a stabilizing force for neoliberalism and communicative capitalism. Thus, the discourse surrounding SJWs on r/TRP

contains a critique of the use of identity-based politics to criticize anonymity-based discourse, which is vital to reinforce of neoliberal ideologies.

Anonymity on reddit has deep ties to the anonymous contributors on 4Chan who are often simply referred to as “anon.” As the home-base for the hacktivist collective, “Anonymous,” users of 4Chan circulate much of the same discourse about SJWs and the problems with identity-based politics found across many publics on reddit. However, as the following piece of parodic dialogue, appearing on r/GamerGhazi, shows, the neoliberal fantasy of anonymity, promoted on 4Chan and through SJW-oriented discourse, reinforces deregulation of identity as a requirement for participation in its public.

u/_handsome_pete: “Chan culture's obsession with 'leave your identity at the door' doesn't actually mean that they're more accepting, but they just can't get their heads around the idea.”

u/StillMostlyClueless: “leave your identity at the door, a new one will be provided for you”

u/_handsome_pete: “I think you'll find our ‘white male’ size to be particularly comfortable”

u/DrakosAmatras: “We don't care who you are in real life—because that's never as important as our identity.”

u/Maytree: “More like ‘We don't care who you are as long as you don't make the straight white males feel bad about themselves by disagreeing with them or pointing out that they're wrong. This is a safe space for the rare endangered straight white male and you're not allowed to make them uncomfortable.’”

u/Sansa_Culotte_: “Chan culture really cannot cope with gender differences. See e.g. ‘Tits or GTFO’, the classic response to a female poster revealing their gender.”⁴⁵

Within the anonymity of communicative capitalism, individual markers of difference and “otherness” are considered unnecessary; however, as these comments highlight, by eliminating gender and race as political categories, anonymous discourse on 4Chan, and subsequently, reddit, does not assume users have no identity, but that they share the common identity of white male. When an anonymous contributor claims to be a woman, anon’s regular rejoinder is to ask for proof of womanhood through pictures of breasts, “or else” (“Tits or GTFO”) the user is

inherently assumed to be a white male. Thus, the fantasy of anonymity is just that, a fantasy; too often, redditors do not assume other redditors to be anonymous, but to be young, white males. When this assumption is challenged through the introduction of real-life identity into the digital public sphere, the fantasy of anonymity dictates this contribution be disregarded because the politics of identity do not belong in the anonymous world of the Internet where identity has been deregulated in favor of anonymity.

THE DEREGULATION OF SPEECH

As evidenced in the previous chapter's discussion of GamerGate, free speech represents a pressing political issue for many redditors who are concerned for the future of the site. More specifically, the publics that circulate discourse about SJWs are consistently concerned with leftist stifling of free expression via collusion and censorship. Just as neoliberal ideology insists upon a deregulated economic marketplace, the neoliberal fantasy of anonymity insists upon deregulated speech for the continued circulation of contributions. Dean argues that under neoliberalism, Americans have come to see freedom as an essential defining aspect of self-understanding: "[Neoliberalism's] emphasis on free trade answers the question of who we, as Americans, are—we are those who trade freely, who value freeness. Ours is the home of the free (despite or because there is no such thing as a free lunch)."⁴⁶ Thus, by deregulating speech, the fantasy of anonymity insists that speech be completely free of social constraints in order to exchange messages unencumbered by concerns about being accountability for the message written on the anonymous Web. While deregulated speech affords the potential for political action, as evidenced by Snowden's and Manning's whistleblowing, reddit, free speech is most often invoked to attack moderators and administrators with accusations of censorship and collusion when faced with the removal of content.

Thus, after r/TheFappening became the de facto circulation center for dozens of stolen celebrity nude photos, ex-CEO, Yishan Wong, framed the administration's decision as a rare interference with the site's general free speech ethos: the administration, he argued, upholds "the ideal of free speech on reddit as much as possible not because we are legally bound to, but because we believe that you—the user —has the right to choose between right and wrong, good and evil, and that it is *your responsibility* to do so."⁴⁷ Wong contended that the closure of r/TheFappening did not represent a shift away from reddit as a site of free speech, but a decision that had to be made based on the problematic choices of the reddit public. However, as u/adminbeast notes, there was

no freedom-of-speech argument to be made here. These photographs were obtained illegally, and circulating them doesn't advance any discernable public interest. [. . .] Nude photographs of celebrities aren't the Pentagon Papers, and I can't believe I even need to say that, but this is Reddit and people are stupid about this kind of thing.⁴⁸

Wong's closing of r/TheFappening does not actually interfere with free speech because illegally obtained content from hacked celebrity accounts does not concern free speech. Furthermore, by assuming that free speech was ever unregulated on reddit's platform, Wong repeats the neoliberal fantasy that online speech can ever be deregulated. As I have shown in the previous three chapters, expression on reddit has never been entirely unregulated; rather, the cultural practices, technological affordances and economic foundations of the site inherently influence and regulate the forms and structures of expression available on the reddit interface. By assuming that free speech existed in the first place, Wong reinforced the neoliberal fantasy of anonymity by implying that deregulated speech exists on reddit when, in fact, speech online is already, inherently regulated by outside forces.

THE NEOLIBERAL FANTASY OF GATEWATCHING

Ultimately, numerous actions by redditors, moderators and the reddit administration evince the neoliberal fantasies Dean envisions as primary drivers of communicative capitalism. Dean contends that these neoliberal fantasies “manifest in our actual practices; these practices, what people actually do, are the location of ideological beliefs.”⁴⁹ As noted in Chapter Five, reddit’s platform affords users the ability to practice “gatewatching” to aggregate and curate news content without the editorial gatekeepers of traditional news outlets. Fundamentally then, reddit represents the logical conclusion of Axel Bruns’s conception of gatewatching; Bruns states that while sites like *SlashDot* and *IndyMedia* offer a limited construction of gatewatching in which several power-users edit content as they see fit,

the next step for collaborative news Websites, then, would be to remove all traces of a privileged role of site editors at any stage in the news process (however limited and heterarchically distributed their powers might already be), while retaining the sense of trust and identity which their work can contribute to the site. This would represent a true *open* form of collaborative news publishing, and finally put all power into the hands of users as producers; it would also lead to true unadulterated multiperspectivity.⁵⁰

Reddit exemplifies the gatewatching premise by trading privileged editors for voluntary moderation and user participation in order to curate and circulate content across the site’s publics and counterpublics. However, while the gatewatching thesis asserts that reddit’s platform should encourage multiperspectivity, my research throughout this dissertation has repeatedly shown that reddit’s public sphere is far from multiperspectival because, ultimately, redditor’s gatewatching practices often fail to provide an alternative discursive public, which Bruns would predict. Thus, in the following section I explore Bruns’s concepts of “producers” and multiperspectivity through examples found on reddit to show how gatewatching reinforces the fantasies of neoliberalism addressed above.

For Bruns, gatewatching relies on users to watch the outputs from various media outlets to identify valuable news stories. Bruns specifically points to “producers” as the key figures in gatewatching because they “engage with such sites interchangeably in consumptive *and* productive modes (and often in both at virtually the same time.)”⁵¹ As gatewatchers, redditors draw on the affordances of the site’s technology to produce and consume content. Through the upvote/downvote function, reddit’s platform affords users the ability to help determine what content makes it through the input and output gates, and karma affords users a sense of accomplishment for their labor as “producers;” comments afford redditors a space for critique, and self congratulation, and subreddits afford reddit users an opportunity to develop a digital public of their choosing. On sites, like reddit, Bruns argues, producers “*observe* the publication of news and information in other sources (that is, the passing of information through other gates) and *publicize* its existence through their own sites.”⁵² Thus, by entextualizing content from across the Web into the reddit interface, reddit’s producers engage in gatewatching practices that form nearly all of the content on the site. Furthermore, Bruns argues that producers can evince an alternative mode of information gathering that could potentially lead to what Herbert Gans termed “multiperspectival news,” which “represents as many perspectives as is possible and feasible.”⁵³ Thus, multiperspectival journalism ought to represent a significant alternative to “mainstream media” by “reanalyzing and reinterpreting mainstream media reports” through the “electronic networks and cheap digital equipment for news production and distribution.”⁵⁴ Thus, for Bruns, the networked Internet communication systems provide the affordances to construct alternative news media through participatory practices of gatewatching. Given these definitions of gatewatching, producers and multiperspectival journalism, reddit represents a paradigmatic space for gatewatching.

However, while Bruns sees gatewatching as a way to improve contemporary journalism, and fundamentally, digital publics and counterpublics, my analysis throughout this chapter has shown that rather than affording a multiperspectival method for circulating information, gatewatching on reddit primarily reinforces the fantasies of neoliberalism. Fundamentally, Bruns's argument that by acting as consumer and producer, producers can somehow challenge the homogeneity of discourse produced by traditional news outlets reinforces the fantasies of participation, abundance and anonymity that undergird communicative capitalism. As Dean argues, "under conditions of intensive and extensive proliferations of media, conditions wherein everyone is presumed to be a producer as well as a consumer of content, messages get lost."⁵⁵ As exemplified previously, producers on reddit often accent their messages' exchange values in order to acquire karma, rather than promoting the use value of complex, nuanced argumentation and discourse.

Perhaps more than any other subreddit, r/AdviceAnimals evinces this trend of emphasizing exchange value over use value. Devoted to "image macro" memes, r/AdviceAnimals is comprised entirely of easy-to-access images with little critical engagement (see Figure 1). These "advice animals" regularly populate the front-page of reddit, along with easily accessible GIFs, pictures and short videos. The popularity of this easily-digestible content indicates redditors's emphasis on exchange value and ease of access over messages with complex messages, and high use-value. The gatewatching practices found on reddit succumb to the neoliberal fantasy of abundance by assuming that inexpensive digital communication networks affords producers the opportunity to engage in more diverse practices of journalism.

Likewise, given that the circulation of discourse represents communicative capitalism, Bruns's figure of the producer reinforces the neoliberal fantasy of anonymity by deregulating the

complexities of identity in favor of their economic roles. Finally, Bruns also reverts to the fantasy of participation as the primary mode through which producers engage publics online, stating that “the collaborative nature of the gatewatching approach already enables us to speak of gatewatching as a form of *participatory journalism*.”⁵⁶ While producers’ contributions to the circulation of content (through participatory acts of linking, commenting, and voting) may represent a new form of participatory journalism, Bruns fails to acknowledge that the fantasy of participation as political engagement reinforces neoliberal structures of domination while reassuring producer’s of their political efficacy.

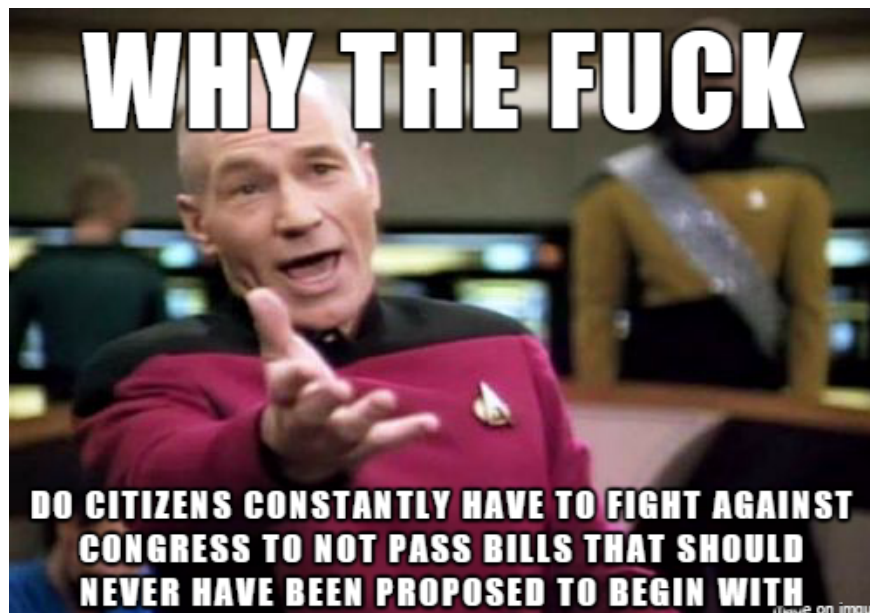


FIGURE 1: u/zemlor - “After reading that congress wants to give tax cuts to the 5400 richest families in the US & fast tracking the Trans-Pacific Partnership on the front page in the same day.”⁵⁷

Ultimately, Bruns constructs gatewatching and producer’s participation in the circulation of content as fundamental elements of a new form of “participatory journalism,” which could produce multiperspectival news that challenges the hegemony of the homogenous narratives circulated through traditional news outlets. However, Bruns asserts that

multiperspectivity depends on the condition that participating users do indeed represent a multitude of perspectives. Where this condition is not met, participatory journalism might in fact lead to a *limiting* of available perspectives: group dynamics within the community of participating gatewatchers may mean that the information gathered through gatewatching represents only an established majority view, and that opposing views are ignored as irrelevant, or suppressed by participants' own self-censorship.⁵⁸

While Bruns carefully qualifies his assertions about the realistic potential of multiperspectival journalism, by assuming that a multiperspectival form of journalism *could* exist through the participatory labor of gatewatchers, he effectively reinforces the neoliberal fantasies of alterneity and wholeness. By relying on Gans's "two-tier" model of journalism that separates the "traditional-style" journalism of "mainstream media" from "alternative media [. . .] which focus on reanalyzing and reinterpreting mainstream media reports," Bruns reinforces the fantasy of alterneity by positioning "new" and "old" media against each other.⁵⁹ As shown in the case study of r/TheRedPill above, gatewatching practices can often reinforce the neoliberal ideologies that permeate the "traditional-style" journalism rather than contest them; by assuming that the gatewatching model of online news production and consumption is inherently alternative to the ideological bent of mainstream news, Bruns reifies the fantasy of alterneity as a fundamental principle of gatewatching.

Within this same dichotomy of the "traditional-style" journalism found in the mainstream news and the potential "multiperspectivity" of gatewatching publics, Bruns also bolsters the neoliberal fantasy of wholeness. In the quote above, Bruns carefully argues that many gatewatching publics fail to produce multiperspectival journalism because their user-base does not represent multiple perspectives. However, *even if* reddit's user-base genuinely contained individuals from every walk of life who each offered their own perspective on every topic, their gatewatching practices would only serve to further reinforce the neoliberal appeal to the global through communicative capitalism. As Dean argues, "networked communications

materialize specific fantasies of unity and wholeness as the global. These fantasies in turn secure networked transactions as the Real of global capitalism.”⁶⁰ Thus, a multiperspectival form of journalism would only continue to reconstruct neoliberal ideologies of globalization, rather than forming a truly alternative public sphere that could effectively leverage public opinion into political action.

Ultimately, when viewed through Dean’s theory of communicative capitalism, gatewatching on reddit implicates a neoliberal public sphere. However, in accordance with Chantal Mouffe’s call for “agonistic spaces,” the poetic aspects of reddit’s publics and counterpublics could, potentially, be more effectively regulated by the reddit administration. Rather than relying on the fantasy of deregulated speech, Mouffe’s approach calls for technological affordances, political economic structures, and cultural practices that resists the “ever present temptation that exists in democratic societies to naturalize their frontiers and essentialize their identities.”⁶¹ Instead of holding communication up to some idealistic standard, Mouffe argues for the need to acknowledge the limits of democracy and transparently address that speech and identity on reddit are always, inherently regulated. By clarifying and delineating the inherent limits of digital democracy within reddit’s platform, the administration may be better equipped to avoid the traps of neoliberal utopianism. Under such a framework, the discourse and politics found on reddit may be able to extend beyond the neoliberal fantasies that currently permeate the site.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, I have explored how reddit exemplifies the different neoliberal fantasies of abundance, participation and wholeness, as described by Dean, as well as the fantasies of alterneity and anonymity that are evinced through the practices of gatewatching.

Fundamentally, reddit's publics and counterpublics represent how neoliberal ideologies are implemented through the discourses found on the site, which reinforce fantasies of technology that are implicitly problematic. By assuming that true anonymity and free speech exist within reddit's public sphere, members of the reddit public reinforce neoliberal fantasies of the free market of information in which misunderstandings no longer exist because the technological affordances of the site allow every person's voice is heard, and the most accurate opinions, statements or arguments are promoted over ignorant and incorrect information. However, by ignoring the inherent cultural, technological and economic limitations that inform discourse on the site, these discourses reify structures of power while implying they differ from traditional media sources. Rather, discourse that circulates across reddit actively reinforces similar neoliberal ideologies that flow across traditional news outlets, as well as other digital news outlets. Further, despite the circulation of discourse across publics and counterpublics on the site, agonistic spaces are far from common, and discourse on or related to identity and sexuality also fail to effectively communicate progressive political potential.

NOTES

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CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation, I have described a variety of cultural practices, technological affordances and political economic influences that help form the discourse found across reddit, and I have shown how that discourse implicates neoliberal ideologies and fantasies throughout the publics and counterpublics on the site. Through the combination of netnography, textual analysis, and document analysis, I drew upon the theoretical traditions found within both Cultural Studies and the field of Political Economy to explore a multitude of fundamental elements that inform reddit's publics and counterpublics. After visiting the site nearly daily for the last half-decade, this research is based within my personal experience of the site, and the research questions I answered in the previous chapters were developed out of that experience: (1) What are the cultural practices, technological affordances, and political economic forces that influence reddit's public sphere? (2) How are publics and counterpublics formed on reddit, and how do they circulate discourse across reddit's larger public sphere? (3) What are the political implications and ramifications of reddit's public sphere, and what do they mean for the potential of democratic participation using the Internet?

I began my findings with detailed descriptions of a number of cultural practices found on reddit based on the theoretical framework established by Nick Couldry. I laid out the different ways through which redditors engaged in searching, showing, presencing, archiving, and other complex media-related practices on the site. I also applied Axel Bruns' concept of

“gatewatching” to the practices found on the site by describing several interactions between administrators, moderators and users on reddit.

Having described the cultural practices, I next detailed several different technological and economic aspects of the site by drawing on Lawrence Lessig’s hybrid economic model. The chapter began with a careful analysis of the commercial economic practices found on the site to show how they generated revenue for reddit’s sustained growth over the last ten years. I also introduced a number of aspects of reddit’s sharing economy, noting how the site’s open-source development, gift exchanging and philanthropy build community through sharing. Finally, I concluded with a detailed analysis of how these practices fulfill, and fail to fulfill, different aspects of Lessig “hybrid economy.” Ultimately, while both types of economies exist on reddit, they are far from fully integrated, and often reddit’s administrative team represented simple gestures at a hybrid economy that remain unfulfilled.

Once I established the fundamental cultural practices, technological affordances, and economic policies, I narrowed my scope to a case study of two specific subreddits to analyze how discourse circulates across publics and counterpublics on the site. The chapter began with an introduction to the #GamerGate public and its representative forums on reddit: r/KotakuInAction (r/KIA) and r/GamerGhazi (r/GG). Through Michael Warner’s theoretical framework, I explored types of texts that circulated across both subreddits, and introduced the discourses on “ethics in gaming journalism” and “social justice warriors” (SJWs) across both subreddits. Having established the details of these discourses, I finished with a thorough discussion of the intellectual style found on both subreddits, concluding that the discourse on r/KIA and r/GG rested on two fundamentally opposed intellectual styles: logical positivism and postmodern identity politics. However, I also discovered a virulent strain of anti-intellectualism

throughout the discourse on r/KIA that rejected entire fields of alternative epistemologies through regular misrepresentation of opposing viewpoints.

The final chapter of this dissertation explored the discourse across the wider reddit public, interrogating the relationship between the public discourse on reddit and Jodi Dean's neoliberal fantasies of communicative capitalism. Through a detailed examination of discourse on a number of subreddits, but especially from r/TheRedPill, I established how discourse throughout reddit's publics and counterpublics often reify the neoliberal fantasies of abundance, participation and wholeness. Furthermore, I also established how this discourse implicated the fantasies of alterneity and anonymity. The chapter concluded with a comparative analysis of redditors' "gatewatching" practices and communicative capitalism, discussing how the publics and counterpublics found within the reddit interface rely on the neoliberal deregulation of language and identity.

These findings represent my attempt to combine the disparate fields of political economy and cultural studies in order to avoid the reductionism inherent within each discipline. However, during my research, the inherent difficulties in combining the two fields became obvious. Why describe the cultural practices of redditors when when they simply reflect the neoliberal paradigms that shape the site? Why does discourse on the site matter if is simply a product of the political economic structures that form publics and counterpublics? Fundamentally, I answered these questions through the structure of the dissertation; I designed Chapters Five and Six to introduce what I see as the base elements of any public: cultural practices, technological affordances, and economic structures; once I established these fundamentals, I introduced the discourses that circulate throughout the publics and counterpublics formed on the site and showed how they reproduced the neoliberal ideologies of communicative capitalism. However, I

purposefully refrained from arguing that the discourses found in the publics and counterpublics across the site reduce to simple reifications of neoliberalism. Rather, they stem from the individuals who have been interpellated by the cultural practices, technological affordances and economic structures. Thus, before we can understand how reddit functions as a neoliberal public sphere, we need to first understand the cultural practices that occur within the same framework. Ultimately, the combination of Cultural Studies and Political Economy as a theoretical framework for analyzing digital culture and the virtual public sphere is possible, but only through long-form analysis that affords ample time and space for establishing the nuances and complexities implicit within digital technology and culture.

During my research here, I often struggled to maintain an equal consideration of both economic and cultural elements, and in my first two chapters I effectively separated the two. Only after I established the cultural and economic practices that inform the discourse on reddit could I effectively begin combining cultural studies and political economy in the final two chapters. Without the extended length afforded by a dissertation project, I would have been unable to draw on the evidence presented in first chapters to analyze the political discourse explored in the final two chapters.. Essentially, while combining Cultural Studies and Political Economy is possible and useful for discussing many elements of the virtual public sphere, a journal article length research project may be better served by maintaining the separation between the two; instead, scholars and researchers should focus on combining the two frameworks within their larger research agendas and projects.

Despite this holistic theoretical framework for understanding the publics and counterpublics on reddit, the research presented here was limited by three primary factors. First, an accurate representation of every public and counterpublic found on reddit is functionally impossible given

the thousands of tiny communities found across reddit's platform. While I addressed a wide variety of subreddits throughout my research, thousands of subreddits and redditors are not represented in this dissertation. Despite this limitation, the research presented here maintains value for understanding the forces that influence discourse across various subreddits and communities on reddit. Future studies could begin to approach these varied, niche communities through extended case studies of specific publics and counterpublics that have developed in the smaller areas of reddit. Further ethnographic research may also prove useful for understanding these smaller publics found on reddit. Quantitative analysis drawing on reddit's "application programming interface" (API) could also become useful for determining the number and tenor of the numerous tiny communities across the site.

Secondly, while the administration's gestures towards a hybrid economy (reddit notes) may challenge the commercial economic practices that dominate traditional media, since these notes are not scheduled to be distributed until Fall 2015, conclusions about this plan are far from certain. Furthermore, the recent closure of the redditgifts marketplace evinces the continued domination of commercial economics within reddit's public sphere. The redditgifts marketplace represented the potential for a strong hybrid economy with individuals purchasing items directly from the producers, and the website gained no profit from the exchange. However, in February 2015, the administration closed the redditgifts marketplace to focus "efforts on continuing to improve reddit and redditgifts as a whole to create the best experience possible."¹ Instead of a hybrid marketplace, the reddit administrators have established an online site solely for reddit merchandise. Future research might examine the closing of the redditgifts marketplace, perhaps focusing on whether its closure represents of neoliberal economic policies enforced by the site's administration.

Although the reddit administration rarely interferes with content submitted to the site, Ellen Pao's recent assent to CEO and Alexis Ohanian's return as creative director may shift the site's regulatory procedures for content and subreddits. As many members promoting anti-SJW discourse and deregulated speech fear, the reddit administration has already begun regulating some content more heavily, revising their privacy policy to prohibit any image or video of an individual "in a state of nudity, sexual excitement, or engaged in any act of sexual conduct" posted without their permission.² In June 2015, Pao and Ohanian enacted new regulations, banning five subreddits that had broken their rules about harassment. With over 150,000 subscribers, r/FatPeopleHate was the largest subreddit to be shut down; r/HamPlanetHatred, r/TransFags, r/NeoFag, an r/ShitNiggersSay all had fewer than 5,000 subscribers.³ In response, members from the closed subreddits began creating multiple new subreddits devoted to either, replacing r/FatePeopleHate (e.g., r/FatPeopleHate2, r/FatPeopleHate3, etc.) or calling Ellen Pao a "cunt" and calling for her resignation; many began brigading numerous default subreddits with pictures of Nazi swastikas. While some redditors frustration with the decision was explicit across many of the default pages, other redditors demonstrated their frustration with this adolescent discourse, supporting administration's decision and understanding this move as the first step in tackling the increasing prominence of hate speech and harassment on the site.

In many ways, these recent bans confirm what many members of r/KIA had feared about Pao's tenure; after closing these subreddits, many redditors saw the administrative team as an authoritarian regime crushing their free expression. However, I have a significant difference of opinion with many members of the GamerGate community. While the discourse on SJWs formulates acts of regulation by the owners of a private website as an infringement on their rights, I see regulation as a necessary and inevitable part of any online community. While many

lamented the closing of these subreddits as the last step before total top-down, administrative control of reddit, I saw their decision as the correct move, economically, culturally and ethically. While every redditor certainly has the right to express themselves, reddit inc. has no obligation to host hate speech or provide the affordances for publics who actively work against the goals of the corporation.

I was certainly not alone in my opinion, as discourse on r/GamerGhazi (r/GG) indicated. In fact, r/GG is indicative of a critical quality found on reddit; the meta-subreddits are often filled with scathing critiques and mockeries of the anti-intellectualism found in the social justice warrior discourse (SJW) across the site. However, as the discourse found on r/GG also indicates, publics and counterpublics on reddit are not particularly effective in creating joint spaces for agonistic political discourse. While reddit's interface potentially affords the platform for an agonistic space that encourages dynamic discourse and progressive political action, the discourse circulated between publics and counterpublics on reddit rarely influences individuals' opinions who are already aligned with one public or another. Likewise, after reading all the evidence presented by members of r/KIA, I am entirely unconvinced of the value of their argument and moral grounding. In fact, as I observed "anonymous" individuals express moral and ethical values that differed significantly from my own during my research, I often had to stop myself from interjecting my own opinion or objection into the discourse; occasionally, I began writing responses to certain comments, but stopped myself from responding because my response was too judgemental, or my response would interfere with the regular discourse on the site too much. I often interacted with members of r/KIA by entextualizing their posts into my archive on r/reddit_research. Several members of the #GamerGate community reached out to me on my archive, asking what I was researching and even providing some valuable pieces of data from

their personal research or an external party's work covering the movement. Thus, beyond providing a certain level of transparency to my work, my open archive also represented a space for redditors to reach out to me and help me produce a more well-rounded description of their public. Nevertheless, some of my result may be limited because of my personal hesitations to engage with the r/KIA public; however, the anti-intellectual attitude directed at academics from this public represents an important dimension of the neoliberal publics formed across reddit.

While this research was approved by the University of Colorado, Boulder in April, 2014, ultimately it is the culmination of four years of active scholastic interest and seven years of personal interest in reddit. While I am not speaking for redditors, or claiming reddit to be one monolithic entity, my experience on the site has degraded significantly since I began visiting it in 2008. Where once reddit provided me with all of the most interesting stories, best pictures, and latest viral sensations before they hit the "mainstream," I now struggle to find interesting or thought-provoking material. When I began reading reddit regularly, I often felt that the site held a great potential for populist, progressive political action; now, I struggle to find a comment thread on default subreddits without at least one racist or sexist comment, or attack on SJWs. While many redditors continue to encourage political engagement with federal policy through the site, the neoliberal fantasies of deregulated speech and identity prevade the discourse across the default subreddits.

I must note that the neoliberal, anti-intellectualism discussed throughout this dissertation is far from ubiquitous across the site, and many (if not most) comments on reddit are often beneficial, or at least benign. Despite reddit's neoliberal public sphere, redditors' practices and actions through the site continue to show that the virtual realm can potentially escape the trappings of communicative capitalism and affect actual political change at level of policy.

However, despite these beneficial aspects of reddit's publics and counterpublics, the problematic discourses on the site protected under "free speech" hinder the site's ability to foster productive political discourse and action across its publics and counterpublics.

Having spent the last year deeply embedded within cultures and discourses on the site, I had hoped to distance myself from reddit after my research phase ended. Nevertheless, I have continued to frequent the site almost daily since finishing. However, I have begun to look elsewhere on the web for news and content, and I primarily visit on the meta-subreddits in order to access news about events happenings on reddit (e.g., r/SubredditDrama, r/Circlebroke, r/BadPhilosophy); I have also continued frequenting r/HipHopHeads to receive updates on the latest hip hop releases. While these subreddits generally eschew the anti-intellectualism found within the anti-SJW discourse permeating other areas of the site, the content on these subreddits still succumbs to the neoliberal influences of the cultural practices, technological affordances and political economy. Ultimately, my research has left me feeling disillusioned about the political potential of the publics and counterpublics on reddit. Despite my original optimism about the site's potential implications for hybrid economies and online political activism, I have witnessed the anti-SJW discourse has spread across a variety of subreddits outside of its origins among the publics on r/TumblrInAction and r/TheRedPill. Even though the increased frequency of these problematic discourses on reddit is difficult (if not impossible) to establish, reddit's impressive growth over the last five years echoes the "eternal September" of 1993, when AOL allowed users to access UseNet; as the discourse on UseNet became overwhelmed by new users, old-users also reported a significant decline in the quality of comments and discussion.⁴

Although "eternal September" may simply be nostalgia for a level of discourse that never existed, I have also felt a similar decline in reddit's quality over the last half-decade, as new

users have shifted the mainstream discourses on the site. As much as I tempered my arguments in the previous chapters, throughout my research for this dissertation, I often found myself repulsed and angered by the tenor of the commentary produced on reddit's platform. As content from subreddits, like r/ImGoingToHellForThis and r/BlackPeopleTwitter, begun to fill the front-page of the Internet, I seriously questioned my continued use of a site that has become known to many as a space for anti-intellectual hate-mongering. The neoliberal nature of the discourse across reddit debases what could potentially become an effective tool for political communication and agonistic spaces; unfortunately, as I have demonstrated, the neoliberal fragmentations and fantasies of communicative capitalism have hampered the ability of reddit to foster such discussion. Of course, redditors need not subscribe to these subreddits with the option to filter them from r/All through the "reddit enhancement suite." Nevertheless, their continued presence and popularity on reddit's front-page is a primary reason that I find myself looking for other sites that do not rely on the neoliberal fantasies of alterneity and anonymity found on gatewatching sites like reddit.

NOTES

1. u/ComeForthLazarus, "Closing the redditgifts Marketplace," *reddit*, February 27, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/secretsanta/comments/2xdkyi/closing_the_redditgifts_marketplace/.
2. u/kn0thing, "From 1 to 9,000 Communities, Now Taking sSteps to Grow reddit to 90,000 Communities (and Beyond!)," *reddit*, last modified February 24, 2015, http://www.reddit.com/r/announcements/comments/2x0g9v/from_1_to_9000_communities_now_taking_steps_to/.
3. u/5days, u/ekjp and u/kn0thing, "Removing Harrassing Subreddits," *reddit*, June 10, 2105, https://www.reddit.com/r/announcements/comments/39bpam/removing_harassing_subreddits/.

4. Dave Fischer, "Weeks? Hah!!," *Google Groups*, accessed April 19, 2015,

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!original/alt.folklore.computers/wF4CpYbWuuA/jS6ZOyJd10>

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APPENDIX A – CASE STUDY SUBREDDITS

Over the course of my official research, I investigated the following subreddits specifically and actively payed attention to their discourses and practices.

r/KotakuInAction	r/SubredditDrama
r/GamerGhazi	r/BestOf
r/TheRedPill	r/BadSocialScience
r/TheBluePill	r/FatPeopleHate
r/HipHopHeads	r/FatLogic
r/TheoryOfReddit	r/ImGoingToHellForThis
r/ShitRedditSays	r/Politics

APPENDIX B – MULTIREDDIT SUBSCRIPTIONS

The following appendix lists the subreddits included in three multireddits I created for this dissertation.

Meta Multireddit Subscriptions

- r/BestOf
- r/MetaReddit
- r/AskModerators
- r/CircleBroke
- r/DailyHerald
- r/KarmaCourts
- r/MetaHub
- r/ModerationTheory
- r/ShitRedditSays
- r/SubredditAnalysis
- r/SubredditDrama
- r/TheoryOfReddit
-

The Red Pill Multireddit Subscriptions

- r/AltTRP
- r/AskTRP
- r/BecomeAMan
- r/ExRedPill
- r/MarriageStrike
- r/MarriedRedPill
- r/MGTOW
- r/PurplePillDebate
- r/PussyPass
- r/RedPillBooks
- r/RedPillParenting
- r/RedPillWomen
- r/ThankTRP
- r/TheBluePill
- r/TheRedPill
- r/TRPGame
- r/TRPOffTopic

GamerGate Multireddit Subscriptions

- r/EllenPaoInAction
- r/GamerGhazi
- r/GhaziGamer
- r/ItsAboutEthics
- r/KiAChatroom
- r/KotakuInAction
- r/neogaming
- r/NotYourShieldProject
- r/ShitGhaziSays
- r/WikiInAction