

**Everything is Awful:  
Snark as Ritualized Social Practice in Online Discourse**

by

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Submitted to the Program in Comparative Media Studies/Writing  
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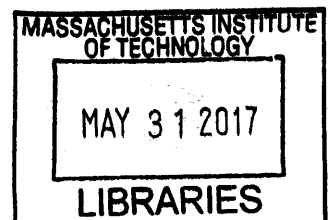
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**Abstract**

This thesis explores a mode of collective meaning making at the intersection of humor, insult, and jest that increasingly occupies social media conversations, online comment sections, and Internet writing far and wide: for lack of a better word, snark. Though akin to the similarly maligned practices of irony and sarcasm, snark is more unwieldy and less refined. To accuse others of snark is to question their intentions, their sincerity, even the validity of their claims. Snark is often seen as *destructive*. Per the subtitle of critic David Denby's book on the matter, "it's mean, it's personal, and it's ruining our conversations."<sup>1</sup>

In the following pages, I investigate the role of snark in online discourse and attempt to salvage it from its bad reputation. I define and historicize snark as a humor- and insult-based social practice rooted in oral rather than written traditions. I argue that snark can adopt a pro-social role in online environments whose architecture tends to reward vapid or deceptive content (which, per former Gawker writer Tom Scocca, I call *smarm* and situate within Harry Frankfurt's concept of *bullshit*). After a discussion of the differences between politeness and civility, I define pro-social snark as impolite yet civil. Lastly, I analyze snark's affective qualities, and specifically its close relationship with paranoia. Utilizing Eve Sedgwick's notions of paranoid and reparative reading, I advocate for a reparative practice of snark that gives back to the culture it ridicules.

Thesis Supervisor: Heather Hendershot

Title: Professor and Director of Graduate Studies, Comparative Media Studies

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<sup>1</sup> Denby



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To my family—σας λατρεύω. And to Geffen—we did it.



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## *Introduction*

### **Why Study Online Snark?**

In March 2016, a Florida jury awarded \$140 million to pro wrestler Hulk Hogan, ending his months-long invasion-of-privacy lawsuit against Gawker Media. Four years earlier, Gawker Media's flagship site Gawker.com had published an excerpt of Hogan's sex tape without his consent. In seeking legal action, Hogan found an unlikely ally in billionaire Silicon Valley investor and Donald Trump delegate Peter Thiel, who harbored a long-running grudge against Gawker Media since its Silicon Valley gossip blog Valleywag outed him as gay in 2007 (he once called Valleywag "the Silicon Valley equivalent of Al Qaeda").<sup>2</sup> Thiel fully funded Hogan's suit, which resulted in the bankruptcy of Gawker Media, the shutdown of Gawker.com, and the sale of the remaining six Gawker Media sites to Univision for \$135 million.

Although much was written about the horrific First Amendment implications of a single billionaire wielding his financial power to bankrupt a media company, nearly every Gawker obituary began with a lengthy, moralizing caveat, essentially implying that the company had it coming. The collective hand-wringing did not seem to stem from Gawker's alleged violations of journalistic ethics. After all, Gawker's various sensationalized controversies over the years surely seem quaint compared to more high profile cases of censorship, plagiarism, journalistic inaccuracy, and conflicting interests that have stopped short of discrediting more respected outlets (As *Rolling Stone's* Jeb Lund points out, "Discussions of the *Washington Post* don't come freighted automatically with thoughts on the fabricated, Pulitzer Prize-winning 'Jimmy's World,' or the fact that

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<sup>2</sup> Margolick



its reporting on for-profit colleges seemed conspicuously sunny at the same time that the *Post*'s ownership also owned Kaplan University.”<sup>3</sup>). Rather, what made people most uncomfortable with Gawker was its tone: Gawker was mean.

Or rather, Gawker was *snarky*. A more comprehensive discussion of the term follows, but for now it suffices to define snark as “the bad kind of invective—low, teasing, snide, condescending, knowing.”<sup>4</sup> Gawker made enemies of absolutely everyone, and eventually this led to its demise. Yet the Gawker tone outgrew and outlived Gawker.com. As *The Washington Post*'s Philip Bump writes, “much of what you’ve read on the web today has been shaped by the style and brashness of Gawker.” *The New York Times*' Farhad Manjoo concurs: “Even if you avoided Gawker, you can’t escape its influence. Elements of its tone, style, sensibility...have colonized just about every other media company.”<sup>5</sup> *WIRED*'s Marcus Wohlsen: “[Gawker created] a new style of online journalism that prided itself on publishing what everyone knew but no one else would say, in a voice everyone would emulate.”<sup>6</sup>

Whether Gawker singlehandedly redefined the rules of online discourse is up for debate, yet its example provides a window into the workings of a mode of collective meaning making at the intersection of humor, insult, and jest that increasingly occupies social media conversations, online comment sections, and Internet writing far and wide: for lack of a better word, *snark*.

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<sup>3</sup> Lund

<sup>4</sup> Denby, 1

<sup>5</sup> Manjoo

<sup>6</sup> Wohlsen



## Peter Thiel is totally gay, people



Owen Thomas

12/19/07 07:05PM Filed to: EXCLUSIVE

🔥 450.80K



By now, you've likely heard how Peter Thiel parlayed a \$500,000 investment in Facebook to a stake now worth \$750 million. There's been a crush of coverage on his \$220 million Founders Fund, which may well change the way entrepreneurs get paid in the Valley. We know about his mansion (he rents it — clever!), his butler, his early-morning jogs. But what no one ever says out loud: Thiel is gay.

Venture capital is a business about risk — but only the right kinds of risk. Unproven technology? Fine. A host of rivals? No problem. A gay founder? Oh, hey, wait a second. Not that there's anything wrong with that. But someone else, somewhere else, might take issue with it. That's VC thinking.

**Figure 1:** the first two paragraphs of a Gawker blog post outing Peter Thiel as gay are representative of Gawker's snarky and conversational tone. Accessed May 16, 2017.<sup>7</sup>

Despite its omnipresence on the Internet, snark remains somewhat of a dirty word. Though akin to the similarly maligned practices of irony and sarcasm, it is more unwieldy and less refined. To accuse others of snark is to question their intentions, their sincerity, even the validity of their claims. Snark—especially online snark—is seen as *destructive*. As the subtitle of critic David Denby's book on the matter says, "it's mean, it's personal, and it's ruining our conversations."<sup>8</sup> Attempts to avoid, ban, or punish online snark are everywhere. Denby contemplates "[writing] snark out of the book of

<sup>7</sup> Thomas

<sup>8</sup> Denby

life—or at least out of the book of style.”<sup>9</sup> *The Believer*, a literary journal founded by Dave Eggers whose inaugural essay lamented the rise of snark in book reviewing, once ran a website called Snarkwatch dedicated to “enthusiasms, mystifications, as well as disgruntled reactions to ‘critical activity.’”<sup>10</sup> In 2015, Coca-Cola launched a Super Bowl-timed online marketing campaign called #MakeItHappy, which aimed to “tackle the pervasive negativity polluting social media feeds and comment threads across the Internet” by turning negative tweets into cute ASCII art (the campaign was later suspended after Gawker built a bot that flooded Coca-Cola’s Twitter account with excerpts from *Mein Kampf*).<sup>11</sup> Accusations of snark and pleas to curb it stop short of defining what snark *is* (as I will explain later on, snark is often in the eyes of the accuser). Thus, blind animosity towards snark ensures that certain voices are silenced on the grounds of what BuzzFeed’s book editor Isaac Fitzgerald calls the Bambi Rule: “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.”<sup>12</sup>

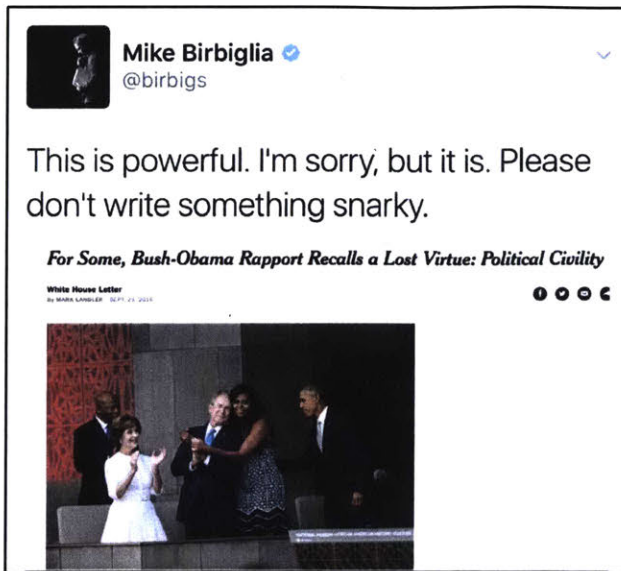
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<sup>9</sup> Denby

<sup>10</sup> Miller

<sup>11</sup> Moye

<sup>12</sup> Beaujon



**Figure 2:** During the 2016 presidential election, the comedian Mike Birbiglia tweeted a photo of Michelle Obama hugging George W. Bush with the caption "This is powerful. I'm sorry, but it is. Please don't write something snarky." This prompted a brief memetic practice in which Twitter users placed Birbiglia's earnest caption over funny or nonsensical images (two examples are shown above). As *New York Magazine* blogger Madison Malone Kircher writes, Birbiglia "violated the number-one rule: Don't tell people online not to be snarky."<sup>13</sup>

In this thesis, I investigate the role of snark in online conversations and argue that online snark can in fact be a *pro-social* mode of discourse. In the first chapter, I define and historicize snark as a humor- and insult-based social practice rooted in oral rather than written traditions and introduce some of the challenges inherent in studying it in online environments. In the second chapter, I examine online snark's reputation as an

<sup>13</sup> Kircher

*enemy* of civil online discourse and analyze popular and academic debates surrounding three similar online practices—trolling, shaming, and outrage—to see what they can tell us about snark’s pervasive and enduring unpopularity. In the third chapter, I attempt to salvage snark from its bad reputation. Specifically, I argue that snark can perform a pro-social service in online environments whose architecture rewards vapid or deceptive content (which, per former Gawker writer Tom Scocca, I call *smarm* and situate within Harry Frankfurt’s concept of *bullshit*). I claim that pro-social snark does not derail *civil discourse*, as its critics fear, but rather *smarm*—itself an enemy of civil discourse. After a discussion on the differences between politeness and civility, I define pro-social snark as *impolite yet civil*. In the fourth chapter, I move from a discussion of snark’s democratic potential to a discussion of its affective qualities, and specifically its close relationship with paranoia. I utilize Eve Sedgwick’s notions of paranoid and reparative reading to advocate for a reparative practice of snark that gives *back* to the culture it ridicules. Finally, I analyze the feminist website Jezebel as a case study in pro-social, reparative snark. Throughout my analysis of online snark, I consider the ways that the form and content of online utterances interact to create meaning, and how that meaning is in turn altered by the infrastructures of online discourse. What is it about snark that puts people off? What voices or views are silenced when snark is marginalized? What is it about the infrastructures of the social Internet that invites so much snark (and so much backlash against it)? Finally, even if one adopts a more forgiving stance towards snark, how can he distinguish between the good and the bad?

## *Chapter 1*

### **“A Snicker Here, A Snicker There”: An Alternative History of Online Snark**

A major hurdle in the study of online snark is defining what exactly snark *is*. In this chapter, I outline the main qualities of snark and historicize it as a humor- and insult-based social practice rooted in oral rather than written traditions. I analyze how snark fits into prevailing theories of humor, as well how it compares to other forms of collaborative insult ranging from Ancient Athenian blame poetry to modern-day rap battles. I close with a brief discussion of the challenges inherent in studying snark that is native to online spaces whose infrastructures are defined by porous boundaries and collapsed contexts.

#### **1. Towards a Working Definition of Snark**

In a sketch from the seminal 1960s British comedy stage revue *Beyond the Fringe*, a group of formerly independent leftist journalists discuss their new corporate boss:

COOK: Whenever the old man has a cocktail party, there's about ten of us—young, progressive people—we all gather up the far end of the room and ... quite openly, behind our hands, we snigger at him.

BENNETT: Well, I don't know, that doesn't seem very much to me.

COOK: A snigger here, a snigger there – it all adds up.<sup>14</sup>

According to critic Jonathan Coe, “the sketch makes it clear that laughter is not just ineffectual as a form of protest, but that it actually replaces protest.”<sup>15</sup> The broader

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<sup>14</sup> Coe

<sup>15</sup> Coe

implications of Coe's ambitious claim aside, is it fair to equate the "sniggering" described above with laughter? Are the chuckles of Cook and his coworkers equivalent to, say, the laughter of the sketch's audience upon hearing Cook's last line? The audience's laughter is caused by a work of *comedy*. What about Cook's snickering? Perhaps we can posit that the snicker-inducing comments that Cook alludes to--impulsive, mean-spirited, targeting a common enemy among a clearly defined in-group—sound a lot like *snark* (in fact, Cook and his coworkers sound remarkably like fictional predecessors of present-day Gawker bloggers). For comedy theorists from Henri Bergson to John Morreall, a history of comedy is a history of laughter. I propose here that a history of snark is a history of snickering.

What is it that makes us snicker? What are the politics and aesthetics of snark? A first pass:

**1. Snark is paranoid:** Snark actively seeks out the world's flaws. It often perpetuates unconfirmed rumors and hearsay. The epistemology of snark rests on what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, drawing on Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, calls a "paranoid reading" of the world (more on this in the third chapter).<sup>16</sup> In other words, the snarker constantly believes he is being lied to.

**2. Snark is social:** Snark is a form of collective and collaborative meaning making. It hinges on what critic David Denby calls a "knowingness."<sup>17</sup> It is meant to be created and enjoyed within a well-defined in-group, thus often seeming idiotic, or unreasonably cruel, or simply indecipherable to those on the outside.

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<sup>16</sup> Sedgwick, 123

<sup>17</sup> Denby, 20

**3. Snark is iterative:** Snark is constantly engaging in a project of world-building, ritualizing specific tropes and narratives that define the common language of the knowing group (For instance, when Maureen Dowd writes about Bill Clinton, to her most loyal readers she is writing about a character that she has painstakingly developed over the past three decades). Snark is always referential.

**4. Snark is theatrical:** Snark views the world as theater and living as playing a role. In this way, it bares a resemblance to Susan Sontag's notion of camp. Snark "sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman.'"<sup>18</sup>

We can understand snark more fully through investigating how the elements described above interact with and feed off of one another. Snark's *paranoia* sees artifice everywhere. As Denby writes, "writers of snark see the world as a series of false appearances."<sup>19</sup> Rejecting commonly accepted relationships between signifier and signified as false, snark opens up possibilities for new worlds. These worlds are *theatrical* (characters, places, and objects are assigned distinguishing virtues and flaws), *iterative* (they grow and evolve over time), and *socially* created.

An example: In July 2014, actress Blake Lively launched a shopping and lifestyle website called Preserve, described as "[honoring] the future, while having a love affair with the past." A Southern-inspired womenswear photo spread on Preserve entitled "Allure of the Antebellum" began thusly: "The term "Southern Belle" came to fruition during the Antebellum period (prior to the Civil War), acknowledging women with an inherent social distinction who set the standards for style and appearance. These women

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<sup>18</sup> Sontag, 278

<sup>19</sup> Denby, 41



epitomized Southern hospitality with a cultivation of beauty and grace, but even more with a captivating and magnetic sensibility.”<sup>20</sup> Gawker writer Allie Jones ridiculed the photo spread in a post entitled “Blake Lively’s Fall Fashion Inspiration Is Slaveowners”:

You'd think that after *12 Years a Slave* won all those Oscars, slaves are over. But you'd be thinking wrong, says actress and lifestyle guru Blake Lively, whose dogged pursuit of the *joie de vivre* associated with slavery is such that she chose to be married on a Southern plantation. According to a Lively-styled fashion spread on her lifestyle website Preserve, the hottest lifestyle for fall is the lifestyle of owning human beings without government interference.<sup>21</sup>

How do the main tenants of snark play out here? Jones is of course rightfully skeptical of a misplaced nostalgia for the antebellum South. Yet rather than giving Preserve the benefit of the doubt (one can appropriate the aesthetics of a historical period without endorsing its politics), she opts for a paranoid reading of its intentions: *Blake Lively loves the idea of owning slaves*. Furthermore, Jones develops a world in which Lively is constantly seeking out opportunities to revisit slave ownership—*she got married on a plantation!* Finally, Jones’ post builds on existing Gawker narratives about both Lively and Preserve (from a previous post: “[Blake Lively and her husband] were wed on a pile of old slave bones”), and sets the scene for future ones (“Celebrate African-American Struggle With Blake Lively’s Muffins”). Other Gawker writers and readers also participate in the development of Jones’ world through further snarky remarks in the comments and on social media platforms where her work is shared. The snark on display

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<sup>20</sup> Jones

<sup>21</sup> Jones

is thus paranoid, collaboratively constructed, iterative, and theatrical. Jones' example also points to another fundamental element of snark: snark is *impulsive*. It is a fleshing out of the first thought one has when faced with a new piece of information. Snark always starts with an eye roll, a snort, a "really?" Surely most readers of Preserve felt a tinge of unease when encountering its uncritical celebration of the Southern Belle, yet they most likely brushed it off as misguided marketing language and focused their attention on the products they were on the site to browse. Jones took that initial unease and turned it into an work of art.

It is now perhaps time to address some common criticisms of snark. And there are many. In his doom-laden polemic, *Snark: It's Mean, It's Personal, and It's Ruining Our Conversation*, David Denby laments a "nasty, knowing abuse spreading like pinkeye through the national conversation," fearing "a future America in which too many people sound mean and silly, like yapping dogs tied to a post."<sup>22</sup> Snark is mean, cynical, and unproductive. What separates it from useful social satire is its "contempt for absolutely everyone."<sup>23</sup> The prevailing sensibility of critics of snark is, ironically, a sort of *anti*-negativity. Anti-snark arguments echo pleas to change the pessimistic "tone" of the news or censures of activism that defines itself around a common enemy rather than a common cause (think Occupy Wall Street). Yet negativity should not be written off so quickly as toxic or unproductive. In fact, it may stem from an underlying optimism. As Mark Greif writes in the preface to his essay collection *Against Everything*, "To wish to be against

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<sup>22</sup> Denby, 5

<sup>23</sup> Denby, 45

everything is to want the world to be bigger than all of it, disposed to dissolve rules and compromises in a gallon or a drop, while an ocean of possibilities rolls around us.”<sup>24</sup>

## 2. Snark as a Social Practice

There is a possible genealogy of online snark that teases out examples of mean-spirited jest from theater, literature, and journalism tracing back to Aristophanes. It includes the biting poems of Juvenal in Ancient Rome, the baseless accusations of early U.S. political campaigns (Thomas Jefferson famously hired a journalist to accuse his opponent John Adams of having a “hideous hermaphroditical character”), *Spy Magazine*, Tom Wolfe, Christopher Hitchens, and Maureen Dowd. Yet as many scholars have pointed out, Internet culture (if such a thing exists) can be more adequately understood as an extension of *oral* rather than written traditions.<sup>25</sup> Thus, although online snark can be historicized as a *literary tone or sensibility*, I will consider it here as an *oral social practice*, specifically one rooted in humor and insult.

### 2.1. Snark as Humor

The three most commonly cited theories of humor are loosely defined, internally discordant, and oftentimes overlapping. The earliest writing on humor, from Ancient Greece to the first Christian intellectuals, was highly critical. For Plato, humor is irrational and anti-social. In the *Republic*, he writes, “when one abandons himself to violent laughter, his condition provokes a violent reaction.”<sup>26</sup> In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle proposes that “a jest is a kind of mockery, and lawmakers forbid some kinds of

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<sup>24</sup> Greif, xii

<sup>25</sup> For instance, see Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind*

<sup>26</sup> Plato, 388

mockery—perhaps they ought to have forbidden some kinds of jesting.”<sup>27</sup> The Bible portrays mockery as punishable by death. In *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, John Morreall traces how these early condemnations of humor and laughter are expanded upon by Christian thinkers from John Chrysostom (“Often from words and laughter proceed railing and insult; and from railing and insult, blows and wounds; and from blows and wounds, slaughter and murder.”) to the Syrian abbot Ephraem (“Laughter is the beginning of the destruction of the soul.”).<sup>28</sup> These views, developed further by Hobbes in the seventeenth century, are collectively known as the **Superiority Theory** of humor. The Superiority Theory posits that humor expresses hostile feelings of superiority towards a targeted person or group, thus undermining collaboration, tolerance, and social harmony.

Attempts to rescue humor from its reputation as inherently anti-social fit into two main traditions: The **Incongruity Theory** and the **Relief Theory**. The former, now considered the dominant theory of humor and advanced by the likes of James Beattie, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Søren Kierkegaard, postulates that laughter is caused by the perception of something *incongruous*. Like the Superiority Theory before it, the Incongruity Theory lumps a diverse array of thinkers with varying intellectual projects into a single group. Thus, *incongruity* may mean a violation of expectations (Kant), a contradiction (Kierkegaard), or a just a general sense of absurdity. We can easily apply some form of the Incongruity Theory to analyses of the set-up/punch line structure of standup comedy, the verbal tricks of puns, or film and television tropes such as the talking animal or the clumsy policeman. The Relief Theory—the second, more

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<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, 4, 8

<sup>28</sup> Morreall, 5

embodied, alternative to the Superiority Theory—suggests that laughter results from a release of excess nervous energy in the body. For Freud, unsurprisingly, the energy liberated through laughter is normally used to repress sexual or aggressive tendencies. For John Dewey, laughter more innocently “marks the ending [...] of a period of suspense, or expectation.”<sup>29</sup>

How can we draw from these three theoretical frameworks to define the contours of snark? Starting with the Superiority Theory, we first turn to Henri Bergson. In *Laughter*, his treatise on the meaning of humor, Bergson’s arguments reflect a disillusionment with the automation of his time. He locates the laughable in *rigidity*, *mechanical inelasticity*, and *absentmindedness*: “The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.”<sup>30</sup> Moving from the individual to the social, he writes:

We cannot help treating [society] as a living being. Any image, then, suggestive of the notion of a society disguising itself, or of a social masquerade, so to speak, will be laughable. Now, such a notion is formed when we perceive anything inert or stereotyped, or simply ready-made, on the surface of a living society. There we have rigidity all over again, clashing with the inner suppleness of life. The ceremonial side of social life must, therefore, always include a latent comic element, which is only waiting for an opportunity to burst into full view.<sup>31</sup>

Compatible with both the Superiority and the Incongruity Theory (he who laughs feels *superior* to those who display mechanical inelasticity, which itself is *incongruous* with

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<sup>29</sup> Morreall, 17

<sup>30</sup> Bergson, 15

<sup>31</sup> Bergson, 22

human liveliness), Bergson's analysis echoes the ideology of snark, which thrives on exposing the hidden mechanisms that allegedly shape our world. Snark seeks the "latent comic element" in the poll-tested politician, the manufactured media narrative, or the overhyped work of art, and thrives on "[bursting] it into full view."

More explicitly situated within Incongruity Theory, Schopenhauer offers a slightly different perspective in *The World as Will and Idea*: "The cause of laughter... is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity."<sup>32</sup> Such incongruities between signifier and signified mirror snark's persistent suspicion that everybody is playing a role. In a confessional *New York Times Magazine* story, writer Emily Gould describes her tenure at Gawker during its early days as a media gossip blog as follows:

The Gawker "voice" was righteously indignant but comically defeated, sighing in unison with an audience that believed nothing was as it seemed and nothing would ever really change. Everyone was fatter or older or worse-skinned than he or she pretended to be. Every man was cheating on his partner; all women were slutty. Writers were plagiarists or talentless hacks or shameless beneficiaries of nepotism. Everyone was a hypocrite. No one was loved. There was no success that couldn't be hollowed out by the revelation of some deep-seated inadequacy.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Morreall, 12

<sup>33</sup> Gould

If Schopenhauer's version of humor derives laughter from the sudden perception of an instance of incongruity, Gawker's snark derives snickers and eye rolls and knowing sighs from the affirmation of readers' collective belief that incongruity is all there is.

Finally we quickly turn to Relief Theory, which is represented on one hand by Freud's largely unsubstantiated claims<sup>34</sup> and on the other by literature on the physiology of laughter (which is beyond the scope of this paper). However, taking the main tenet of Relief Theory (humor releases excess nervous energy) as a foundation, we can imagine a folk relief theory of snark: Everyday we are faced with endless streams of information about the world and those around us, all of which we have to contextualize, process, assess, and divide into truths and lies, opinions and facts, substance and triviality, main event and distraction. Snark provides a series of heuristic shortcuts (*rich people are evil, politicians are selfish, celebrities are dumb*) that *relieve* us from the more complex work of fully making sense of the world.

## **2.2. Snark as Insult: Play and Ritual**

I have argued that as a humorous practice, snark attempts to (1) unveil invisible mechanisms that shape dominant cultural and political narratives, (2) expose people and events as fundamentally different than what they appear to be, and (3) perpetuate an ongoing account of the world shaped by predictable tropes. Yet much of this could also describe other modes of social critique. To more concretely situate snark as a social practice, we turn to a discussion of insult as play and ritual.

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<sup>34</sup> From Morreall "If [Freud] is right that the energy released in laughter is the energy normally used to repress hostile and sexual feelings, then it seems that those who laugh hardest at aggressive and sexual humor will be people who normally re-press those feelings. But experiments by Hans Jurgen Eysenck showed the opposite: it is people who usually give free rein to their hostile and sexual feelings, not those who repress them, who enjoy aggressive and sexual humor more" (20).

In *Snark*, David Denby begins his historical analysis with a discussion of Nancy Worman's *Abusive Mouths in Classical Athens*. Worman describes "wine parties" among the Athenian elite where men entertained each other with stories and speeches peppered with humorous references to the cultural and political affairs of the day. Occasionally, a guest would direct a series of jesting insults at a chosen peer. As Denby points out, "The salient social point was that it took place within the walls or tents or around the fire of a club, and the humor of it depended on...*knowingness*. If you didn't understand that a certain kind of joke was allowed, you wouldn't have been there in the first place."<sup>35</sup>

These winking comic performances eventually moved from private clubs into the public agora, where ritualized insults against leaders and public figures took on a formal poetic style known as iambos or, in some contemporary writing, *blame poetry*. Denby locates later versions of this kind of formalized invective in Roman oratory, where one's goal is often to "demonize [an opponent] by contrasting his views with the ethical standards of the community—its appreciation of family lineage, courage, and character, the norms of aristocratic behavior."<sup>36</sup> Both in intimate settings and in the public sphere, Athenian and Roman insult-based oral poetry follows strict formal rules, seeks to expose enemies as liars and frauds, and appeals to shared sets of values, beliefs, and experiences. In other words, it is a clear precursor of online snark. In fact, a list of the most frequently attacked personality traits in Roman oratory very closely resembles Emily Gould's account of the Gawker "voice" quoted in the previous section.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Denby, 20

<sup>36</sup> Denby, 24

<sup>37</sup> According to the University of Tennessee's Christopher P. Craig, these traits include "1) embarrassing family origins; 2) being unworthy of one's family; 3) physical appearance; 4) eccentricity of dress; 5) gluttony and drunkenness, possibly leading to acts of *crudelitas* ("cruelty") and *libido* ("lust"); 6) hypocrisy in appearing virtuous; 7) avarice, sometimes linked with prodigality; 8) taking bribes; 9) pretentiousness; 10) sexual conduct" (Denby, 24)



Though Athenian iambic poetry and Roman oratory both offer promising entryways into a history of snark as an insult-based social practice, the rest of Denby's book focuses solely on literature and journalism. In order to continue the thread that Denby begins, we turn to the work of Jerome Neu. In *Sticks and Stones: The Philosophy of Insults*, Neu analyzes various contemporary examples of insult as play and ritual. He takes as a starting point sociologist John Dollard's work on *the dozens*, "a practice, common especially among urban African-American adolescent boys, of aggressive, joking exchanges of patterned insults."<sup>38</sup> Much like our previous examples, the dozens are grounded in formalized rules (turn-taking, rhyming) and rooted in shared social norms. Participants inevitably accuse each other of deviating from these norms (according to Dollard, common themes include "incest, sex with the other's mother, passive homosexuality, and personal defects") and perform insults as much for one another as for the active audience whose reaction determines the winner.<sup>39</sup> Writing in 1939, Dollard falls into the familiar traps of ethnographic work of that era, often essentializing black male identity and perpetuating raced and classed stereotypes. Ayoub and Barnett's work on insult rituals among middle- and upper-class white suburban adolescents in Ohio challenges Dollard's underlying argument that the dozens are defined solely by suppressed race- and class-based aggression. (It turns out the instinct to insult other people's mothers has more to do with age and gender than with race.) Regardless, these examples give us some insight into the work that humor- and insult-based social practice does within adolescent communities:

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<sup>38</sup> Neu, 58

<sup>39</sup> Neu, 58

Peer groups provide the audience essential to affirming the honor and status that take the place of the childhood search for parental approval. Adolescents achieve identity partly by revolting against adult authority. The dozens and sounding [Ayoub and Barnett's preferred term for the practices they studied] provide (among other things) a structured and controlled context for that revolt, a context in which they can achieve their independence in collusion with other adolescents.<sup>40</sup>

Neu goes on to describe a variety of more adult-oriented insult practices, from "drum matches" among Greenland Eskimos ("institutionalized [contests] in ridicule, invective, and satirical abuse" that serve official judicial purposes) to Brazilian street fights known as *briga*.<sup>41</sup> At their best, these practices create opportunities for communities to experiment with taboos, interrogate social norms, and bond with one another through play. At their worst, it must be said, they result in murder. The difference of course lies in the negotiation of social norms and expectations: "Just as shared conventions and assumptions put boundaries around ritual insults, those boundaries may be broken when shared understandings fail."<sup>42</sup> Taking this into account, it is easy to see how such insult-based social practices can have unpredictable results on the Internet, a network of intersecting social spaces defined by porous boundaries and collapsed contexts.

### **3. Introducing Online Snark**

I have attempted to situate snark as a humor- and insult-based social practice rooted in oral traditions. The discussion that follows begins to explore what happens

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<sup>40</sup> Neu, 66

<sup>41</sup> Elliott, 70

<sup>42</sup> Neu, 70

when such a practice is transposed onto the logics of the Internet, and specifically social media.

### **3.1. A Brief Interlude: On The Politics of Social Media**

The term “Web 2.0,” which refers to what is now called social media, was created in the mid-2000s by the Silicon Valley technology industry to self-consciously distinguish a new generation of companies from the disappointments of the dot-com era. For the purposes of this thesis, we can say that Web 2.0, or social media, describes online platforms that emphasize interactivity and user-generated content.

As Alice Marwick notes in her book *Status Update*, the cultural history of Web 2.0 is fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, the philosophy of user-generated media seems to stem from countercultural movements of the 70s, 80s, and 90s united by a collectivist ethos, a distrust of corporate media, and a resistance to capitalist structures. Hackers at MIT, Stanford, and Xerox PARC emphasized “sharing, openness, decentralization, and getting your hands on machines at any cost—to improve the machines and to improve the world.”<sup>43</sup> Open-source advocates were skeptical of proprietary software, insisting that “information wants to be free.” Punk and feminist zine creators proudly espoused a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic: “make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you.”<sup>44</sup> Grassroots environmentalist, anti-corporate and anti-globalization activists sought to create infrastructures for the dissemination of information outside the boundaries of the mainstream media (the 1999 World Trade Organization riots in Seattle spawned the first Independent Media Center, whose slogan,

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<sup>43</sup> Levy, 7

<sup>44</sup> Duncombe, 2

“be the media,” “referred to its foundational commitment to participatory media as a core component of radical democracy”).<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, the ways in which Web 2.0 is conceptualized and marketed reflect what media theorists Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron call the Californian Ideology: “a set of widely held beliefs that increasing the adoption of computer technologies brings positive social consequences, that the technology industry is where the best and the brightest thrive, and that an unfettered free market is the best way to ensure prosperity for all.”<sup>46</sup>

The tensions between the techno-utopianism and libertarian individualism of Silicon Valley and the radical politics of the hackers, activists, and independent media creators who brought it into being, are baked into the fabric of social media. The effects of Web 2.0 will thus always be contradictory: social media platforms are simultaneously tools for community organizing and the neoliberal practice of self-branding; citizen empowerment and mass surveillance. Thus, any discussion of social media practices like the one that follows must not fall into the trap of viewing the social Internet as inherently democratizing *or* as inherently oppressive (or, more broadly, as inevitably resulting in any predetermined set of user behaviors).

### **3.2. The Challenges of Studying Snark As An Online Practice**

As we have seen, social practices that combine humor and insult have been around for centuries. Yet online snark inspires a very specific type of moral panic. It is said to be ruining journalism, human conversation, and the tone of politics. It contributes to the general toxicity of online discourse, opening the doors for harassment and abuse.

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<sup>45</sup> Marwick, 44

<sup>46</sup> Marwick, 23

According to David Denby, the Internet has single-handedly ushered in a “degenerate phase” of snark (“I would bet that half the words written as instant messages or Twitter are snark of one sort or another.”).<sup>47</sup> So what is it that makes snark so deadly when it moves to the Internet? As a case study, I turn to a discussion of snark in online blogs, the precursors to what we now call social media (once known as “microblogging”).

Blogs are user-generated journals or logs that appear online. They address topics from parenting to politics to pop culture. Their writing is informal and personal. According to critic Sarah Boxer, “invective—hilarious, acidulous invective, often served up with false apologies—is everywhere. The law of the blogosphere is Hobbesian: survival of the snarkiest.” Blogging lends itself to snark first because it is *reactive*. As Boxer writes:

Many bloggers really don't write much at all. They are more like impresarios, curators, or editors, picking and choosing things they find on line, occasionally slapping on a funny headline or adding a snarky (read: snotty and catty) comment. Some days, the only original writing you see on a blog is the equivalent of “Read this.... Take a look.... But, seriously, this is lame.... Can you believe this?”<sup>48</sup>

With a simple “Can you believe this?”, a blogger establishes an enemy (“this”) and an audience (“you”). This invites conversation and, most likely, more snark. A blogger's reactions thus create new possibilities for social interactions. Blogging is *conversational*:

Bloggers assume that if you're reading them, you're one of their friends, or at least in on the gossip, the joke, or the names they drop. They often

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<sup>47</sup> Denby, 10

<sup>48</sup> Boxer

begin their posts mid-thought or mid-rant—in medias craze. They don't care if they leave you in the dust. They're not responsible for your education...The unspoken message is: Hey, I'm here talking with my buddies. Keep up with me or don't.<sup>49</sup>

Blogging thus presupposes a divide between an in-group and an out-group and succeeds when it is read and commented on by people who share a common set of beliefs.

So far, then, online snark follows all the rules set by predecessors like iambic poetry and the dozens: One's ritualized humorous insults seek to discredit a perceived enemy and gain approval from a knowing audience. The pitfalls of online snark, however, lie in the volatility of the roles of everyone involved. A victim of online snark may not consent to entering an insult contest with a blogger, and the blogger himself has no way of knowing whether his message reaches its intended reader (whether that be the person being attacked or an audience that will appreciate the his wit). Furthermore, through linking and social media sharing, each instance of snark becomes divorced from its original place within a specific argument or ecosystem of ideas, taking on a different meaning with each reading. Decontextualized nuggets of humorous insult thus permeate social media feeds and comment threads, giving the illusion that the Internet faces an epidemic of negativity. The challenge of studying online snark as a social practice (and attempting to save it from its bad reputation) lies in tracing the effects of changing contexts, audiences, and meanings.

In this chapter, I attempt to situate and historicize the nebulous concept of online snark. I argue that snark is paranoid, social, iterative, and theatrical. Rather than viewing

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<sup>49</sup> Boxer

snark as a rhetorical device or literary sensibility, I consider it as a humor- and insult-based *social practice*. As a humor practice, snark attempts to (1) unveil invisible mechanisms that shape dominant cultural and political narratives, (2) expose people and events as fundamentally different than what they appear to be, and (3) perpetuate an ongoing account of the world shaped by predictable tropes. As an insult practice, snark provides spaces for communities to interrogate shared norms and experiment with taboos. Snark's success as a social practice depends on the negotiation of social conventions and assumptions. Thus, the de-contextualization of content characteristic to social media makes the analysis of *online* snark especially challenging.

## *Chapter 2*

### **“Behead the Kings, but Don’t Dare Snark Against Them”: Online Snark’s Bad Reputation**

Framing a discussion of the dynamics of online conversation around the nebulous concept of “snark” is a double-edged sword. Snark is simultaneously a specific and an overly general category. On the one hand, as an online mode of discourse, it has a shorter and less messy history than the related categories of irony, sarcasm, vitriol, or vulgarity. Its rise to ubiquity in blogs, social media feeds, and comment sections has been documented, critiqued, and satirized. As early as 2006, *MarketWatch* published a three-part report on the rise of snarky online journalism.<sup>50</sup> In a 2011 episode of *30 Rock*, Liz Lemon describes the fictional blog *Joan of Snark* as “this really cool feminist website where women talk about how far we’ve come and which celebrities have the worst beach bodies.”<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, snark is often used as a blanket term for any and all Internet activity that one perceives to be nasty or mean-spirited. You’ll know it when you see it, as David Denby claims. The key word here is *you*. Much like, say, political correctness, snark is in the eye of the accuser.

Furthermore, when one labels an utterance (or a line of argument, or an entire exchange) as snarky, he makes its truth value more difficult to assess and lowers the chances that others will take it seriously. Accusations of snark aim to eliminate the credibility of claims on account of their tone rather than their substance (more about this in the next chapter). When we internalize the view that snarky rhetorical elements cheapen or degrade opinions, we dismiss those opinions prematurely. This is especially

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<sup>50</sup> Friedman

<sup>51</sup> Hartmann



the case in online environments like social media feeds and comment sections, where the sheer volume of content requires readers to make quick and hasty judgment calls regarding what is deserving of their attention and what is mere noise. Snarky elements often serve as red flags—*this is not serious!* (Of course, this doesn't mean we don't click on snark. As with tabloid news and reality television, we often consume snark *knowing* it is bad for us.)

For an especially telling illustration of snark's bad reputation, I turn to a recent profile of Bhaskar Sukara, the publisher of the polemically socialist online magazine *Jacobin*: "He has little patience for left-of-center writers who go out of their way to make enemies, saying of Gawker, 'It's less mean and snarky than it used to be. I don't like that kind of mean Internet humor...Being mean as a way to fight the power is kind of ridiculous.'" As writer Amber A'lee Frost points out, this is an amusing assessment coming from Sukara, considering *Jacobin* sells posters of guillotines on its website: "behead the kings of course, but don't dare snark against them!"<sup>52</sup> What is it that makes snark the ultimate sin? In Sukara's denigration of "mean Internet humor," the key word is not *mean*, but rather *Internet*. Snark's bad reputation stems from its very "Internet-ness"—like bad grammar or poor graphic design, snark is a sign that whatever you are reading is not serious and polished, but bloggy and disposable.

In the rest of this chapter, I will attempt to examine snark's bad reputation through interrogating popular discourses around three online phenomena that often come up in discussions of snark—*trolling*, *shaming*, and *outrage*. Collectively, these behaviors contribute to what many diagnose as *toxic* online environments, which in turn allegedly stifle debate, lower the level of online discourse, and create breeding grounds for anti-

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<sup>52</sup> Matthews, Frost

social or hateful views. Trolling, shaming, and outrage all reflect sensibilities that rely on combinations of humor and insult, and thus often overlap with snark (or are snark-driven or snark-adjacent). The goal of this chapter is to show how online practices rooted in humor and insult are misinterpreted and misrepresented in debates about the ethics and politics of online discourse. By exploring snark through three inherently social phenomena (rather than focusing on, say, the rhetorical features of snarky written content), I continue my analysis of snark as a *social practice*.

## 1. Trolling

According to Internet scholar Whitney Phillips, the concept of trolling can be traced back to the mid 90s, when it referred to pretty much any kind of irritating speech or behavior online: “These trolls, as they were then called, would clog a particular discussion with non-sequiturs, engage in so-called identity deception, and/or commit various crimes against language and logic.”<sup>53</sup> In the early 2000s, anonymous users of 4chan’s /b/ board (an image-based Internet forum infamous for its anything-goes approach to content moderation) began appropriating the term to refer to their community’s preferred methods of humorous online interventions. Phillips explains, “for these users, trolling was something that one actively chose to do. More importantly, a troll was something one chose to *be*. Over the years, and thanks in no small part to the frenzied intervention of mainstream media outlets, a distinctive subculture began to cohere around the term “troll,” complete with a shared set of values, aesthetic, and language.”<sup>54</sup> Phillips analyzes these qualities of *subcultural trolling*, as she calls it, in her

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<sup>53</sup> Phillips, “A Brief History of Trolls”

<sup>54</sup> Phillips, “A Brief History of Trolls”

book *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping The Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. She argues that the motivation for any kind of trollish activity is “the lulz.” We turn to anthropologist Gabriella Coleman’s ethnography of the hacker group Anonymous for a definition:

Just what does the term [lulz] do or signify that no other word can? ... If we keep in mind that lulz derives from the acronym “lol” (laugh out loud), it becomes easier to see that lulz is primarily about humor. Lols are familiar to everyone who has ever sent a joke to someone by email. Lulz are darker: acquired most often at someone’s expense, prone to misfiring and, occasionally, bordering on disturbing or hateful speech (except, of course, when they cross the border entirely: thank you, rape jokes). Lulz are unmistakably imbued with danger and mystery, and thus speak foremost to the pleasures of transgression.<sup>55</sup>

The lulzy trolling that Phillips and Coleman describe in their work ranges from arguably noble (publicizing the Church of Scientology’s deep-rooted corruption) to irrefutably immoral (sending videos of flashing lights to Internet users with photosensitive epilepsy hoping to induce seizures). The media’s incessant obsession with the dangers of online life as well as the popularization of trollish online memes beyond the confines of 4chan boards<sup>56</sup> thrust trolling back into the mainstream. The definition of trolling, in turn, came full circle to once again denote pretty much any kind of annoying online activity, much to the chagrin of those who felt their term had been appropriated (“The lament that ‘that’s

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<sup>55</sup> Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*, 31

<sup>56</sup> “Rickrolling,” one of the earliest internet memes (in which one lures a friend or colleague into clicking a hyperlink which leads to the music video for the 1987 Rick Astley song “Never Gonna Give You Up”), started as an inside joke among 4chan users.

not trolling' ... has become a common refrain within the ranks of self-identifying trolls, who take great offense to what they see as the mainstream media's bastardization of 'their' term."<sup>57</sup>

So can we reconfigure the concept of trolling into something semi-coherent? In 2014, after Robin Williams' daughter Zelda quit Twitter due to an onslaught of hateful messages blaming her for her father's suicide, the *New York Times* tried to do just that. In a seven-part *Room for Debate* feature entitled "The War Against Online Trolls," commentators including Phillips and Coleman offer perspectives on trolling as, alternatively, a free speech issue, an online manifestation of offline prejudices, and a matter of corporate responsibility for online communication services. Though disjointed and devoid of many proposals for concrete solutions, the discussion (like most discussions about trolling) centers around three main topics: anonymity, misinformation, and identity-based harassment. I examine these one by one:

**1.1. Anonymity:** Debates around the merits of online anonymity have existed since the advent of the social Internet. Critics of anonymity cite some version of the *online disinhibition effect*, according to which "dissociative anonymity" is a main factor in "some people [self-disclosing] or [acting out] more frequently or intensely than they would in person."<sup>58</sup> When we act anonymously online, the story goes, we feel as though we will not be held accountable for our words or actions, and are thus more likely to engage in anti-social behavior. This line of thinking is central to the reasoning behind Facebook's real-name policy and contributes to its reputation as more safe and civil than social networks like Reddit or 4chan. As Facebook executive Justin Osofsky states:

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<sup>57</sup> Phillips, "To Fight Trolls, Focus on Actions and Context"

<sup>58</sup> Suler, 321

On Facebook, we require people to use the name their friends and family know them by. When people use the names they are known by, their actions and words carry more weight because they are more accountable for what they say. It also makes it harder for bullies to anonymously smear the reputations of others, or anyone else to use an anonymous name to harass, scam or engage in criminal behavior.<sup>59</sup>

The counterargument here is simple: anonymity may enable “bullies,” but it also permits their victims to protect themselves. As Coleman argues, “anonymity can empower those who seek consolation and justice to speak out against assailants enabled by the same processes.”<sup>60</sup>

**1.2. Misinformation:** One of the main goals of subcultural trolling has always been the deception of gullible audiences. As Whitney Phillips writes in *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, some of the most successful trollish ploys carried out by 4chan users in the 2000s consisted of fabricating preposterous stories as bait for cable television personalities desperate for shocking content to feed their viewers.<sup>61</sup> To curb misinformation without sacrificing anonymity, online strategist Annmarie Dooling suggests the implementation of moderation systems that verify knowledge rather than identity: “Commenters can send moderators personal information, like a business I.D. or copy or research documents, which add to their reputation scores or brand their accounts with special tags and allowances. They can be independently verified behind-the-scenes

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<sup>59</sup> Osofsky

<sup>60</sup> Coleman, “Anonymity Online Serves Us All”

<sup>61</sup> An example: In September 2008, an anonymous 4chan user posed as a pedophile on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*'s message board, claiming that “his group has over 9000 penises, and they're all ... raping ... children.” Winfrey, assuming the message was written in earnest, read it live on air as evidence of the dangers of online sexual predation (Phillips, 66)

by administrators, but this information is never published.”<sup>62</sup> Suggestions like these predictably invite accusations of elitism or even censorship from those who object to any adulteration of “democratized” online spaces.

**1.3. Identity-based harassment:** In her landmark 2014 cover story for *Pacific Standard*, *Why Women Aren't Welcome on the Internet*, journalist Amanda Hess describes in detail her experiences with online threats, harassment, and cyberstalking, remarking that “none of this makes me exceptional. It just makes me a woman with an Internet connection.”<sup>63</sup>

In the *New York Times*, communication designer Kristy Tillman explains,

Vulnerable communities on the web often find themselves the biggest targets of anonymous trolling. Recently, a group from the popular Internet forum 4chan launched a trolling mission to harass and intimidate black feminists by hijacking hashtags they use on Twitter and posing as feminists on fake accounts that would send embarrassing tweets. Anonymous apps like Secret have played host to sexist conversations about women who work in technology. And teenagers, who are often ill-equipped to handle bullying even by named peers, are consistently the victims of anonymous bullying made possible by apps and social media.<sup>64</sup>

Any conversation about trolling eventually arrives at the conclusion that women and marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by online abuse (how quickly this happens, of course, depends on who is dominating the conversation). Despite the democratizing promise of the Internet, online spaces too often imitate and even intensify offline power imbalances. On the other hand, trolling can work to *subvert* those same

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<sup>62</sup> Dooling

<sup>63</sup> Hess

<sup>64</sup> Tillman

imbalances. Ryan Milner, a communications scholar and author of *The World Made Meme*, cites Twitter users who repurposed the hashtag #AskThicke—intended to promote singer Robin Thicke’s album release—to criticize the singer’s record of misogyny.<sup>65</sup> Other examples include the Google Chrome extension created by John Oliver’s late night show *Last Week Tonight* that changes all online instances of the word “Trump” to “Drumpf” or the post-election viral practice of donating to Planned Parenthood in Mike Pence’s name (thus ensuring he receives thousands of donation certificates from Planned Parenthood in the mail).

Framing important debates about anonymity, misinformation, and identity-based harassment around “trolling” (a mode of transgression and play which, by definition, seeks to break rules) does everyone involved a great disservice. Specifically, referring to an undefined range of online activities as trolling has a two-fold effect: it pathologizes harmless acts of humor or play, while undermining the gravity of already established categories of illegal, anti-social, or otherwise harmful behavior (stalking; harassment; abuse; bullying; hate speech) just because it occurs online. This leads to demonizing anyone who doesn’t strictly abide by the arbitrarily set rules of a given online environment, while simultaneously dismissing the legitimate concerns of victims of actual abuse (or worse, advising them to “not feed the trolls”).

## **2. Shaming**

In March 2015, Monica Lewinsky took the main stage at the TED Conference in Vancouver and addressed a packed room: “You’re looking at a woman who was publicly

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<sup>65</sup> A sample tweet: “What form of sexual or emotional abuse will you be normalising in your next jaunty hit? #AskThicke” (@Scriblit)

silent for a decade.”<sup>66</sup> Her speech, titled “The Price of Shame,” was a call to end cyberbullying. Lewinsky, whose privacy, career, and reputation were effectively destroyed at the age of 24 due to a story that was the first of its kind to break online, harnessed her experience to speak on what she saw as the modern online “commodification” of humiliation: “There is a very personal price to public humiliation. And the growth of the Internet has jacked up that price.” Lewinsky ended her remarks with an impassioned call for “a cultural revolution...an intervention on the Internet and in our culture.”<sup>67</sup> The speech received a standing ovation. A week later, as if the whole thing was orchestrated by Lewinsky’s publicist, bestselling nonfiction author Jon Ronson released a book entitled *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed*. In it, he argues that the Internet, and social media specifically, have ushered in a re-emergence of the once pervasive practice of public shaming.

The story that consumes the first few chapters of Ronson’s book is that of Jonah Lehrer, a rising star in the pop science genre (think Malcolm Gladwell with a knack for neuroscience) whose career hit a screeching halt when an online journalist published a post accusing him of plagiarism. Lehrer was forced to resign from his position as staff writer for the *New Yorker* just months after being hired, and two of his bestselling books were eventually withdrawn from the shelves. Less than a year after the controversy, Lehrer was invited to speak at a conference organized by the Knight Foundation. Though his speech started as a relatively standard public apology, it slowly turned into a convoluted meditation on the nature of human error. He referred to the human mind as a “confabulation machine,” and employed an elaborate metaphor about the shortcomings of

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<sup>66</sup> Bennett

<sup>67</sup> Bennett



forensic science to compare his own blunders to those of the FBI.<sup>68</sup> Lehrer's apparent inability to take full responsibility for his actions, as well as the fact that the Knight Foundation allegedly paid him \$20,000 for his remarks, made the audience in the room and at home (the event was livestreamed) foam at the mouth. The chilling scene that Ronson describes serves as an archetypal case study of the online shaming epidemic: As Lehrer speaks, his eyes wander to a huge screen in the room containing a live feed of tweets reacting to his speech: "I have zero inclination to forgive or read his future work"; "Rantings of a Delusional, Unrepentant Narcissist"; "Wait, Jonah Lehrer is speaking at a journalism conference? Did they run out of people who aren't frauds with interesting stuff to say?"<sup>69</sup> Ronson writes, "It felt as if the people on Twitter had been invited to be characters in a courtroom drama, and had been allowed to choose their roles, and all had gone for the part of the hanging judge. Or it was even worse than that. They all had gone for the part of the people in the lithographs being ribald at whippings."<sup>70</sup> Lehrer is a strange choice as a model for online victimhood—he is, after all, an Ivy League educated Rhodes Scholar who took shortcuts to undeserved success, botched an opportunity to repent for his mistakes, and went back to writing books a few short years later—but Ronson moves on to profile a wide range of shamees: Justine Sacco, the public relations executive whose poorly worded joke to her 170 Twitter followers went viral and resulted in her firing; Adria Richards, the tech employee who publicly accused two fellow conference attendees of off-color humor and spent the next year being bombarded with murder and rape threats. Though he dwells on especially shocking examples, Ronson aims to expose a broader cultural shift that implicates all of us. He describes social media

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<sup>68</sup> Ronson, 47

<sup>69</sup> Ronson, 47

<sup>70</sup> Ronson, 51

platforms like 4chan, Twitter, and Facebook as the backbone of an emerging shaming *culture*. Contemplating the evolution of Twitter, he writes:

After a while, it wasn't just transgressions we were keenly watchful for. It was misspeakings. Fury at the terribleness of other people had started to consume us a lot. And the rage that swirled around seemed increasingly in disproportion to whatever stupid thing some celebrity had said. It felt different to satire or journalism or criticism. It felt like punishment. In fact, it felt weird and empty when there wasn't anyone to be furious about. The days between shamings felt like days picking at fingernails, treading water.<sup>71</sup>

Certain parts of Ronson's argument warrant pause. His assertion that public shamings essentially disappeared from our culture centuries ago ("They didn't fizzle out because they were ineffective. They stopped because they were far too brutal.") only to suddenly return with a vengeance during the Internet age conflates legal and social trends and embraces the kind of oversimplified technological determinism that often populates bestseller lists.<sup>72</sup> Public shaming as a mass media tradition is no more novel than spectacle or celebrity worship, and we can easily trace its evolution from *WANTED!* posters to tabloids to the spectacle of cable news. However, Ronson is right to ask how shaming as a social practice changes when it is transposed onto the logics of online virality. Here, we return to the online disinhibition effect and, indeed, to many of the same arguments that pervade discussions of trolling. Ronson believes that we "feel the

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<sup>71</sup> Ronson, 88-89

<sup>72</sup> Ronson, 54

need to dehumanize the people we hurt.”<sup>73</sup> Similarly, in *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, Whitney Phillips lists “emotional disassociation” as a vital component of trolling. (In fact, trolls don't only dehumanize their *victims* but also *themselves*: “The vast majority of trolls I've worked with agree, and insist that their troll selves and their offline (‘real’) selves are subject to totally different sets of rules.”<sup>74</sup>) Is the supposed dehumanization that happens on the Internet any different than that which characterizes other kinds of mass mediated communication? When television viewers and magazine readers participated in the humiliation of Monica Lewinsky for instance (or Anita Hill or Marcia Clark), it is hard to argue that they were any more empathetic or any less guilty than modern day online shamers. Rather, what's new is the *documentation* of people's participation in shamings. Reading comments and tweets riddled with expletives is more viscerally appalling than reading the Nielsen ratings of Bill Clinton's impeachment trial and knowing that every person listed probably made some equally offensive throwaway comment to a friend or colleague. In other words, social media merely makes public shaming more *visible* and more *concentrated*.

Years before the re-emergence of public shaming occupied headlines in the *New York Times*, a slightly different, if closely related, usage of the term started making the rounds online. Feminist blogger Andrea Rubenstein defines *slut-shaming* as “shaming and/or attacking a woman or a girl for being sexual, having one or more sexual partners, acknowledging sexual feelings, and/or acting on sexual feelings.”<sup>75</sup> Similarly, *body-shaming*, incidentally derived from *body-snarking*, refers to the practice of mocking someone's weight or size. Such uses of the word shaming, popularized by feminist blogs

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<sup>73</sup> Ronson, 80

<sup>74</sup> Phillips, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, 34

<sup>75</sup> Rubenstein

and members of the body positivity movement, serve as necessary rhetorical interventions to the normalized misogyny in popular entertainment, journalism, and online commentary. However, much like most online-native terms originally coined in support of progressive politics (recent debates about trigger warnings come to mind), “shaming” soon got stripped of any coherent meaning as disparate communities began appropriating it for at times directly conflicting goals. As linguistic expert and humorist Mark Peters writes in *Slate*,

Guys who are tired of being called creeps have absurdly claimed creep-shaming, for instance. Breast-feeding advocates are sometimes accused of formula-shaming moms. I’ve also seen social-media-shaming, tattoo-shaming, luxury-shaming, attendance-shaming, snack-shaming, bigot-shaming, privilege-shaming, salary-shaming, single-shaming (i.e., shaming the nonmarried or nonattached), fedora-shaming, Drake-shaming, and filter-shaming. This last word was used, with all apparent sincerity, in an article by an acne sufferer who felt “shamed” for her use of Instagram filters.<sup>76</sup>

Peters concludes, “While shaming is often used to point out legitimately horrible behavior—especially against women—it is becoming so common that its meaning has begun to leach away. Shaming, in other words, is going the way of trolling.”<sup>77</sup> As though by a game of telephone, a once useful descriptor is co-opted to the point of uselessness.

### **Interlude: What’s Gender Got to Do With It?**

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<sup>76</sup> Peters

<sup>77</sup> Peters

Acclaimed science fiction writer Margaret Atwood is often credited with the quote, “Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them.” When it comes to online harassment of any kind, it cannot be overstated how uneven the stakes are for male- and female-presenting Internet users. This thesis is not primarily about trolling or shaming, and I introduce each term above mainly to argue that it is ultimately unhelpful in weeding out harmful activity. Yet any discussion of these practices, however brief, would be dishonest and unconstructive without addressing the fact that online harassment is not merely *influenced* by gender, but rather an inherently *gendered* practice.

In *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, one of the case studies that Jon Ronson explores concerns Adria Richards, a tech conference attendee who tweets disapprovingly about overhearing what she perceives to be a sexually inappropriate joke, including a candid photo of the two offenders in her post. What follows is a public shaming one-two punch. The two men are fired from their jobs, and when one of them pens an online post about his experience, Adria herself becomes the shaming victim of his defenders. Critically, he lands a new job almost immediately whereas Richards is not only fired (after trolls employ a massive DDoS attack to crash her employer's servers) but also bombarded with a continuous stream of violent images and threats of murder and rape. As former Gawker editor Choire Sicha writes in his *New York Times* review of Ronson's book, “The experience of women online is the great link between speech and violence, between offense and abuse. For women—and for all gender-offenders, from gays to trans people—insult and the threat of murder are issued simultaneously.”<sup>78</sup> Thus, one of the most fundamental reasons terms like trolling and shaming are counterproductive is

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<sup>78</sup> Sicha

because they mean entirely different things for different communities of Internet users. Finally, when the overwhelming majority of tech industry leadership is male, the specifics of trolling and shaming complaints often get lost in translation.

### 3. Outrage

In an online post, *New Yorker* writer Joshua Rothman describes online communication as “Kafkaesque”—not only because of the mental acrobatics necessary to make sense of context-less chunks of content, but also because, much like in Kafka’s writings, “punishment is pervasive”:<sup>79</sup> Recall Jon Ronson’s similar observation from *You Think You’ve Been Publicly Shamed*, quoted in the previous section: “It felt different to satire or journalism or criticism. It felt like *punishment*.” The *Atlantic*’s Connor Friedersdorf describes the ritual of our collective processing of current events online as such: “Every week, a fraught subject is broached, usually imperfectly. Perhaps a wrongheaded or offensive claim is made. Plenty of thoughtful people offer smart, plausible rebuttals. But they’re overshadowed by distortionists with practiced performances of exaggerated outrage. The object isn’t a fair debate—it’s to get the other guy ejected.”<sup>80</sup> Here, I cannot help but point out that even in outrage-free zones, one’s *object* is rarely to foster fair debate but rather to make a winning argument. In fact, one could argue that Friedersdorf’s performance of level-headedness (which seems to say “I would like to foster fair debate”) is just as contrived as the type of “exaggerated outrage” he is condemning. (I will develop this argument in the following chapter.)

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<sup>79</sup> Rothman

<sup>80</sup> Friedersdorf

Rothman and Friedersdorf describe online posts and comments that hinge on the deliberate exaggeration of the moral stakes of a particular event, action, or opinion. Considering any online conversation involves two or more people with already different politics and ethics, misrepresenting one's own emotions merely adds another layer of confusion. This is notoriously true in online comment sections. *Popular Science*, for instance, removed comments from its website in 2013, citing their potential to “undermine the integrity of science and lead to a culture of aggression and mockery that hinders substantive discourse.”<sup>81</sup> Even outside the Wild West of hostile comment sections, the aesthetics of online outrage have long been appropriated by content producers from advertisers to legacy media outlets. In the article quoted above, Joshua Rothman marvels at an especially comical *Washington Post* headline tailor-made to add fuel to the outrage fire: “Stop congratulating yourself for opposing the Redskins’ name. You’re not helping the real problem. We’re finally paying attention to Native Americans, but it’s for the wrong reason.”<sup>82</sup>

Once you see it, the saying goes, you can’t unsee it. Outrage permeates online spaces of all kinds. Three years ago, *Slate* declared 2014 the “Year of Outrage,” publishing an interactive calendar showing which news stories generated the most indignation each day (the stories ranged from Khloe Kardashian being named *British GQ*’s Woman of the Year to reports that New Jersey Governor Chris Christie withheld hurricane relief funds to punish a mayor for not endorsing his campaign, stretching the usefulness of the umbrella term to its limits). More interestingly, it seems like Internet users take joy and even *pride* in their outrage. What one hates is just as important to his

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<sup>81</sup> Konnikova

<sup>82</sup> Rothman

identity than what he loves. We hate-*watch* (“watching [something] and luxuriating in its badness”)<sup>83</sup> and hate-*read* (“visiting a website, Twitter feed, or Facebook page for the express purpose of ridiculing—or indulging your disdain for—the author and/or content”)<sup>84</sup>. There is even a dating app, Hater, that matches users based solely on their dislikes! It seems we are drowning in our own fury.

#### 4. Back to Snark

Trolling, shaming, and outrage may come with unique histories and sets of baggage, but they describe overlapping and mutually enabling activities: If a *troll* body-shames an unsuspecting Twitter user, a bystander may react with an *outraged* post. She may then be *shamed* because her post contains a grammatical error. In response, she may *troll* her shamers by making more grammatical errors on purpose. The *shamers* may then react with more *outrage*. The cycle continues.

And snark is the fuel that keeps this online hate machine going. The trollish search for lulz, the cruelty of shaming, and the performativity of outrage, in some capacity all hinge on some combination of humor and insult. We could say they all start with a snicker (“What an *idiot!*” “Can you *believe* this?” “She did *what?*”). Like snark, these practices are rooted in *paranoia* (nothing is as it seems and we are constantly being lied to) and are inherently *social*, *iterative*, and *theatrical*. Think of the examples above: The trollish responses to the #AskThicke hashtag (“Which Axe Body Spray scent did you use to seduce the women you cheated on your wife with? #AskThicke”), the comments allegedly shaming Jonah Lehrer for his insincere apology (“wish I could get paid \$20,000

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<sup>83</sup> Franich

<sup>84</sup> Baker



to say that I'm a lying dirtbag"), the outraged tweets cited by Slate's "Year of Outrage" feature ("Yes, Bill Maher, what the Middle East needs now—more than ever—is reductive analogies. Thank you for your help").<sup>85</sup> If there is one element that can be said to unite these practices, is it not snark?

Snark breaks the veneer of civility and opens the floodgates for all sorts of terrible possibilities. Snark is the basis of mockery, ad hominem attacks, disruptive interjections, childish play. Without snark, it seems, we would all be better off. This is the essence of online snark's bad reputation. It allows for a sort of mean-ness that permeates online conversation, and we're all worse for it. However, as I will show in the following chapter, this interpretation of snark is incomplete. Sure, negativity is (by definition!) bad. But snark does not emerge in a vacuum. A more well-rounded analysis of snark as a social practice requires addressing its role within a larger online ecosystem. Specifically, it requires investigating just what it is that makes snark so angry.

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<sup>85</sup> Spires; Ronson, 49; Schwartz (This final tweet is in response to Bill Maher comparing Hamas to a crazy woman.)

### *Chapter 3*

#### **Finding the Good in Online Snark, Part 1: The Hegemonic Power of Smarm and the Necessity of Impolite Civility**

So far, I have (1) established online snark as a humor- and insult-based social practice and (2) expanded on its bad reputation as a harmful online ritual. Snark, the common view goes, breaks decorum and opens up possibilities for the kinds of toxic and anti-social activities detailed in the previous chapter. It is worth asking then if we should do away with snark altogether. In this chapter, I argue that snark can in fact be pro-social and even vital to healthy online discourse.

I first conceived of the idea for this thesis in 2013, a few months after I graduated college, upon reading a 9,000-word essay on none other than Gawker.com entitled *On Smarm*. In it, longtime Gawker writer Tom Scocca argues convincingly *in favor of* snark, claiming that the real enemy is what snark is reacting to—*smarm*. I have returned to this piece many times since first encountering it, and I often recommend it to friends just to have the opportunity to debate it again. In the remaining chapters, I will use Scocca's piece as a jumping off point for a discussion on the merits of snark grounded in communication scholar Zizi Papacharissi's work on politeness and civility and feminist theorist Eve Sedgwick's notions of paranoid and reparative reading.

#### **1. Snark and Smarm**

If there is one element of snark that seemingly everyone can agree on, it is that snark is *reactive*. As David Denby writes, "Snark doesn't create a new image, a new idea.

It's parasitic, referential, insinuating."<sup>86</sup> This is at the root of why snark should be studied as a social practice rather than a rhetorical device. It is always part of a larger conversation. Therefore, what our discussion of snark has been missing thus far is an articulation of what exactly snark is reacting *to*. According to Tom Scocca, it is reacting to smarm:

What is smarm, exactly? Smarm is a kind of performance—an assumption of the forms of seriousness, of virtue, of constructiveness, without the substance. Smarm is concerned with appropriateness and with tone.

Smarm disapproves. Smarm would rather talk about anything other than smarm. Why, smarm asks, can't everyone just be nicer?<sup>87</sup>

Though Scocca's definition of smarm gets away from him at times (he is at his most convincing when discussing politicians and media personalities, yet his attacks on films like *Black Swan* and *Where the Wild Things Are* seem *ad hominem*), he grounds it convincingly in philosopher Harry Frankfurt's notion of *bullshit*—which, in turn, is an extension of Max Black's *humbug* (“deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody's own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes”).<sup>88</sup> Bullshit is marked by an “indifference to truth”:

The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides...is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him; what we are not to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it...The bullshitter may not deceive us, or even intend to do so, either about the facts or about what he takes the facts to be. What he does

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<sup>86</sup> Denby, 4

<sup>87</sup> Scocca

<sup>88</sup> Black, 143

necessarily attempt to deceive us about his enterprise. His only indispensably distinctive characteristic is that in a certain way he misrepresents what he is up to.<sup>89</sup>

For Scocca, then, smarm is a subcategory of bullshit. “It expresses one agenda, while actually pursuing a different one. It is a kind of moral and ethical misdirection.”<sup>90</sup> More specifically, smarm places *form over content* (otherwise, *stance over message* per Max Black, or *performative effect over truth value*, per Eve Sedgwick—but more on that later), and then weaponizes this focus on form to fundamentally alter the rules of discourse. Thus, in the logic of smarm, politeness, positivity, and appropriateness are all more important than truth. Conversely, rudeness, negativity and vulgarity are deal breakers in a way that well-mannered lying is not.

Scocca cites an example: Democratic pundit Lanny Davis, upon being accused by writer Jon Lovett of “[representing] everything that’s wrong with Washington,” replies on Twitter with: “name-calling is juvenile. I want 2 debate issues.”<sup>91</sup> What is at work here? Davis is a corporate lobbyist whose past clients include for-profit colleges and Ivory Coast dictator Laurent Gbagbo. It is fairly uncontroversial to claim that people like him actively contribute to the pervasive distrust of Washington politics. Saying he “represents everything that’s wrong with Washington,” however, is rude and snarky. And that is what his response focuses on. Calling Lovett’s attack “name-calling” and “juvenile” addresses only its tone and not its truth value. Expressing a desire “2 debate issues,” on the other hand, amusingly attempts to establish a sense of moral superiority without actually engaging with any, well, issues. For an example more consequential than

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<sup>89</sup> Frankfurt, 54

<sup>90</sup> Scocca

<sup>91</sup> Scocca

a lone tweet, Scocca discusses the public response to the Snowden leaks: “Smarm says: Edward Snowden broke the law...Edward Snowden is a naïf...Edward Snowden is an attention-seeking narcissist...So what if Snowden is telling the truth? Just look at the way he’s telling it.”<sup>92</sup>

Of course, smarm (like snark) is nothing new. It is the language of advertising, politics, and university commencement speeches. However, Scocca argues that it holds a special place in social online environments. In the attention economy of social media, smarm rises to the top. It is rewarded with clicks and shares.

Scocca writes, “What currently fills the space left by the waning or absence of traditional authority, for the most part, is the ideology and logic of the market.” This is incidentally anthropologist David Harvey’s definition of neoliberalism: “[the valuing of] market exchange as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs.”<sup>93</sup> How do the logics of the market define the infrastructure of social media? Platforms like Facebook and Twitter strive to create and maintain pleasant experiences for their users with the goal of keeping them coming back for more. When it comes to the moderation of questionable content, this translates to a focus on *tone* rather than *truth value*. Thus, posts are (rightly) removed if they constitute hate speech, harassment, or abuse, yet viral hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and—to use the preferred term du jour—*fake news*, are all allowed to spread. One could even postulate that the spread of such content is *good* for a social media company’s bottom line. As digital advertising executive Ian Shafer is quoted as saying in the *New York Times*, “Nothing drives clicks better than when the headline is exactly what people

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<sup>92</sup> Scocca

<sup>93</sup> Harvey, 3

want to hear or believe.”<sup>94</sup> For companies like Facebook and Twitter, fighting the spread of misleading information goes directly against their business model.

If a devaluation of the significance of truth is baked into the very fabric of social media environments, then it follows that content is judged increasingly on solely affective terms. And if users generally prefer positivity over negativity, this creates a breeding ground for smarm. As an example, Scocca quotes Adam Mordecai, the editor-at-large for the inspirational viral content website Upworthy (whose very name effectively summarizes the argument of the preceding paragraph), on his headline-writing philosophy:

Don't depress people so much that they want to give up on humanity.  
Negative headlines breed negative shares...Don't curse in your headlines.  
Moms hate it (and are the biggest sharers on the Internet by a significant margin)... Don't make people take positions they might be uncomfortable with...Don't use terms that overwhelm, polarize or bore people. I never use Social Security, The Environment, Immigration, Democrats, Republicans, Medicare, Racist, Bigot, etc... You can talk about issues without giving away what they are.<sup>95</sup>

This of course results in such substance-free headlines as “This author’s powerful essay about sexual harassment is part of a valuable conversation.” Upworthy’s posts, constructed with social media metrics in mind, do not primarily follow the ethics of journalism (tell the truth) or even conversation (make a point). Rather, their purpose is to generate just enough positive sentiment in a reader for him to click ‘share.’

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<sup>94</sup> Isaac

<sup>95</sup> “What Tools Does Upworthy Employ to Test Its Headlines? - Quora.”



MISSION

**Lots of media companies have a mission. But Upworthy is on a mission to change what the world pays attention to.**

We believe that stories about important issues can and should be great stories — stories for everyone, stories that connect us and sometimes even change the world.

Because we're all part of the same story.

**Figure 3:** Upworthy's mission statement. Accessed May 16, 2017. [Upworthy.com/about](http://Upworthy.com/about)

If there is one company that has perfected this scheme, it is the online media juggernaut BuzzFeed. BuzzFeed CEO Jonah Peretti says, “The way people interact with media is more about someone’s reaction, an emotional or even intellectual reaction... It’s not ‘I love to read the Style section,’ it’s ‘I love all the LOL stuff.’”<sup>96</sup> People seek out the Style section because they are interested in a specific topic. People go to the LOL section because they want a specific type of emotional experience. BuzzFeed’s innovation thus lies in placing form firmly over content. Stories are organized based on whether they are happy or sad; funny or gross; “OMG” or “WTF.” And—surprise!—the smarm rises to the top. As *The Atlantic*’s Philip Bump writes,

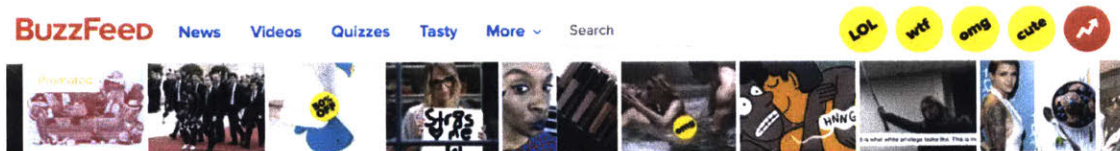
‘No haters,’ BuzzFeed’s (in)famous hiring mantra, extends beyond its employees. It’s reflected in BuzzFeed’s content, praising supermarkets [“25 Reasons Wegmans Is The Greatest Supermarket The World Will Ever Know”] and happy things [“The 35 Happiest Things That Have Ever Happened”] and Beyonce [“19 Reasons The Grammys Were Just The Jay

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<sup>96</sup> Walker

Z and Beyonce Show”]. And, if you want, you can pay BuzzFeed to help you praise yourself.<sup>97</sup>

Here, Bump is of course referring to sponsored content, a form of advertising pioneered by companies like BuzzFeed, wherein a company pays a publication to produce ads that have the look and feel of that publication’s native content. It turns out advertisements blend in seamlessly within an environment of substance-free positivity. Once again, smarm reflects the logics of the market. As the social Internet devours every industry from journalism to entertainment to commerce, smarm threatens to become hegemonic—the default ethos of all communication.



**Figure 4:** The top navigation bar of BuzzFeed’s homepage. On the right, we see sections for LOL, WTF, OMG, cute, and trending. Accessed May 16, 2017. Buzzfeed.com.

Where does snark fit into all of this? Scocca’s intervention into the criticism of snark can be summarized as follows: Critics like David Denby believe snark disrupts civil discourse, but what snark *actually* disrupts is an environment of pervasive *smarm*—which is itself an *enemy* of civil discourse. Snark—good snark, anyway—may be mean or rude, but it can nevertheless serve to break through the veneer of deception, misdirection, and, well, bullshit, that permeates our online conversations. In fact, in his discussion of “remedies” to *humbug* (which, as stated earlier, is the conceptual basis for Frankfurt’s *bullshit*), Max Black cites a series of examples that very much resemble snark. I quote him at length here as a preview of the discussion that follows:

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<sup>97</sup> Bump



For short-term remedies, I recommend first...the deliberately naive and rather impolite challenges expressed by the questions "Do you really believe that?" and "Do you really mean that?" (If the answer is yes, one might then use one of G. E. Moore's favorite expressions: "How extraordinary!") A more elaborate maneuver is to take the humbugging formula literally in order to reveal its latent exaggerations and absurdities. Thus if somebody solemnly delivers the shoddy bit of proverbial wisdom that "the exception proves the rule," one might trump it by saying, "Quite so. The more exceptions, the better the rule!" ...Strongly to be recommended also are humor, parody, and satire. (The glorious response, for instance, of the philosopher Samuel Alexander, in his deaf old age, shaking his ear trumpet with laughter on being introduced to a Harvard professor: "I must be getting very deaf—I thought you said he was a professor of business ethics!"<sup>98</sup>)

Pro-social snark can lead us *closer* to the kind of civil discourse that smarm undermines. But how do we recognize good snark? And how do we define civil discourse? To answer these questions, I turn to the work of communication scholar Zizi Papacharissi.

## 2. Civility and Politeness

Each of snark's critics resents it for a different reason. For some, snark's gravest sin is that it is frivolous and insufficiently sincere, seeped in irony and sarcasm. For others, snark is too *negative*, always seeing the worst in the world and assuming ulterior motives in innocent people. Such critiques are often valid, and the merits of caustic

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<sup>98</sup> Black, 142

rhetoric and pessimism will always be up for debate. However, the most interesting—and most damning—critique of snark is that it is *uncivil*, and thus *undemocratic*: As the subtitle of David Denby’s book claims, snark *ruins* our conversations. It *shuts down* dialogue. Who would want that?

Arguing in favor of snark thus entails proving that it can in fact advance (or, at least, not actively inhibit) *civil discourse*. However, civility is a fraught term. Specifically, as Zizi Papacharissi points out, we often confuse civility with mere politeness. And a concern with politeness brings us right back to the aforementioned weaker critiques of snark (it’s malicious; it’s mean; it’s rude). Any sarcastic or insensitive comment can be said to be impolite, but it takes more for something to be a threat to civil discourse. Along these lines, drawing on Papacharissi’s work on the tone of online political discussions, I will use the notions of politeness and civility to more formally define smarm and snark, and finally to argue that good, pro-social snark is *impolite yet civil*.

Civility—a requirement for productive democratic discourse—is seemingly constantly under attack. Whether it’s political polarization, divisive culture wars, the entertainment-as-news model of cable news, or the cacophony of social media discourse, something is seemingly always preventing us from reaching the elusive ideal of civility. The persistent alarmism over the decline of civility has even led certain scholars to advocate for doing away with it as a goal altogether. Papacharissi cites Jean-Francois Lyonard’s “vision of democratic emancipation through disagreement and anarchy” in *The Postmodern Condition*, as well as Michael Schudson’s assertion that “democracy may

require a withdrawal of civility itself.”<sup>99</sup> However, for Papacharissi, abandoning civility entails throwing the baby out with the bathwater:

It is not civility that limits the democratic potential of conversation, but rather, a confusion of politeness with civility. It is adherence to etiquette that frequently restricts conversation, by making it reserved, tepid, less spontaneous. Adherence to civility merely ensures that the conversation is guided by democratic principles, not just proper manners. The distinction drawn defines politeness as etiquette-related, and civility as respect for the collective traditions of democracy.<sup>100</sup>

Drawing from Nancy Fraser, Papacharissi summarizes four main theoretical perspectives on politeness. According to the ‘social-norm view,’ politeness is the adherence to certain agreed-upon rules of etiquette, whereas rudeness entails the subversion of these rules.

The ‘conversational-maxim view,’ rooted in Grice’s theory of conversation, views politeness as a collection of “strategies to minimize conflict and promote accord,” which however may involve “suppressing some of the discussants’ emotions and opinions.”<sup>101</sup>

The ‘face-saving view,’ based on Goffman’s concept of “face” (“the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact”), essentially views politeness as one’s desire for his words or actions to be pleasing to (at least some of) his peers.<sup>102</sup> Finally, the more general ‘conversational-contract view,’ drawing from the preceding three, views each discussant as “entering a specific conversation [with] an understanding of an initial set of rights and obligations

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<sup>99</sup> Papacharissi, 259, Schudson, 12

<sup>100</sup> Papacharissi, 260

<sup>101</sup> Papacharissi, 261

<sup>102</sup> Goffman, 5

that will determine, at least preliminarily, the expectations of all discussants.”<sup>103</sup>

Politeness, then, is the adherence to a conversational contract, and conflict arises when differing assumptions about the contract collide. All of these approaches highlight the *interpersonal* nature of politeness as well as its intimate relationship with *etiquette and formality*. As Papacharissi points out, perhaps the most significant goal of politeness is simply that discussion “flows smoothly.” Politeness is not, however, bound by any larger commitment to honesty, morality, or justice.

This is where civility comes in. Where politeness is interpersonal, civility is collective. Where politeness is concerned with etiquette and formality, civility is concerned with democracy. As Papacharissi writes,

In order to fully explicate civility, we need to focus on how it affects the common good, rather than isolated individuals. This requires moving beyond instances of name-calling to episodes that are truly offensive...Specifically, an exchange that involves poor manners is not necessarily uncivil and does not set democratic society back, unless it involves an attack upon a social group of which one of the discussants is a member. This is a distinction that needs to be drawn between rudeness and incivility; between heated discussions and truly uncivil ones. Before a behavior is termed uncivil, its implications for democratic society should be considered...Civility can then be operationalized as the set of behaviors that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Papacharissi, 261-2

<sup>104</sup> Papacharissi, 267

Despite the strength of Papacharissi's analyses of politeness and civility as individual concepts, her discussion of the relationship between the two is often contradictory. At first, she conceptualizes civility as "a construct that encompasses, but also goes beyond, politeness," and even adopts "a definition of civility as collective politeness."<sup>105</sup> Later on, however, she writes: "One could argue that impoliteness is not so bad; it implies emotion, and emotion implies compassion, which in turn implies humanity."<sup>106</sup> Taking this line of reasoning to its natural conclusion, we can argue against Papacharissi's initial assertion that politeness is necessary for civility. In fact, the effects of politeness can often lead us away from civility's democratic goals. If someone expresses views that are rooted in prejudices, falsehoods, or ulterior motives, then a *polite* response—one that attempts to respect the initial speaker's utterance and avoid engaging in personal insult—actually serves to situate the initial uncivil statement within the boundaries of acceptable discourse. To use a favored term of contemporary political analysis, politeness in the face of incivility *normalizes* uncivil ideas—and is thus itself uncivil. The surface-level positivity of politeness—its gestures towards inclusivity and harmony—often obfuscate its more ethically murky outcomes.

In summary, civil discourse does not solely exist within the confines of polite discourse. Rather, the relationship between politeness and civility more accurately resembles a Venn diagram of two partially overlapping circles. With all of the above in mind, it is possible to make the following assertions regarding snark and smarm:

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<sup>105</sup> Papacharissi, 266, 279

<sup>106</sup> Papacharissi, 279

1. Smarm is **polite but uncivil**. It scales interpersonal politeness to a generalized dogmatic framework that values inoffensive pleasantness above all else (truth, morality, ideological consistency).
2. Anti-social snark—the kind that leads to the many of the behaviors described in the previous chapter—is both **impolite and uncivil**.
3. Pro-social snark—the kind that aims to destabilize smarm—is **impolite yet civil**.

Let's revisit the subtitle of David Denby's book on snark: *It's Mean, It's Personal, and It's Ruining Our Conversations*. The first two accusations—personal and mean—can be consolidated to *impolite*. By definition, politeness is interpersonal and hinges on etiquette and formality. The third accusation—snark is ruining our conversations—points to the problem of civility. If snark is ruining *civil* conversations, that is inarguably bad.

However, if snark is ruining conversations that are smarmy, deceptive, or dominated by the wrong people, it is doing a public service. If we were painting in broad strokes, we might say that smarm is *nice but not good*, whereas pro-social snark is *mean but necessary*. But before sweeping generalizations threaten to undermine any chance of a productive argument, I turn to a specific example.

On February 28, 2017, Donald Trump gave his first address to Congress as President, which many saw as the most coherent and calm speech in his short and turbulent political career. Columnists and television pundits especially praised a moment in which Trump paid tribute to the widow of Ryan Owens, a U.S. Navy SEAL who had died just weeks before in a covert anti-terror mission in Yemen (the first member of the armed forces to be killed in the line of duty during Trump's administration). CNN's website published a sprawling feature entitled "Presidential Trump": "Trump adopted a

statesmanlike cadence, hitting notes of inspiration.”<sup>107</sup> In the *Washington Post*’s politics blog, Chris Cillizza wrote, “Trump rapidly grasped that this was a real moment—and he didn’t step on it by trying to immediately return to his speech...Trump, dare I say, gracefully handed the spotlight to Owens—even taking a few steps back to let her have that moment.”<sup>108</sup>

In a blog post condemning this type of fawning coverage entitled “You Cretins Are Going to Get Thousands of People Killed,” former Gawker writer Alex Pareene writes:

You think Donald Trump noticed how the first thing he did that actually got the TV guys to like him was kill a troop? Here are some things Donald

Trump is famous for:

1. Noticing which things he does that elicit positive attention and then doing those things over and over and over again.
2. Craving the validation of the press, generally the sort of press a 70-year-old upper class New Yorker pays attention to, especially cable news. If one dead American service member won him this much praise, just imagine how much they’ll respect him when he kills a couple hundred—or a couple thousand! Now that Trump has learned that there is a direct relationship between a president’s body count and how “presidential” the mainstream political press considers him to be, the whole world is fucked.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Collinson

<sup>108</sup> Cillizza

<sup>109</sup> Pareene

These are textbook examples of smarm and snark, respectively. In the glowing reviews of Trump's performance, a respectable *tone* is the ultimate marker of a good President. The implication is that, throughout Trump's campaign and early presidency, it was his *style* rather than his actual *ideas* that prevented him from being President material (as always, smarm privileges form over content). Regarding Trump's supposedly respectable behavior towards Owens' widow, pointing out that just days earlier Trump had refused to accept responsibility for the raid that cost Owens his life (or that the raid had also resulted in over 20 civilian deaths) would be in poor taste.<sup>110</sup> Pareene's snarky intervention seeks to undermine this smarmy narrative. He is rude to everyone involved—both Trump and the pundits who praise him—but in arguing against the glamorization of war, he ultimately advances a pro-social agenda. Using humor and insult, he destabilizes a narrative that glosses over inconvenient truths.<sup>111</sup> This is snark at its best.

As a necessary addendum to this discussion of snark and smarm as expressions of (im)politeness and (in)civility, we must once again address the infrastructure of the social Internet and its influence on our conversations. Social media destabilizes the spatial and temporal limitations traditionally imposed on human conversation, and thus complicates commonly accepted notions of politeness and civility. For instance, we have defined politeness as *interpersonal*, but what does it mean for an interaction on the Internet to be interpersonal? Is a comment under an online article that directly addresses its author interpersonal? What about a public reply to a tweet? Although politeness and civility

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<sup>110</sup> Vennoch

<sup>111</sup> The word “destabilize,” which I use repeatedly in this chapter, is key. Snark does not just present an alternative argument. Rather, it *interrupts* the smooth flow of a conversation (or the development of a hegemonic narrative) altogether. It creates pockets of chaos where new possibilities can emerge.



offer a productive framework through which to analyze snark and smarm, their definitions are constantly changing along with our own habits and expectations.

Civility, as Papacharissi points out, “[rests] on the ideal of the **public sphere** and [is] sustained through the expression of **public opinion**, so its ideological meaning has shifted together with these two concepts.” Not coincidentally, much scholarship and popular writing about the Internet has focused on how it redefines or augments our understandings of these two very concepts. On the one hand, the social Internet has been compared to a town square (Gates), a coffeehouse (Connery), and a shopping mall (boyd), all symbolic manifestations of democratized public spheres. On the other, discourses around so-called filter bubbles and echo chambers point to a more complex online reality—one consisting of multiple networked publics often dependent on offline identities and experiences.<sup>112</sup> Either way, our understanding of civility online must be tied to the continued exploration of how the Internet influences social norms and not be bound by nostalgic definitions of appropriateness or decorum.

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<sup>112</sup> For more on filter bubbles and echo chambers, see Flaxman, Goel, and Rao. On networked publics, see boyd.

## *Chapter 4*

### **Finding the Good in Online Snark, Part 2: Towards a Reparative Practice of Snark**

In the previous chapter, I argue that snark can in fact be productive, and even necessary, for healthy online discourse. I will now move from a focus on snark's democratic potential to a discussion of its affective qualities. If the previous chapter provided a response to critics who claim that snark derails conversations and prevents productive civil discourse, this one will address those who dismiss snark as too angry or mean-spirited. Indeed many of snark's most ardent detractors lament the fact that snark often stems from such vulgar feelings as *envy* (the lowly, underpaid blogger ranting against those more successful than he) or *irritation* (the petulant restaurant critic who *must* mention a slight hiccup in his dining experience in a sarcastic aside) or even *boredom* (the high school student who floods online forums with detailed grievances about the latest episode of a television show). For many critics, the *feelings* that produce snark mark any actual *ideas* it expresses as instantly unworthy of serious consideration. As David Denby says in his discussion of nasty and jealous music reviews, "Snark's aesthetic judgments can't be trusted; it has too modest a rooting interest in artists actually succeeding at anything."<sup>113</sup> At the risk of using a somewhat smarmy phrase, this seems like a slippery slope. Dismissing ideas just because they stem from negative affective positionings (I'm reminded of the trope of the feminist *killjoy*) greatly limits the diversity of voices allowed in a given conversation. We need not look far to find important artistic, philosophical, or political speech rooted in negative feelings like anger or grief (or, less dramatically, doubt). Despite the unpleasantness of these feelings, their products should

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<sup>113</sup> Denby, 42

not be instantly discounted. Similarly, we must salvage snark from the bad reputations of the even less glamorous affects from which it is born.

In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai describes a class of muted affects she sees as illustrative of the contemporary political moment:

Our emotions no longer link up as securely as they once did with the models of social action and transformation theorized by Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, and others under the signs of relatively unambiguous emotions like anger and fear. In other words, the nature of the sociopolitical itself has changed in a manner that both calls forth and calls upon a new set of feelings—ones less powerful than the classical political passions, though perhaps more suited, in their ambient...nature, for models of subjectivity, collectivity, and agency not entirely foreseen by past theories of the commonwealth.<sup>114</sup>

Rejecting Fredric Jameson's oft-cited claim that postmodernity is defined by a 'waning' of affect, Ngai argues instead that the intense negative affects we traditionally associate with political and social life have merely been replaced by ones that are weaker yet more enduring: anxiety, irritation, envy, paranoia, boredom. These ugly feelings ("sentiments of disenchantment") are ambivalent, amoral, and noncathartic, yet nevertheless potentially capable of "critical productivity."<sup>115</sup> Writing in 2005, Ngai not only anticipates discourses surrounding the rise of social media, but offers a rather progressive lens through which to respond to them. The experience of existing within a social media environment—passively scrolling through one's feed, skimming updates from far-off

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<sup>114</sup> Ngai, 5

<sup>115</sup> Ngai, 3

acquaintances, scoffing at something offensive or stupid or inaccurate—is defined by these muted negative affects: the *boredom* of aimless browsing, the *anxiety* of being surveilled, the *envy* of those with more photogenic lives than ours. Such tropes have become cliché in popular writing about social media. The challenge for critics and commentators lies in remaining open to the “critical productivity” of these ugly feelings, rather than dismissing them on account of old biases.

As an online practice, snark is surely an expression of (or response to) many of the affects described above (after all, what is the *snicker* described in the first chapter but a physical expression of ugly feelings). As discussed, a snarky comment may be rooted in envy or irritation or boredom. However, if there is one affective position that pervades all snark, it is *paranoia*.

### 1. Paranoid and Reparative Critical Practices

In an essay titled “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” Eve Sedgwick argues that the default ethos of contemporary feminist, queer, and psychoanalytic criticism is rooted in what Ricoeur (discussing the work of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche) calls a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Within this framework, “the man of suspicion carries out in reverse the work of falsification of the man of guile.”<sup>116</sup> In other words, the role of the critic is to decipher the ambiguous or deceptive web of meanings within a text (or emotional event or cultural phenomenon), in order to *uncover* the truth—which is always being hidden from us. For Sedgwick, “the methodological centrality of suspicion to current critical practice has involved a concomitant privileging of the concept of paranoia...In a world

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<sup>116</sup> Ricoeur, 34

where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant.” Paranoia is a non-negotiable prerequisite for criticism to be considered smart, socially productive, complete. The question is not *whether* something reflects oppressive power structures but *how*. The man of suspicion’s search for guile can become all-encompassing. One is reminded of the once popular bumper sticker: “If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention.”

Sedgwick does not argue that paranoid critical practices are ill-conceived or untrustworthy (they are, of course, often necessary), but simply that they represent *one* way of knowing among many. As an alternative, she offers the possibility of *reparative* critical practices. Where paranoid practices tirelessly seek to expose lies, dangers, and societal ills, as if playing a never-ending game of whack-a-mole, reparative practices attempt to assemble the incomplete, imperfect pieces of the world into a new whole. If paranoid practices are destructive, reparative practices are generative. Importantly, neither of these descriptors entails a normative value judgment (to put it in comically simplistic terms, something destructive can be *good* if it destroys something *bad*). Paranoid and reparative practices are not in competition with each other. They represent different ways of “seeking, finding, and organizing knowledge” and are often even complimentary.<sup>117</sup>

So far in this thesis, I have argued unequivocally in favor of online snark. I have attempted to show how some of its seemingly worse qualities—its mean-ness, its rigidity, its contempt for manners and propriety—can in fact work towards pro-social means. In this final chapter, guided by Eve Sedgwick’s work, I wish to investigate the *limitations* of

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<sup>117</sup> Sedgwick, 130

online snark and speculate about how they can be overcome. Thus, the questions at hand are as follows: What are the limits of snark as a paranoid practice? How can snark evolve to address them? Finally, *is a reparative practice of snark possible?*

## 2. Snark as a Paranoid Practice

Sedgwick lists five fundamental qualities of paranoia: “Paranoia is *anticipatory*. Paranoia is *reflexive* and *mimetic*. Paranoia is a *strong theory*. Paranoia is a theory of *negative affects*. Paranoia places its faith in *exposure*.”<sup>118</sup> I will analyze how each of these shapes the practice of snark.

1. **Snark is anticipatory.** Snark does not allow for surprises. It “requires that bad news be always already known.” *Of course* that politician is corrupt. *Of course* that new movie is terrible. The rules that shaped the disappointments of yesterday will also always shape those of tomorrow.<sup>119</sup> In this way, snark is rooted in a deeply conservative ideology.
2. **Snark is reflective and mimetic.** In other words, snark is self-perpetuating. It “seems to grow like a crystal in a hypersaturated solution, blotting out any sense of the possibility of alternative ways of understanding *or* things to understand.”<sup>120</sup>
3. **Snark is reductive.** Drawing from the work of Silvan Tomkins, Sedgwick defines paranoia as a “strong theory,” or a “theory of wide generality...capable of accounting for a wide spectrum of phenomena which appear to be very remote, one from the other, and from a common source.” Paranoia achieves this level of generality by “interpreting information so that what is possibly relevant can be

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<sup>118</sup> Sedgwick, 130

<sup>119</sup> Sedgwick, 130

<sup>120</sup> Sedgwick, 131

quickly abstracted and magnified, and the rest discarded.”<sup>121</sup> We can easily see how this applies to snark, which only deems relevant the elements of a story that support its agenda—the out-of-context quote, the incriminating photo, the one instance of moral impurity (think of the common online practice of presenting two contradictory photos side by side—*here he claims to support working families, but here he is posing with the CEO of Walmart!*). As a paranoid practice, snark is somewhat tautological: its aim is to prove its own assumptions.

4. **Snark is negative.** Sedgwick describes paranoia as a theory of negative affects.

Although this is semantically confusing (considering Ngai’s earlier definition of paranoia as an affect in *itself*), the main takeaway is that paranoia as a practice works by anticipating negative affects, rather than maximizing positive ones: “The only sense in which [the paranoid] may strive for positive affect at all is for the shield which it promises against humiliation. To take seriously the strategy of maximizing positive affect, rather than simply enjoying it when the occasion arises, is entirely out of the question.” There is moreover a sense that uncovering negativity means one is closer to *objective truth*—that our reality is *inherently* bad (think of the most exaggerated example of a paranoiac, the conspiracy theorist). With snark, any sign of earnestness, optimism, or hope is suspect. Actively seeking out positive affect is out of the question for snark, separating it from similar practices like comedy.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Tomkins, 519

<sup>122</sup> This is illustrated in the first chapter’s assertion that snark is to snickering what comedy is to laughter. Snickering lacks the catharsis—the explicit goal of a positive outcome—inherent in laughter. In fact, it often results from a *suppression* of laughter.

5. **Snark places its faith in exposure.** Sedgwick writes: “Paranoia for all its vaunted suspicion acts as though its work would be accomplished if only it could finally, this time, somehow get its story truly known. That a fully initiated listener could still remain indifferent or inimical, or might have no help to offer, is hardly treated as a possibility.” Herein lies the paradox of paranoia and thus of snark: although they view the status quo as immutable (see #1 above), they also believe that their intervention—their *revelation*—will somehow make a difference. Here, I quote Sedgwick at length:

What is the basis for assuming that it will surprise or disturb, never mind motivate, anyone to learn that a given social manifestation is artificial, self-congratulatory, imitative, phantasmatic, or even violent?...How television-starved would someone have to be to find it shocking that ideologies contradict themselves, that simulacra don't have originals, or that gender representations are artificial?...Some exposés, some demystifications, some bearings of witness do have great effectual force (though often of an unanticipated kind). Many that are just as true and convincing have none at all, however, and as long as that is so, we must admit that the efficacy and directionality of such acts reside somewhere else than in their relation to knowledge per se.<sup>123</sup>

Could it be that exposing hypocrisy or smarm or bullshit does not actually guarantee or even facilitate the possibility of eradicating it? I am reminded of Adorno and Horkheimer's claim that “the triumph of advertising in the culture

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<sup>123</sup> Sedgwick, 141



industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see right through them.”<sup>124</sup> Switch “advertising” for smarm, and “products” for ideas, and we’ve got ourselves a problem.

I return then to some of the critiques of snark that I so easily brushed off in the first pages of this thesis. Is snark overly defensive, stiff, uncompromising? Is it *toxic*? Is occupying a snarky position simply a shield against humiliation or a way to evade vulnerability? Can snark ever truly be pro-social or is it inherently selfish (as Joseph Litvak writes in a letter to Eve Sedgwick, “If I have to be miserable, at least let me be brainier than everybody else.”)?<sup>125</sup> Is snark, ultimately, futile? Well, no. But the same qualities that enable it to so successfully cut through artifice and deception, as described in the preceding chapter, can also lead it to eat its own tail. Snark can easily become masturbatory or pointless, even counterproductive. A defense of snark, then, must not only salvage it from unfair criticism, but also attempt to guide it in the right direction.

### **3. Toward a Reparative Practice of Snark**

If a paranoid practice of snark seeks only to tear down false appearances, expose the world’s flaws, and reduce everything to a familiar set of disappointments, then what would a reparative practice of snark look like? Drawing on the work of Melanie Klein, Sedgwick writes,

To read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*; to a reparatively positioned reader, it

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<sup>124</sup> Adorno, 136

<sup>125</sup> Sedgwick, 147

can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates.<sup>126</sup>

The most significant—and most devastating—achievement of smarm is that it has managed to so wholly appropriate the methods and attitudes of the reparative position that any sliver of optimism, hope, or joy seems instantly suspicious. If smarm monopolizes reparative practices, which are “additive and accretive,” then snark will always be fighting a losing battle against a constantly regenerating Lernaean Hydra.<sup>127</sup> Thus if paranoid snark is necessary to destabilize smarm, then reparative snark must provide an alternative.

The possibility of a reparative practice of snark may seem counterintuitive. After all, snark is by definition rooted in paranoia and negativity—it is *reactive*. Yet as Sedgwick writes, “it is sometimes the most paranoid-tending people who are able to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices.”<sup>128</sup> For examples of reparative practices rooted in paranoid philosophies, we need not look further than the historical precedents of online snark listed in the first chapter. From Athenian blame poetry to rap battles and comedy roasts, we see communities utilizing paranoid attitudes towards generative rather than destructive goals, thereby “extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture.”<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Sedgwick, 146

<sup>127</sup> Sedgwick, 149

<sup>128</sup> Sedgwick, 150

<sup>129</sup> Sedgwick, 150-1

Reparative online snark is everywhere. Feminist blogs like Jezebel and The Hairpin, very much founded in reaction to (and as a rejection of) the ideals of smarmy women's magazines of the past, at their best offer spaces for productive and inclusive conversations. The intersecting online communities that make up "Black Twitter," as theorized by André Brock, employ an often snarky (reflexive, negative, reductive) ethos to fuel creative and surprising collaborative meaning-making: Brock traces the online behaviors he studies to "the dozens" (discussed in the first chapter), and describes "Twitter users employing cultural touch points of humor, spectacle, or crisis to construct discursive racial identity."<sup>130</sup> "Anti-fan" communities turn their resentment of texts they consider overrated, silly, or problematic into humorous and even educational critiques. For instance, Haig describes the ways "snark fandom" surrounding the *Twilight* book and film series empowers young people to collectively negotiate their views on gender politics. Elsewhere, Harman and Jones explore how the online BDSM community's snarky reactions to *Fifty Shades of Grey* helped define and formalize its members' own "distinctions of taste."<sup>131</sup> In all of these examples, paranoid critical positions are used towards reparative ends. To borrow again from Sedgwick, we can say these online users repurpose and remix the unsatisfactory, imperfect parts of their culture, creating *new wholes*—new possibilities for collaborative meaning making and identity formation.

#### **4. Case Study: Jezebel's Reparative Snark**

Each of these examples could easily be expanded into its own chapter (or separate thesis!). However, I will focus here on the feminist blog Jezebel as a primary case study

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<sup>130</sup> Brock, 537

<sup>131</sup> Harman and Jones, 951

in pro-social and reparative snark. I choose Jezebel for two reasons. First, it brings us full circle from the discussion of Gawker's demise in the introductory chapter, as Jezebel is one of the Gawker-owned properties that survived the Hulk Hogan lawsuit and is now owned by Univision. Second, the snark found in Jezebel and its ilk is explicitly *opposed* to the anti-social online activities described in the second chapter: As we've seen, a disproportionate number of the victims of trolling are women who identify as feminists. All of the Jezebel writers I discuss below have been victims of online trolling, and one of them (Lindy West) eventually quit Twitter because the insults and threats against her became unbearable. In my analysis of Jezebel's pro-social, reparative snark, I will consider its founding manifesto, "The Five Great Lies of Women's Magazines," as well as two other posts that I believe to be emblematic of Jezebel's best impulses throughout its ten years of existence.

As mentioned previously, Jezebel defined itself explicitly against the values, ethics, and publishing practices of legacy women's media. Unsurprisingly then, the "Jezebel Manifesto," written in 2007 by Moe Tkacik, Jezebel founder Anna Holmes' first hire, is titled "The Five Great Lies of Women's Magazines." Its first sentence sets the tone for Jezebel's particular brand of snark (conversational, funny, self-deprecating, always tapped into the cultural zeitgeist): "If you're reading this, you're probably wondering who this 'Jezebel' is, and if she is, like, bipolar or something. (Answer: Probably!)" The second sentence is more interesting: "To put it simply, Jezebel is a blog for women that will attempt to take all the essentially meaningless but sweet stuff directed our way and give it a little more meaning."<sup>132</sup> Here, Jezebel's ethos of reparative snark is clear. Its goal is *additive*—to give *more* meaning to the vapid messages of

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<sup>132</sup> Tkacik

women's magazines; not just to expose lies, but to repurpose them into something useful. Tkacik goes on to describe the aforementioned five great lies: "The Cover Lie" (neither the physical appearances of the women featured on magazine covers nor the promises the covers offer are based in reality); "The Celebrity-Profile Lie" (supposedly candid looks into famous people's lives are actually publicist-approved puff pieces); "The Must-Have Lie" (magazine editors' endorsements merely reflect business partnerships between publications and fashion or beauty companies); "The Affirmation Crap Lie" (calls for empowerment and self-love address insecurities that are created by the very same people who promise to cure them); and, finally, "The Big Meta Lie":

The big lie is that we haven't let the norms of the celebrity-sartorial complex seep into the way we see everything in the world, perpetuating the notion that all of life is high school, and the pretty people are the only ones worth your attention, and that alpha girls are entitled to act cruel and inhuman towards their subordinates, and that all the world would be that way anyway. Because it wouldn't. And though we've found women's magazines to be a fairly trusty engine of hilarious tidbits, it is not all one big joke.<sup>133</sup>

To re-introduce the language of the previous chapters into this case study, the "Big Meta Lie" is in essence that *smarm* (in this case, the smarm of women's media and, somewhat by extension, the entertainment, fashion, and beauty industries which it covers) is a necessary evil that we all have to live with. The Big Lie says we shouldn't be scandalized by a dishonest celebrity puff piece or an misleading advice column, because we're somehow all in on the joke. Although snark is often criticized for its so-called ironic

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<sup>133</sup> Tkacik

distance from the world, it is (ironically) a more widespread and insidious ironic distance to which Jezebel is *reacting* in its rejection of the Big Lie. The Big Lie says: *the smarm of women's magazines is harmless. It's just part of the world. Let me enjoy my guilty pleasures!* It is *this* ironic distance—this self-aware complacency—which Jezebel seeks to expose. Jezebel's snark may affect an ironic detachment in its brash and humorous tone, but this simply serves to make its rather serious intellectual project more approachable (and fun) to readers. At its best, as I'll show below, Jezebel's snark does not only disrupt the Big Lie, but also provides alternatives to it.

As an example, I turn to Jezebel's coverage of Sophia Amoruso, founder of the online clothing brand Nasty Gal and author of the bestselling professional self-help memoir *#GIRLBOSS* (which was later somewhat awkwardly adapted into a Netflix series just as Nasty Gal was filing for bankruptcy). Amoruso's meteoric rise—a community college dropout, she turned her eBay store into “the fastest growing retailer in the country” before the age of thirty—was adoringly documented in both traditional and online publications: Amoruso was the “Cinderella of tech,” as well as an “entrepreneurial idol” who was “making feminism cool again.”<sup>134</sup> As Jezebel's Anna Merlan writes, the message in Amoruso's book and various interviews seems to be, “work hard as hell, be relentlessly positive, treat everyone you see on the way up with kindness and respect, and you'll work magic” (Amoruso herself says that Nasty Gal has a “no-asshole policy”).<sup>135</sup> However, in a lengthy post that draws from interviews with eight former Nasty Gal employees, Merlan paints a very different picture of Amosuro's company: repeated mass layoffs, systemic mismanagement, and even a series of lawsuits alleging employees were

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<sup>134</sup> Perloth, Williamson, Feloni

<sup>135</sup> Merlan, Bailey

terminated while either pregnant (some during parental leave) or seriously ill. Shortly after Merlan's piece was published, Amoruso responded on Twitter: "A note to all women: do not become successful unless you are prepared for Jezebel to trash you."<sup>136</sup> Merlan replied, "We're mainly interested in the part where you allegedly fired pregnant employees. Do email me if you want to chat about it."<sup>137</sup>

This exchange of course mirrors the one between Lanny Davis and Jon Lovett described in the previous chapter, with Amoruso employing the familiar smarmy defense mechanism of feigning personal offense to distract from legitimate accusations. Even worse, Amoruso implies that Merlan's reporting on the alleged mistreatment of women is somehow anti-woman because it happens to damage her own personal brand. Merlan's tweet, as well as her original post, use Jezebel's signature snark (a graphic under the post's title reads "Revenge of the Pregnants") for *reparative ends*: In her exposure of Amoruso and Nasty Gal's hypocrisy, Merlan amplifies the voices of women who were treated unfairly and invites conversations about women in the workplace that are arguably more urgent and complex than those broached in Amoruso's book. Lastly, the social nature of snark is also apparent here: Aside from the aforementioned Twitter exchange between Amoruso and Merlan, the vibrant comment section under Merlan's original post contains accounts from more former Nasty Gal employees and even recommendations for the women interviewed in the piece from policy and law professionals. In just one example of the contagious nature of snark, one commenter's suggestion that a woman who was fired while suffering from advanced kidney failure apply for Social Security Disability in order to qualify for immediate Medicare ends with

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<sup>136</sup> Amoruso

<sup>137</sup> Merlan

the following: “It’s rare that I get to use knowledge from the job I am actively shirking in order to comment on this website but miracles do happen.”<sup>138</sup>

For a final example of Jezebel’s pro-social, reparative snark, I take a post by Lindy West which does not directly address mainstream women’s media in the same way that the previous two examples do, but is rather emblematic of Jezebel’s brand of pop cultural commentary. In the summer of 2012, an incident at the Laugh Factory in Hollywood involving the comedian Daniel Tosh and an audience member spurred a seemingly Internet-wide debate on the merits of jokes about rape. In short, after a woman interrupted Tosh to yell out “rape jokes are never funny,” Tosh suggested that it would be funny if she herself was raped by multiple men at that moment. Predictably, many commentators maintained that rape jokes are *never* funny while others objected to *any* kind of censorship of comedy. Jezebel’s Lindy West (a pioneer of the type of snark this thesis is about, as well as an incessant target of anti-feminist trolls and the author of the memoir *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman*) offers a third option in a post titled “How to Make a Rape Joke.” West maintains a snarky tone throughout, yet carefully and even patiently offers advice on how to avoid Tosh’s mistakes. The following passage is representative of her tone throughout:

The world is full of terrible things, including rape, and it is okay to joke about them. But the best comics use their art to call bullshit on those terrible parts of life and make them better, not worse. The key—unless you want to be called a garbage-flavored dick on the Internet by me and other humans with souls and brains—is to be a responsible person when you construct your jokes. Since the nuances of personal responsibility

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<sup>138</sup> Merlan



seem to escape so many people, let's go through it. Let's figure out rape jokes.<sup>139</sup>

West goes through various recurring themes in the writings of Tosh's supporters: the idea of "equal opportunity offenders" ("Oh, don't worry—I punch everyone in the face! People, baby ducks, a lion, this Easter Island statue, the ocean..."); the importance of spaces for comedians to work out new material ("You're exactly right. That is how comedy gets made. So CONSIDER THIS YOUR FUCKING FEEDBACK."); the enduring trope of the "thought police" ("No cuntty feminist killjoy is citizen's-arresting you and taking you to brain jail for your shitty rape joke.");<sup>140</sup> West ends with a list of rape jokes, from *Borat* to Louis CK, that she sees as pro-social or at least not actively harmful (their common characteristic being that they make rape *culture*, rather than a rape *victim*, the butt of the joke). She uses the imperfect pieces of the culture she is critiquing to attempt to move it in the right direction. Her piece, while often using jarring and antagonistic language, comes paradoxically from a place of care. As West herself says, "I'm not saying all of this because I hate comedy—I'm saying it because I love comedy and I want comedy to be accessible to everyone. And right now, comedy as a whole is overtly hostile toward women."<sup>141</sup> In advocating for a more inclusive comedy landscape (and even offering suggestions for how to get there), West's snark is biting but ultimately reparative.

Tom Scocca writes, "Snark is often conflated with cynicism, which is a troublesome misreading. Snark may speak in cynical terms about a cynical world, but it is

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<sup>139</sup> West

<sup>140</sup> West

<sup>141</sup> West

not cynicism itself...The practice of cynicism is smarm.”<sup>142</sup> Snark’s apparent cynicism lies in its paranoia—at its worst, it sees lying, hypocrisy, or deception where there is none. Yet the big secret of (pro-social, reparative) snark is that, despite its negativity, its unruliness, and its apparent disregard for taste and manners, it is ultimately rooted in a kind of optimism—in the belief that *things could be better*. Reparative snark is not content with simply unmasking societal ills, but rather seeks to repurpose their broken pieces into something better—to “extract sustenance from the objects of a culture.”<sup>143</sup> Consider the above examples. In the “Five Great Lies,” Moe Tkacik attempts to shock her readers out of complacency and make room for feminist alternatives to consumerism, celebrity worship, and faux empowerment. In her coverage of Nasty Gal’s mistreatment of employees, Anna Merlan provides a counter-narrative to Sophia Amoruso’s self-serving corporate feminism. In “How to Make a Rape Joke,” Lindy West lays the groundwork for comedy that is edgy without being hostile to women. To call any of the snark described above cynical or nihilistic is to misinterpret it completely. On the contrary, it is the smarm that each of the above examples is *reacting* to—the empty promises of women’s magazines, the polished but vacuous personal brands of public figures like Sophia Amoruso, the calls for free speech at all costs from male comedians who refuse to take responsibility for the consequences of their own words—that is inherently and dangerously cynical. Smarm glosses over injustices and inconvenient truths with vapid platitudes. It is much more nihilistic and unhelpful than snark will ever be in that it refuses to imagine a better world. Snark’s bad reputation, on the other hand, is predictable: If smarm is hegemonic, any serious attempt to destabilize it will look and

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<sup>142</sup> Scocca

<sup>143</sup> Sedgwick, 151

feel violent and ugly. On the Internet especially, snark is so common and often so unpleasant, that it is tempting to tune it out altogether. However, it is in our best interest to seek out the pro-social and the reparative within the ocean of snickers.

## *Concluding Thoughts*

### **Rival Snarkdoms and Alternative Facts**

In December 2013, after BuzzFeed’s online traffic surpassed that of Gawker for the first time, CEO Nick Denton sent a cautiously hopeful note to his staff. It closed with this message: “The crowd will always choose the juicy truth over the heartwarming hoax.”<sup>144</sup> It is easy and even comforting to view the world in these binary terms—to see the battle of snark versus smarm as a zero-sum game. But just because someone adopts the attitude of a fearless truth-teller, her ideas do not automatically become any more urgent, original, or correct.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the various contemporary political movements (sometimes grouped together under the label “populism”) currently defining themselves against the mainstream (and, importantly, gaining momentum largely through social media). The snarky tones of both the far left and the far right are direct responses to the smug wonkery and self-satisfied smarm that dominates political discourse on mainstream publications and cable news.<sup>145</sup> On the one hand, the so-called “alt-right” (“an informal and ill-defined collection of Internet-based radicals” with roots in 4chan, Reddit, and the commentary website Breitbart) rallies against what it sees as a rise in political correctness, often employing deliberately bigoted rhetoric to scandalize its enemies.<sup>146</sup> On the other, segments of the far left lament the elitist sensibilities of centrist politicians,

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<sup>144</sup> Beaujon

<sup>145</sup> In *The Ideas Industry*, Daniel Drezner offers one possible account of this problem: He believes that a variety of social factors, including the declining trust in academic and government institutions and the market logics of cable news and social media, have led to an increase in the influence of *thought leaders* over that of *public intellectuals*. Drezner defines public intellectuals as critics that comment on a wide variety of topics with a clear moral stance and thought leaders as evangelists for Big Ideas (the kinds of ideas that we see in TED talks and popular science bestsellers). It does not take a public intellectual to figure out which of these two groups relies more on smarm.

<sup>146</sup> Caldwell

pundits, and celebrities for whom progressive values function as a merit badge of cultural capital rather than an active commitment to social solidarity. Online leftist publications like *Current Affairs* and the newly re-launched *Baffler*, the podcast “Chapo Trap House,” as well as a variety of social media users with sizable cult followings (often recognizable from their use of the rose emoji—🌹—symbolizing their support for democratic socialism) embrace humor and vulgarity in their critiques of liberals and conservatives alike. The common reactionary ethos of these groups, seeped in irony, humor, and insult, can lead an uninitiated bystander to believe they espouse similar worldviews. After all, when Felix Biederman, the leftist co-host of “Chapo Trap House,” refers to Hillary Clinton’s donors as “psychologically weak, tormented, elite freaks,” his tone indeed resembles that of Breitbart editor Milo Yiannopoulos’ diatribes against “dumpy lesbian feminists and shrieking harpies in the Black Lives Matter movement.”<sup>147</sup> The unfortunate leveling power of snark is that it can make these two statements seem not just equally rude but equally dangerous.

For instance, *Vanity Fair*’s James Wolcott argues for this very kind of false equivalence in his piece “Why The Alt-Left is a Problem, Too,” in which he compares a somewhat bitter leftist critique of Hollywood elitism (“written in Snarkish”) with alt-right writing that he himself describes as rooted in neo-Nazi ideology and nativist white supremacy. Of online far right and far left communities, Wolcott writes, “They’re not kissin’ cousins, but they caterwaul some of the same tunes in different keys.”<sup>148</sup> Without even attempting to distinguish between form and content, he simply places all opinions that he perceives as mean-spirited or disrespectful into the same bucket. In a political era

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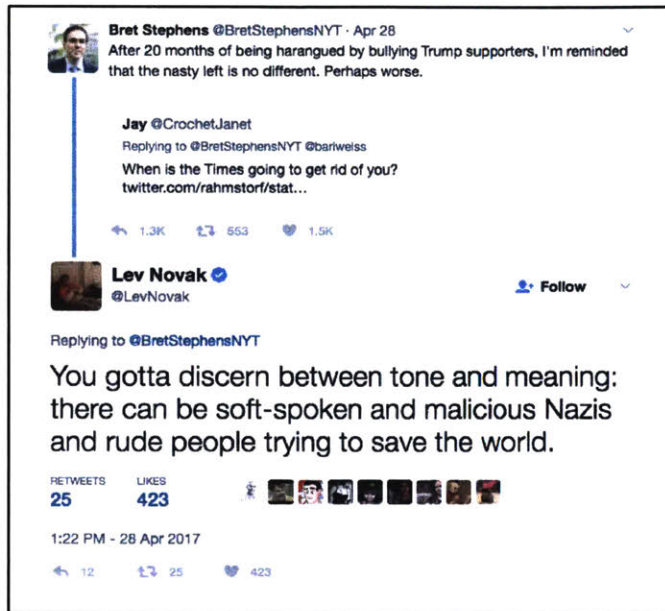
<sup>147</sup> Nizam, Stein

<sup>148</sup> Wolcott

defined by impassioned and often quite rude rhetoric on all sides, such reductive reasoning is extremely misguided. By contrast, the vocabulary I provide in this thesis, specifically in my analysis of the differences between politeness and civility, pro-social and anti-social insult, and paranoid and reparative snark, offers alternatives to such one-note thinking. Snark (like other similar modes of discourse grounded in some combination of humor and insult) often invites crude and one-dimensional readings: *He's just jealous! She's just being difficult! He needs to relax!* It is my hope that we can move past these knee-jerk reactions and interpret snark as meaningful and politically significant speech. Conversely, as we cautiously give snark the benefit of the doubt, we must approach smarm with an emboldened sense of skepticism. Thus, for instance, when the *New York Times* defends hiring an opinion columnist with a history of racism and climate change denial by appealing to the importance of a free exchange of ideas, we must confidently reply: *that's bullshit.*<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Roberts



**Figure 5:** Top: A tweet by Bret Stephens, the newest *New York Times* opinion columnist, in which he responds to criticism of a column of his expressing skepticism towards climate change. Stephens compares “bullying Trump supporters” to “the nasty left.” Bottom: A response warning against the comparison of anti-social (“malicious Nazis”) and pro-social (“rude people trying to save the world”) snark. Accessed May 16, 2017.

A debate about snark and smarm online is ultimately a debate about what is allowed, respected, and rewarded in the marketplace of ideas (which inevitably runs through an unwieldy ecosystem of porous and mutable in-groups and out-groups). The examples in this thesis may soon seem outdated—smarm can quickly become normalized and snark often ages quite poorly—but I hope I have provided a set of intersecting frameworks (that transcend the specificity of their test cases) through which one can interpret language rooted in humor and insult that may at first appear unseemly. In my discussion of the oral roots of online snark, I argue that snark as a social practice must necessarily be understood within the larger context in which it appears. In my analysis of the effects of social media infrastructures on the tone of online discourse, I specify that the context that gives rise to online snark as that of pervasive smarm. I argue in favor of a snark that is pro-social (impolite yet civil) and reparative (capable of providing an

alternative to the smarm that it exposes). Throughout this thesis, I aim to contribute to conversations about how we negotiate meaning on the Internet as well as argue for a cautious open-mindedness regarding what can constitute civil, productive, and pro-social online speech. Too often, smarm sets the rules for civil discourse online. Pro-social and reparative snark (and similar online practices) is thus necessary to expose smarm and provide alternatives to it. If we are scandalized by a caustic insult, a tasteless personal attack, or an unwelcome outburst, it is worth asking why. Snark may not always offer us the “juicy truth” on a silver platter, but sometimes it just might lead us in the right direction.



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