

Challenging Digital Communication

Disconnections, toxicity and
right-wing digital architecture

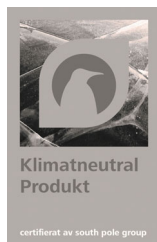
Anne Kaun (ed.)

The cover features a teal background on the top left and a purple background on the bottom right, separated by a diagonal line. A yellow-green shape is located at the bottom left, containing a stylized purple graphic that resembles a hand or a set of fingers.

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Disconnections, toxicity and
right-wing digital architecture

Anne Kaun (ed.)



Södertörns högskola
(Södertörn University)
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Introduction

The following chapters are adaptations of three master's theses that were written and defended within the framework of the international master's programme media, communication and cultural analysis at Södertörn University. The programme has been running since 2009 and by 2020 has some 100 alumni who are now employed in the media, academic or educational sector. In 2020, the programme coordinator, together with the programme council and the department council decided to highlight the most excellent theses with a book publication. This book is the first in the series and includes three chapters by alumni who graduated in 2020, a year that has been in every sense challenging. Nevertheless, the students showed dedication to their subjects and produced high quality essays.

The contributions deal with discussions of how those in the creative industries manage day-to-day life in hyperconnected pandemic times, how toxic language is experienced and reproduced in gaming environments and what is specific to right-wing digital platforms. Each contribution challenges aspects of digital communication: work overload, toxic language, and behavior or extremist communities, and helps us develop a better understanding of contemporary digital culture from a critical perspective.

The department for media and communications studies invites readers to engage with this crucial and critical work conducted by our master's students.

Anne Kaun

Stockholm, 15 January 2021

Keeping it creative: Exploring COVID-19 and the role of digital media for creatives newly working from home

Lucie Váněová

When I first explored different topics for my master's thesis, I was mainly interested in studying the relationship between being unplugged (digitally disconnected) and self-perceived creativity by people working in the creative industries. Yet, with the changed circumstances, being connected to the internet became essential for working and socialising. Therefore, finding people for an unplugging experiment seemed very difficult in a situation where the broader social life and work life is online life. In comparison to the worldwide changes that COVID-19 brought, the change of the course of this thesis seems then less dramatic.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, many have switched to home offices. The “normative” way of working has been shaken up and the workforce has had to adapt. No matter how long the crisis lasts, it offers an ideal opportunity for reflection, which can be fruitful now as well as later. Since social isolation and digital connection is a reality for the time being, it is worth exploring their impact on individuals. This isolated, always-online plugged-in environment provides a window to an extreme way of living. I would argue that now is the perfect time for people to reflect on the situation as the world undergoes significant changes.

Besides my personal interest in the creative industry, selecting people working within the creative industry as the group to focus

on is academically anchored. The creative industries are often studied for their important role as ‘symbol creators’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p.20), creating products that are widely distributed, and which are helping to share a common set of ‘cultural packages’ (Hansen, 2010, p.112). The creative industries¹ are also working with “deep-seated cultural assumptions and anxieties” (Hansen, 2010, p.112), and having impacts on the creation of norms in wide societies (Hall, 1973). In the text I refer to individuals working in the creative industry as ‘creatives’.

The objective

The aim of this chapter is to explore the impact of the situation caused by the spread of COVID-19 on people working in creative industries and their creative processes, and analyse the role of media in reconstructing their work and leisure spaces at home.

The general relevance of this topic lays in how the novel situation may be a window to alternative ways of work. Moreover, as a quote by Kaun and Treré (2018) suggests “freelance work that enhances the precariousness of boundaries between work and private life” (p. 14), shows that industries which have had a large experience in remote or ‘freelance’ work prior to the enforced Work From Home (further referenced as WFH) (Upwork, 2019, Statista, 2020), with the problem of keeping boundaries between work and leisure, have been of an academic interest prior to this new situation. These points in combination with the fact that creatives are more prone to mental health problems (Kyaga et al., 2012) and creative work being highly individual (Amabile, 2012, p 10), thus perhaps more independent of teamwork, invites further research on the creative industries in these times.

¹ Drawing on the Creative Industries Task Force Mapping Document (DCMS, 2001), the term ‘Creative industries’ encompasses the following fields: advertising, architecture, art and antiques, computer games, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, music, performing arts, publishing, software, TV and radio.

This area is interesting and can provide a greater understanding of what individual creatives think of this situation professionally and how they perceive the switch compared to their ‘normal’ mode of work. I would argue this field is interesting for both creatives and researchers of social sciences and media scholars as it combines topics from media and everyday life with questions around creativity.

In the times of quarantine or social distancing, people seek digital connections in place of physical meetings. However, how is creative work in the constant state of digital connection being affected, in an environment which needs to encompass both creatives’ work and private lives? Are people who face this situation working well creatively? In that context I am asking:

RQ1: How do the creatives handle the change from their regular work mode and leisure environment to the digitally connected yet socially isolated spaces at home?

RQ2: What role does the presence and absence of media have in reconstructing the creatives’ work and leisure environment at home?

RQ3: Do the creatives notice any impact on their creative processes caused by the changed situation in their digitally connected yet socially isolated homes?

Material and methods

Interview style and setting

For the style of data collection, I chose a semi-structured interview. The purpose of interview questions is to extract knowledge and make interviewees feel comfortable, so they should be easy to understand and short, in order to gain valuable information (Pickering, 2008, p. 67). Therefore, the questions directed to the participants often differed a lot from the research questions. For example, Research question two is: *What role does the presence and absence of media have in reconstructing the creatives’ work and leisure environment at home?* And one of the questions

asked in order to extract some valuable knowledge on the topic was: “What do you do when you want to shut off work completely?”. As demonstrated, this question omitted media but yielded better results than more media-specific questions similar to the research question.

Choice of participants

To borrow the terminology of Jensen (2002), my participants are so referred to as ‘respondents’ who represent the social category ‘creative workers’. ‘Creative workers’ correspond to the definition of creative industries used in the DCMS document (2001, p.12). That is why ‘purposive sampling’ (Jensen, 2002, p.216) is used to ensure the respondents are fulfilling certain criteria.

I included respondents working in Sweden and in the Czech Republic due to my professional and personal connections and my understanding of both cultures. Sweden’s approach in dealing with the spread of COVID-19, which differed greatly from other European countries (Henley, 2020), was also a significant element.

In order to achieve a certain sense of saturation within the given time frame, I aimed for ten to twelve interviews and conducted eleven. The interviews lasted for approximately 40 minutes, with five respondents working in the Czech Republic and six in Sweden. The respondents worked in architecture, art direction, communication design, copywriting, creative developing, film production, graphic design, illustration, innovation design, UX design, and visual design.

To avoid bias, my ambition was a ‘maximum variation’ sample, which would include ‘as wide set of qualities’ (Jensen, 2002, p. 238) as possible, in this instance age and household situation (living alone, with a partner, family with children). Due to the overruling ‘convenience sampling’, and my ability to engage potential participants, the majority of the respondents were people either living alone or with a partner and without children. The average age of the respondents was 30–40. Gender diversity was satisfactory, where six respondents identified as female and five as male.

Practicalities

Due to the circumstances, avoiding physical contact as much as possible, I relied on video/audio interviews. Although computer-assisted interviews are not ideal, or as Brinkmann and Kvale put it, “a problem with computer-assisted interviews is the difficulty to understand the body language and spoken language, some details of the conversation will be missed out” (2015, p. 174–175). They also offer certain advantages, “[...] it is shown that computer-assisted interviews make the participant keener to openly talk about intimate topics” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 175). Similarly, the computer-assisted interviews I collected offered certain benefits and disadvantages. Among the benefits we can count non-existent need for travelling and less restraint on the geographical locations of the interviewees. On the other hand, one disadvantage is that computer interviews are usually shorter than face-to-face interviews (Robson, 2011, p. 290).

Qualitative analysis

I approached the analysis of the interview responses by thematic coding (Robson, 2011, p. 467), where themes are naturally occurring from the interview respondents, but also grouped the responses in alignment with the theoretical framework, as the questions were crafted with the theoretical framework in mind. The analysis of the data started when the process of thematic coding was finished. The information was divided into categories and subcategories and then related to the theoretical framework and previous research. This data was then categorized, segmented, interpreted and compared (Jensen, 2002, p. 258) with other responses.

Limitations

One limitation of the conducted interviews is the age and household homogeneity. I would have liked to have included responses from people with children at home or from older participants. Another constraint is that the majority of the interview-

ees were living in large cities (Stockholm and Prague). The higher cost of rental space in large cities often results in limited space options. For studying home environments, it would have been useful to hear from more people with space, and perhaps even a separate area available for working. In my interview sample one participant had this option.

Theoretical framework

Theoretically, I am drawing firstly on Goffman's distinction between front and back region as well as the notion of backstage control, ritual state and keying and secondly on boundary theory. The front region is concerned with the public region, which is associated with work and fewer personal interactions, demarcated by boundaries which are either physical (home, work) or mental. The back region is associated with family and close friends where people can drop off their professionalism. Just as front region, back region is also demarcated by boundaries. Backstage control describes the difficulties of clashing both (front and back) regions and ritual state (Goffman, 1959) refers to the way we find appropriate to act in the given situation. With keying, Goffman (1974) refers to switching within the ritual state which is subtle but meaningful (e.g. switching radio off/on). I connect Goffman's theoretisations with boundary theory that is similar to the theory of regions and frames by both Goffman and Bengtsson but with slight differences (Ashforth et al., 2000, Clark 2000, Nippert-Eng, 1996). Boundary theory introduces for example the notion of segmentation and integration (Nippert-Eng 1996) of different boundaries (e.g. between work and leisure) depending on the person's abilities and preferences. The boundary work considered here involves physical, temporal and psychological aspects. In addition the theoretical framework integrated the notion of transformation between ritual states that Stina Bengtsson (2006) has developed and argued that we are constantly switching between different ritual states and regions.

This includes geographical transformation, intermedia transformation as well as intramedia transformation.

Result and analysis

This chapter presents the interview answers from the participants, together with an analysis based on the theoretical framework. The interview answers are divided into six main categories: *Human connectedness and digital connectivity*, *Digital connectivity*, *Front region and back region*, *Boundary theory*. Within these categories, there are themes focusing on different aspects of the creatives' experiences and opinions on the situation of working from home imposed by COVID-19.

It is also important to note that many of the negative aspects noted in the interviews were intertwined with the social isolation situation and thus they can't be viewed purely as "work from home" related problems. It is rather the combination of the unique situation which perhaps makes it difficult for people to set boundaries as their homes are largely the only places they inhabit.

Human connectedness and digital connectivity

Human connectedness (Van Dijck, 2013) encompasses certain social behaviour cherished in the real life. The following examples include both the hard to replicate in the digital world connectedness, and also the social feelings being successfully reproduced in the digital world.

An example of the later can be seen in this quote by Participant H:

H: I feel much more connected (to the world) because we have a shared sense of this situation which is very connecting. For example, I was invited to a birthday party I normally wouldn't be, or [joined a] hackathon which I would not normally do. [It is also] amazing to have a glimpse into the lives of people on the other side of the world.

Furthermore, some people feel now paradoxically more connected to their employers than before. The reasons seem to be a feeling of togetherness, more frequent updates and seeing private spaces of their colleagues' lives:

E: I feel like I know some people even more now because I see into their private homes. Everyone likes sharing. I feel more engaged and connected, motivated and [feel as] working as a team. I [also] feel now more invested in the company because of these tough economic times which also play a role.

However, many interviewees voiced the feeling that all of their activities shifted into the online environment, activities that were before relaxing and offering “no-screen time” for relaxation and socializing. The interviewees said they experienced online fikas, after-work beer, playing games or watching Netflix with other people online. However, some participants noted a certain discomfort with the situation as demonstrated by Participant G:

G: Right now everything happens online, also recreational activities like fikas or common breakfasts, chatting with friends and so on, which only increases my screen time which is something I tried to avoid [before].

As observed from the responses, connectivity seems to be working more for the professional environment. Many participants voiced benefits that come with this change. However, for the extended feeling of connectedness, there was often a problem with the things that are hard to be transmitted into ones and zeros. This feeling was experienced both in private and professional connectedness among the interviewees. In the private connections it was seen as aspects that people miss while in the professional places it was making the work relations for some interviewees (perhaps more efficient) but more sterile.

Digital connectivity

In contrary to the more private connections, the interviewees noted, that in many cases they were not missing the physical professional connections. Actually, the majority of the participants preferred digital communication with their work. The form of this digital communication depended then on the nature of the topic the participant needed to discuss with their work. For many participants, the digital connectivity in relation to their work environment brought many positive changes. These positive aspects can be seen in the following quote:

E: Meetings are amazingly transformed, what would usually take one hour now takes 15 minutes.

Some of the participants noted that in the new WFH situation, they find themselves being able to focus more with their work-places being physically separated because they are able to focus more naturally and listen to their own preferable work rhythm rather than just work in the given time frame:

F: I would say I am 50% more productive from home because I have no one to disturb me... asking me questions... which [in the office] is difficult to get into the flow... while now with the concentration it is easier as I have also much less stress.

Lastly, among the positive aspects of digital connectivity (Van Dijck, 2013) is the previous high saturation of it. This means, that for many interviewees the situation didn't feel so different as they were used to working from home and as such it was not problematic. In this section one could see many positive opinions on the changed work situation, however, the quick pace and higher focus of the online work environment might not be only positive. It can also mean that in the digital environment people are less willing to spend time on the 'connectedness' part or that some people are not feeling comfortable/speak up in the digital meetings.

As introduced in the last paragraph, the digital connectivity brings as well certain negative aspects to it. Some participants didn't share the higher sense of belonging to their companies which can be seen in the previous chapter on human connectedness (Van Dijck, 2013):

D: [...] we try to have online fikas, so I feel connected to my team but not with the rest of the company. So to say, with the overall company it is worse. They give us updates but I don't feel connected to the company as a whole.

F: I feel much more disconnected from my company because they don't put so much effort in making us feel connected. So I feel more separated and it makes the work relation worse ... now it is more sterile.

The answers from participants D and F remind of isolation (Blauner, 1964) from work. Work isolation was defined by Blauner (1964) as “[...] the worker feels no sense of belonging in the work situation or is unable to identify or uninterested in identifying with the organization and its goals.” (1964, p.24). Participant F expressed himself negatively about the company's lack of effort to go beyond the work obligations. Now he feels all communication and relationship is more “business oriented”.

Front region and back region

The front and back region (Goffman, 1956) are important terms in connection to the boundary theory (Nippert-Eng 1996) and transformation between ritual states (Bengtsson, 2006). That is because the front and back region are demarcated by some form of boundaries, where transformation between ritual states is useful in order to change from one (region or ritual state) into another.

To be in the front region for the interviewees means to be at work. This reality is true regardless whether the work happens online or in the office, as many interviewees are still communicating with their colleagues or clients online. However, for many interviewees the front region at home changed. There is usually no need to look too professionally as voiced by Participant I:

I: I am in comfortable clothes, I don't have to commute, the whole preparation, the transition to work is so much more smooth and calm.

The change to the relaxing back region is also much easier. For example, Participant D's front region is now set more by her which creates a nicer work environment. Moreover, she can take her meetings (front region) on the balcony and structure her day more according to her:

D: I can manage my time in a better way and don't need to commute, and I take longer breaks. I also eat healthier [and] enjoy my plants more [with] the balcony, and [that] I can take meetings there. I was here (in my apartment) usually when it was already dark, so I am happy to see my apartment [more] during sunlight.

The quote above is also connected to the higher presence in the back region which will be discussed in the following section.

The back region (Goffman, 1956) is the place for people to drop off their performances, relax and be themselves. For many interviewees, the fact that they work from home now offered many positive aspects because they gained some time which would otherwise be "lost" in commuting or getting ready for work. For some it was easier to access the back region in this new situation. The back region (Goffman, 1956) is accessed through different transformation between regions and with establishing different boundaries. Accessing the back region is important in order to balance out the presence in the front region (Turkle, 2008), where people work and make work calls, and are often happening in the same environment as leisure is.

For example, Participant E was talking about the ways he can incorporate his back region more easily to his everyday life:

E: I found out that I prefer to communicate digitally [with work] to be honest, because it gives me so much more time to focus, I feel like I can kind of incorporate my life a little bit more, because in between working on assignments I can go for a

walk or have a snack. I also noticed that my work hours are more flexible as I might start earlier, then stop at some point, and then pick up again in the evening.

Moreover, “When the world gives you lemons, turn them into a lemonade” ... seems to be a motto of many of the interviewees as they found many positive aspects originating from the new situation and having more time on their hands (thus the ability to spend more time in their back regions) which they would like to take away with them into the future. Several participants noted the increased simplicity as anchoring and were being mindful of reflecting on their previous hectic way of living, as illustrated by Participant E:

E: For sure I would like to take a certain sense of simplicity. I would also like to take advantage of the nature, flexible schedule and focus on the little things, like cooking. A bit of happiness in the simplicity as a creative outlet which I would like to continue doing.

The clashing between the front and the back regions, or the backstage control (Goffman, 1959) occurs when two regions overlap and it creates problems for the people. For some participants these clashes are harder in the home environment (in contrast with physically segmented work environments), as the merge between different regions is more present. Because of the higher integration of the regions, the backstage control can occur more often as those regions are closer together.

For Participant K, the clashing between different regions (front and back) was a problem for her routines. The problem seems to be with the mental segmentations (Nippert-Eng 1996), which the participants are in charge of. There are no supervisors controlling them and thus sometimes it is hard to stick to the mental or temporal boundary within one geographical frame which creates the clashes between the front region (when the Participant should be working) and the back region (relaxing by watching TV):

K: For example I have this bad habit that when I eat I watch TV and then when I am done eating I realise, I am home, I can just continue watching TV for another 20 minutes and that's the moment when the routine starts to break down.

Boundary theory

Different regions (front/back) or different ritual states (work/rest) are usually somehow demarcated. This demarcation of an appropriate behaviour (ritual state) has different kinds depending on its nature. It is very important to say that for all of the interviewees, the new WFH situation shifted all of their previous boundaries. The physical boundary was shifted from office to home, the temporal from set time frame such as 9–5, to another time frame which the participants decided for themselves (with usually longer working hours). Moreover, the mental boundary changed too as it had to be developed more (as seen in the examples with exercising or unplugging).

Integration of boundaries happens when the boundaries for different ritual states (activities) are not firmly separated (Nippert-Eng 1996). Segmentation appears through firmly separating boundaries between different activities (Nippert-Eng 1996). These will be described in the further chapters respectively: physical boundary, temporal boundary, and mental boundary.

An example of mixing several forms of boundaries can be seen in this quote by Participant H who enjoys different ways to establish boundaries between her work and leisure. From physical, to an intramedia transformation where she enjoys some cultural programme:

H: [In order to relax] I am going out in the nature but also being active and physical. Also, a nice way to shut off [work] is [to watch online] theatre from the BBC which gives me non-corona-related culture.

The physical boundary refers to the geographical change of frames (such as changing rooms or devoting a space for work in the WFH environment). Physical boundary is very useful as its

boundaries are firmly fixed unlike with the (mental and temporal) forms of boundaries. For approximately half of the respondents it was harder in the new situation to disconnect from work. For the other half it was easier or the same. This situation seemed to be easier to disconnect from for those who experienced less stress in this new WFH set-up. For participants who articulated the problem with setting boundaries for work and leisure as both are happening in the same environment, this often resulted in blurring the boundaries and overworking which will be further demonstrated. For example, Participant C, who enjoys working from home acknowledged that she misses only one aspect of working in the open-office, and that is the physical segmentation of the work and leisure environments. At home she has more troubles setting boundaries as they are more integrated.

Participant J then further touched upon the problem of the lack of physical boundaries on mental health. He experienced a burnout in the past when overworking himself which taught him to separate his work and leisure more in order to relax. In his quote we can explicitly see the importance of physical and temporal segmentation of boundaries:

J: [...] if you are not careful, then work from home can be difficult for you to stop working. Especially if you have the same space for leisure and work and you don't put a hard stop to your work. But I learned this the hard way before the coronavirus. I experienced a burnout last year and it was terrible but it was solely my doing because I tend to put more work on my shoulders than I can handle...

From the answers it seemed that the lack of physical segmentation overrules the temporal or mental segmentations (Nippert-Eng 1996) as unlike the others, physical segmentation does not depend on the individual will of the people, unlike the other two forms of segmentation.

Due to the lack of space, most respondents did not have a completely separated workplace (except Participant J) but ex-

pressed they would want one. However, many participants still had a special place at home where they were working from. For some participants, nature was part of the physical segmentation. Going to nature was a recharging activity for many, as a practice for changing the frames. Furthermore, Participant G enjoyed nature but he connected it also to being offline which is a mixture of the physical and mental boundaries:

G: We do day walks and enjoy the nature or go for a run. I [also] enjoy recharging form work by not being online... because that's my work and the opposite is that (not being online) so I can recharge from it.

Interestingly, in a study done by Atchley et al. (2012) adults who spent four days in nature devoid of all access from electronic technology demonstrated an increase in creative problem solving skills. Even though the interviewees didn't do any retreat like this, they still felt that being in nature is recharging them.

Temporal and mental boundaries seem to go hand in hand. For a certain amount of time (20 min for break or eight hours for work), people have the mental boundary set for 'leisure' or 'work' or other activities.

Integration of temporal boundaries is connected to the lack of the physical boundary which was present in interviewees' former offices/studios. In the new situation it was harder for many to stick to the temporal boundary such as the work framework of nine-to-five for work. For example, Participant E acknowledged that the looser temporal segmentation of his work tasks is leading to a higher willingness to work overtime:

E: [...] because of my flexibility I feel more willing to be more available. Five hours a week maybe on average. Before corona, the time frame was much more set and we shouldn't do any overtime.

Other participants were describing the problems which were introduced in the boundary integration section. The biggest

problem for many was the difficulty to stick to their temporal boundary for work (usually eight hours for work) to stop working which resulted in overworking. For Participant I, the integration of temporal boundaries happened also due to having a job in a big international company with worldwide clients, thus the boundaries of worktimes on one side of the globe sometime integrated with hers.

Another form of a temporal boundary is the concept of a weekend/workweek. The time for leisure and disconnection from work was usually connected to the notion of weekends. The following quote is a reflection of a Participant H on what the biggest difference for her between their workweek and weekend is:

H: In theory I try to keep weekends free but now few things are happening during it so I will work during them as well. I try to give myself some time off so social distancing works very well. I try to be outside and meet up with someone to socialize and exercise so right now it is one day to socialize and one day just for me.

However, here it is important to note, that Participant H lives in Sweden where casual socializing is possible. In the Czech Republic during quarantine, meetups with friends would not have been as easy as every outdoor activity was supposed to be well-justified. That is also why people in the Czech Republic might be missing some aspects of ‘connectedness’ more because they are being more affected by the situation socially.

Drawing on the responses, the lack of a physical boundary in connection to the looser temporal (and mental) boundary, often resulted in people working much more.

A possible reason for overworking is the changed sense of time which is being affected by the lack of physical boundary and not sticking to the temporal or mental boundaries. Therefore, it seems that the penetration of work into the weekend is easier in this setup for some of the participants. Similarly, to the conclusion found in Turkle’s work (2008), many participants had difficulties detaching themselves from work and as such faced

overworking or burnouts. Shockingly, all the respondents except for one whose work tasks were reduced in general, commented that they work more hours now.

The temporal boundaries were not all only integrated. For some participants the temporal boundary still acted as a tool for segmenting their ritual states. However, for example Participant A experienced problems in the new set up as his boundaries are too integrated and he acknowledged himself that he would need stricter temporal boundary segmentation:

A: I believe [it would take me] one more month for going crazy (two months in total) or I would have to change more things, like giving myself stricter work hours with strict times for work and leisure.

Furthermore, many of the examples which could be used here were already introduced previously as they are also falling under the physical boundary because many participants are mixing them with other forms of boundaries.

Mental boundaries are set with an intention to be in a certain ‘ritual state’ (Bengtsson, 2006), such as work. Similarly, to the temporal boundary, the mental boundary is often hard to follow, because it requires discipline with routines. But many participants lack or were not able to create them yet. Perhaps due to the hardness of segmenting boundaries, which could be connected with the overworking introduced in the *Integration of physical boundaries* part, most of the interviewees didn’t have any routine for ending their work day.

However, for some participants who experienced increased focus and decreased stress (such as Participant F) in this new situation, it is nonetheless easier to disconnect from work and create a mental boundary. This segmented mental boundary can be seen in the “disconnection” from work due to a higher focus. Participant F can more easily relax his mind when not working, because he is less stressed:

F: I feel it is easier to disconnect from work now, because I can work much more in focus and it is less stressful, not as frustrating and then I shut of my computer and I can disconnect more.

Although ‘exercising’ is organised under the mental segmentation, it was also an activity scheduled for a specific time for interviewee C, therefore it has aspects of a temporal boundary segmentation too. Besides the general ways to set up mental segmentation of boundaries introduced earlier, exercising was often used for ending a work day.

C: Exercising is the only boundary I have to switch off because other than that it is hard for me to set up boundaries. So it is good that the exercise makes sure that I never stay longer with it, [it acts as a] time restraint.

After exercising, another form of creating the mental boundary (Nippert-Eng 1996) could be found through digital disconnection which seemed to be for many an important aspect of relaxing. Both people who are exposed to a lot of digital activities, and also the participants of my interviews, were doing some unplugging practices, as many of their activities shifted onto digital platforms. So it is perhaps this heavy use of digital technologies for various aspects of participants’ lives, including work, social, and entertainment aspects which creates the need for the opposite.

A: I use the moon icon to shut down all the applications to disconnect from work.

To conclude, among the most frequent ways to access the back region (Goffman, 1956) and relax from work was for the interviewees to disconnect from their devices, exercise, and be in the nature. This was done by segmenting their boundaries either physically, temporally or mentally.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to explore the impact of the situation imposed by the spread of COVID-19 on people working in creative industries and their creative processes, and analyse the role of media in reconstructing their work and leisure spaces at home. This was done by conducting eleven interviews based on relevant theories on boundaries, regions, digital connections and creativity. These interviews were done with people working in the creative industry both in Sweden and the Czech Republic. The impact was explored by asking the interviewees to assess and compare this situation with their previous way of work. Their creative processes were studied through their eyes, both compare the ease of work individually or in a team and what impact they experienced on their creativity and the processes connected with it. The role of media was analysed through interviewees' behaviour in the front and back region.

When Turkle (2008) discussed conclusions from her interviews, she wrote that for people to regain time, they need to unplug (p.132), which she argues is not easy as the technologies to unplug from became extensions of our minds and bodies and being online is often part of some "social contract" which requires availability and responsibility. The interviews I conducted 12 years after Turkle's showed that the interviewees' opinions were largely the same. Many participants had the urge to disconnect from their devices in order to access the back region. However, similarly to Turkle's case (2008), the connection was part of a social contract (or also a job contract), thus people still had the need to digitally communicate with their friends and families even though it was extending their screen time.

Furthermore, van Dijck (2015) explained that connectivity follows a longer historical trend towards re-shifting boundaries between private, corporate and public domains (p.12). It is however obvious from the responses, that people still need to have boundaries in order to relax. As such, when this is influencing the well-being of their employees, it should be an interest of the

employers as well, as suggested in Fish (2017, p.362). Companies also need to find effective ways to communicate and spread team spirit, which in the long turn will be beneficial for the whole remote-working sector. The majority of my interviewees were happy with their employers doing a good job in creating the feeling of belonging.

For the majority, it was easier to focus in the WFH environment. Most of the people however were working more (perhaps also due to the higher focus) and some have had problems to stop working which was not ideal as it can lead to overworking or burnouts.

Even though they were overworking, people noted (mostly) that they do enjoy working from home. In some cases, it offered more time on their hands which was beneficial for their work-life balance. Furthermore, participants tried to take out the positive from the situation. Participants who were not living alone in their households were handling the socially isolated situation well. Those who did not share a household (and living in Sweden) proceeded with socialising as it was an important part of their life and perhaps is not easily replaced by online connections. The work-related digital connections seemed to be mostly working for the participants, even creating a greater bond with their employers.

As such, the notion of isolation did not prove to be largely influenced by the physical disconnection. The overriding factor for the participants was to see an effort from their employers in informing and creating online social opportunities.

To access the back region (and as such, handling the change of their work/leisure environment), the interviewees were doing a combination of different kinds of boundary segmentation. Different boundaries helped to diversify between different ritual states for work or leisure. The physical boundary segmentation included going to the nature or for a walk. The temporal boundary was achieved by allocating certain times for rest (such as lunch breaks or several breaks throughout the day). Finally, the mental boundary was set by focusing on other activities, such as

hobbies, exercising or unplugging. The combination of several boundaries was sometimes used, perhaps for achieving larger relaxation, such as physical and mental boundary combined. Many forms of media are filling the home environments of the participants, and as such were difficult to reflect on. However, more important than the presence of media was the potential absence of it. Especially in connection to reconstructing interviewees' environments. Disconnection (or unplugging) often acted as an opportunity to enter the back region, as the front region (work) was connected with being digitally present.

Furthermore, music has had a large role especially before the WFH situation. Right now, the need for creating social exclusivity was not as needed, thus listening to music stopped being as important for many of the participants. To add, some interviewees were also accessing their back region either through intra- or intermedia ways of using their devices. As such, the media allowed to reshape the nature of the environment significantly (such as watching TV in the same room as where people are working).

For the majority of the respondents, to work creatively was easier or similar in the new WFH set up. This was influenced by a mixture of factors, including, that creativity is a rather internal matter, the 'climate' for work at home is often perceived as less distracting, and that the motivation can now be higher both because of the situation imposed by COVID-19 (and some creatives working on projects related to it) and because of the motivation of securing their jobs. Even though some participants voiced that they miss their colleagues' input, it didn't affect their level of creativity (except for one participant). This novel situation imposed by COVID-19 seemed to provide many positive and unexpected factors together with challenges for the interviewees. It is possible, that due to health or economic factors work from home will be the work-setup of the future. As such, this chapter has articulated the difficulties and advantages of the boundary integration and segmentation in a condensed space for people working within the creative industry.

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Fostering “good” losers: A study of toxic behaviors and gaming capital in competitive online games

Azul Romo Flores

Over the past decades gaming has grown from a hobby to a global mass market. This can be demonstrated through the growing diverse audience and the vast number of players. *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve Corporation, 2016), for example, has an average of 900,000 active players per month (SteamCharts, 2020) and a recent report from the Entertainment Software Association (2020) stated that there are currently 214.4 million gamers in the United States, ranging from children to elderly players. Further, the importance of acknowledging video games as a unique market can be noted through the economic growth in terms of revenue (e.g. *Call of Duty: Black Ops* sold for 30.99 million USD in unit sales (Gough, 2020)) and employment possibilities (Harvey, 2019). Arguably, games have gained an increase in cultural value, which may be seen through the impact of the electronic sports (eSports) scene and streaming (Gandolfi, 2016; Seo, 2013) and game-based tools which help improve education (Buckingham & Burn, 2007; Wagner, 2006), citizenship and science participation (Lieberoth, Bro Wellnitz, & Aagaard, 2015).

Conversely, public debates on video games and the act of gaming and the gaming community tends to lean towards the negative influences of said activity. Mainstream media commonly re-opens this discussion after mass shootings in the United

States (Copenhaver, 2015; Pidd, 2012) claiming games convert kind suburban kids into mass-murderers, despite the many studies that have demonstrated the opposite effects (Halbrook, O'Donnell, & Msetfi, 2019; Lundmark, 2015; Majamäki & Hellman, 2016).

For those unfamiliar with games, they consist of entering a space balanced with fun and sets of rules. Historically, this space is referred to as the “magic circle,” a space of play parallel to the real world (Huizinga, 1955; Juul, 2008). Games often consist of objectives and puzzles which the players need to fulfill in order to progress. Ideally a well-made game places the player in a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) where s/he is in balance between focus, involvement and enjoyment. There are many types of games that are defined by their genre, which in turn are developed based on particular traits that build the genre and expectations for that game and genre (Consalvo, 2007).

The present study will focus on competitive multiplayer games, which in traditional game studies are games where players are required to form strategies that directly oppose those of the opponent players in the game. In order to succeed with the game's objective, players require proficiency or “skill” to execute tasks, knowledge of the game and team synchronization (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009; Johnson, Nacke, & Wyeth, 2015; Märtens, Shen, Iosup, & Kuipers, 2015; Romo Flores, 2018). Games of this nature are typically played as matches, where a win is granted to the team who completed an objective or a set of rounds. *Valorant*, for example, consists of purely graphical menus. By selecting a *game mode* the player will enter the playing field itself (see Image 1) where the system connects the required players together for the match to start (called “queueing”). Each match is played in rounds, where each round has the objective of either arming or disarming a bomb or killing all the opponent players. The match itself ends when a team has won sixteen rounds.

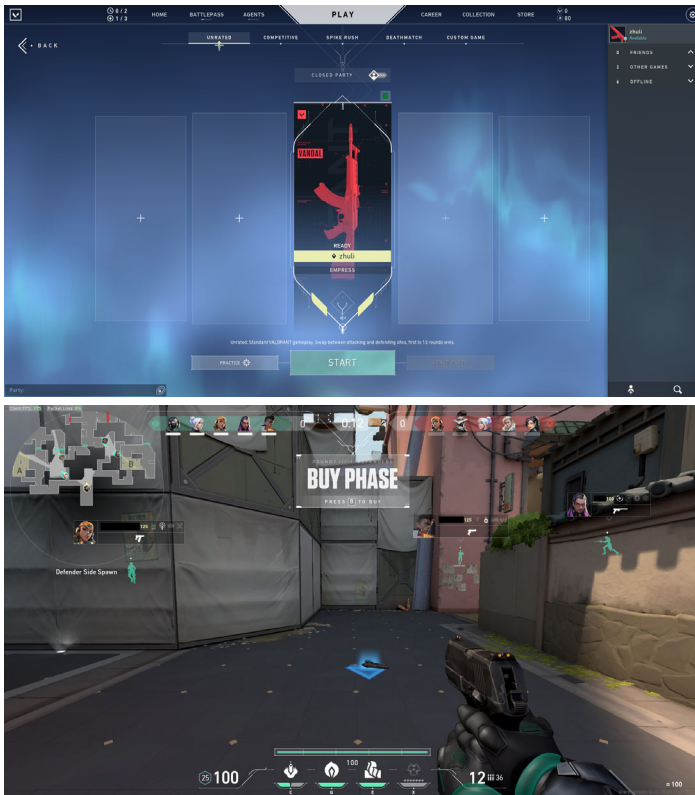


Image 1 (top). A screenshot of the game Valorant once the players start the game itself. Source: Author; Image 2 (bottom). The game when players enter the playing “field”. Source: Author, edited to anonymize players.

Team coordination and playing against skilled (or less skilled) players is not always as simple as it sounds, it happens (more often than it should) that players are placed in a position where they are harassed, humiliated and cyberbullied (Kwak, Blackburn, & Han, 2015). Scholars have examined these antisocial social interactions for various decades, both in digital media (Davis, 2002; Turkle, 2008) and in video games (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009; Lundmark, 2015). In game studies however, disruptive and antisocial behaviors have been explored under the term “toxic” behaviors, which commonly refers to a large range

of ‘bad’ behaviors with the intention of harming others through various methods such as sending messages. Mattinen and Macey explain:

[in online game settings] the motives for both trolling and grieving are manifold, and include: aiming to destroy the game, to disrupt gameplay and group proceedings, to harass and provoke other participants, to display power and knowledge, and sometimes even to create culture. (Mattinen & Macey, 2018, p. 2).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the medium and environment of competitive multiplayer games and how toxic behaviors are conveyed and interpreted by players in this setting. The intent is not to redefine existing definitions of toxic behaviors, but rather to expand and clarify what has been previously established through building an analytical framework that may establish a foundation for understanding the phenomenon as a context and not in isolation from other events. As stated by McLuhan (1994): “Games are popular art, collective, social reactions to the main drive of action of any culture. Games, like institutions, are extensions of social man and of the body politic, as technologies are extensions of the animal organism.” (p. 255). In light of the frequency with which disruptive behaviors occur, it renders it worthwhile to investigate to which extent successful games can be seen as mirrors of the societies in which they are produced, and it is crucial to understand these spaces and the users who inhabit them, in order to foster an inclusive and safe environment.

This study incorporates the lens of media studies and audience behavior to gain a broader perspective on how players reason and act in digital spaces. Borrowing capital theory from Bourdieu (1984; 1990; 1983) and reworkings of it (Burkart & Anderson Schwarz, 2014; Consalvo, 2007), this study seeks to include personal values and reasoning as a contributing factor for perceiving and understanding toxic behaviors in multiplayer games.

The research questions which this study aims to answer are the following:

RQ1, *user perception*: How do players perceive and experience 'toxicity' in the setting of competitive multiplayer games?

RQ2, *user action*: How do players respond to (act on) toxic behavior in the setting of competitive multiplayer games? Do users engage and try to prevent, do they encourage such behavior, or other?

RQ3, *capital*: What aspects of the gaming environment influence or contribute to the players' perception of toxic behavior in competitive multiplayer games?

Toxic Behaviors in Online Games

Toxic behavior has previously been referred to as cyberbullying. According to Thompson and his colleagues (2017) the toxicity present in *Starcraft 2* does not meet the definitions of cyberbullying due to the fact that "players part ways after a fifteen minute game" (2017, p.160) which is an important aspect of many of the modern online games: temporary interactions with strangers. Other studies (Kou & Gui, 2014, p. 161) have reported that temporary teams have a low level of social interaction amongst the players and that these players may or may not interact. This raises the question of where and why toxic behaviors occur.

The presence of toxic behavior in online games has been well documented both by researchers and by the communities of such games (Core-A Gaming, 2018; Kwak & Blackburn, 2014; Tang & Fox, 2016; Crowbcats, 2015). Toxicity, or toxic behaviors are often defined through a combination of alternative terms such as *flaming* (Lee, Jeong, & Jeon, 2019), *trash-talking* (Matten & Macey, 2018) and *trolling* which commonly refer to malicious accusations and verbal hostility towards others. Infor-

mally, the gaming community may use the term “salt”¹ to refer to toxic behaviors (Core-A Gaming, 2018). Furthermore, toxic behaviors may encompass non-verbal actions as well, by disrupting the game experience using the game mechanics (permitted actions within the game).

Reasons for becoming or expressing toxic behaviors are manifold. Previous research suggests that competition itself and playing competitive game modes (Shores et al., 2017) and anonymity (Chen, Duh, & Ng, 2009; Davis, 2002) are influential aspects that promote antisocial behaviors. Additional reasons which have been proposed are not admitting one’s own flaws and blaming others (Romo Flores, 2018) and failing to recognize when being toxic (Chen, Duh, & Ng, 2009; Kwak & Blackburn, 2014). The most recurring form of toxic behavior is through language, either in the voice- or text-based communication systems in the game (Kou & Gui, 2014; Kwak & Blackburn, 2014; Märten et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2017). Interestingly, even in online card games where there is no chat function, toxicity can be experienced when players befriend other players after a match to access a private chat-room and harass them (Türkay & Adinolf, 2019). Exposure of toxicity in online games may result in degrading the user experience (Kwak, Blackburn & Han, 2015), lead players to quit the game permanently, or even scare away new players (Chen, Duh & Ng, 2009; Shores et al., 2014).

Theoretical Context

Bourdiesian theory is traditionally applied within social sciences, and his theories and concepts have been broadly used within media studies (Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Lindell, 2015; Ohlsson, Lindell, & Arkhede, 2017) and game studies (Consalvo, 2007). The present study will borrow Bourdieu’s concepts *capital* and

¹ Salt refers to is as an expression of signifying that a player is angry and thus, expressing toxic behaviors such as insults or breaking controllers, One can also say that a comment is “salty” or that a person is “salty.”

field. *Capital* refers to intangible social constructs that dictate the status of an individual (or collective) in a society. *Social capital* refers to the networks that an individual has, it may be relationships which the person creates in their life or relationships which are inherited (Bourdieu, 1983; 1984). *Cultural capital* refers to both tangible and intangible assets which differentiate an individual based on social class, for example a person's skills and tastes, material belongings or cultural competence (such as education or qualifications) (Bourdieu, 1983; 1984). Additionally, Bourdieu describes *economic* (currency which may be traded for resources) and *symbolic* capital (the prestige of an individual as a collection of social, cultural and economic capital), though these will be excluded due to the scope of this thesis. *Field* is the "place" where one develops capital and accumulates resources, for example the childhood home where one is raised and taught specific values. *Habitus* is the accumulation of individual experiences that shape one's capital.

Mia Consalvo (2007) reworked Bourdieu's concept of capital and applied it to games as "gaming capital." The term refers to the accumulated knowledge of games and game culture as it serves to classify groups by their system of preferences and dispositions, in a way similar to the categorization of social class. Consalvo explains that games are not developed, marketed, nor played in a cultural vacuum, instead how players perceive games is often dictated by paratexts, meaning user-created content such as reviews and walkthroughs (Consalvo, 2007, p. 176) and not necessarily by the information given by the game itself. Consalvo utilizes outdated resources (such as DVDs and tapes; 2007, p.59), therefore this study includes the current primary sources for gamers which include user-created content site YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2018) and streaming platform Twitch.tv (Gandolfi, 2016), and social media sites.

Burkart & Andersson Schwarz (2014) applied and reworked Bourdieu's concept of *field* and *habitus* in the field of internet privacy as a method to describe the relationship between agency and knowledge of a field. Originally, Bourdieu argued that per-

sonal beliefs and knowledge had the same meaning and value. Burkart and Andersson Schwarz on the other hand, argue that there is a difference between these concepts, where beliefs are the personal and represent the individual's investment in the norms of a field, whereas the knowledge of a field represents an objective and rational view of the field. As they describe: "agency is determined by the extent to which the participants are able to make an effective use of the resources they are endowed with; it is a function of the adaptation of their habitus in a specific field." (Burkart & Andersson Schwarz, 2014, p. 229). The reworking of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field is applied as an illustration of the relationship between three distinct categories: *praxis* (habits and engagement of an individual), *doxa* (beliefs that support personal values) and *knowledge* (general understanding of a field and its norms).

Methodology

Existing studies on player interactions and behavior have used participant observation methods (Halloran, Rogers, & Fitzpatrick, 2003), examination of recorded gameplay sessions or chat logs (Kwak, Blackburn, & Han, 2015; Kou & Gui, 2014) and through questionnaires (Chen, Duh, & Ng, 2009; Johnson, Nacke, & Wyeth, 2015). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative approach is used to obtain phenomenological insight which may otherwise be missed.

While traditional ethnography (Jensen, 2012a) would be suitable for the present study, digital games are a rather different study object as the environment lacks physicality and the engagement with the artifact (game or users) occurs within the virtual space through digital tools, such as the text-based communication systems. Therefore, this study applies digital ethnography (Ibid.) as a method for exploring the virtual space and cultures that inhabit them. Although digital ethnography has been criticized for lacking various traits from traditional ethnography such as proximity, physical presence of the researcher,

and face-to-face contact (Bengtsson, 2014); other scholars have used this method within game studies because the researcher needs to submerge in the virtual worlds and experience them in order to analyze their content, may it be narrative, gameplay or other factors (Brown, 2015). Furthermore, this approach serves as an effective method for observational research to avoid including an additional games research method which would require a different structure, such as categorizing game components through "formal analysis" (Lankoski & Björk, 2015), and therefore deviate from the scope of this study.

In addition, semi-structured interviews (Jensen, 2012b) with active competitive players were conducted to gain insight of players' perception, awareness, and responses towards toxic behaviors in online games. The empirical data will account for the praxis and doxa (Burkart & Andersson Schwarz, 2014) of players and the relationship to gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007) which may influence their understanding and engagement with the game. Because the aim of this study is to understand specific practices, obtaining significant results would have been more difficult using traditional ethnographic methods (such as participant observation) due to the unpredictability of its occurrence, hence the retrospective interviews with active gamers.

Previous studies (Johnson, Nacke, & Wyeth, 2015; Romo Flores, 2018; Tyack, Wyeth, & Johnson, 2016) have shown that online games are complex systems and have an intense learning curve and require vast game-related knowledge (such as positioning of a character, individual abilities of characters and combination of these together or against other characters, etc.). Because toxic behaviors are defined as deviant from social norms (Kwak, Blackburn & Han, 2015), it would prove useful to highlight what these "norms" are within the gaming context. Thus, this study will incorporate the technical aspect of games. As there are indications of non-verbal practices (Kwak & Blackburn, 2014; Myers, 2019), adding the technicality of games may provide insight to how these actions could encourage toxic behavior in competitive games.

Participants

A theoretical sample (Jensen, 2012b) was gathered through network sampling (Facebook groups and Discord servers) and through snowballing techniques. All participants were recruited based on three criteria: 1) the participant is regularly playing a competitive multiplayer game, 2) is active and plays at least six hours per week,² and 3) decent proficiency in English (for the interview). The recruitment of female, older (above thirty years of age) and self-proclaimed 'toxic' players, was difficult to achieve within the time limit for this study, resulting in an unbalanced sample. Because the participants are primarily experienced players, who have a better understanding of the game, the sample is not a fully scientifically designed random sample, therefore the conclusions drawn from this study were extrapolated with caution to apply to other players' perceptions and engagement with toxic behavior.

The sample group consisted of 14 participants aged 17 to 40, where the majority (87%) were men. Regarding occupational demographics, half the sample reported they were students, and the other half were employed. The country of residence for most participants was Sweden, but there were some living in Germany (2), Mexico (1), Greece (1), and England (1). Most of the participants spent 6–12 hours per week playing video games and a significant number of participants played over 12 hours per week (6 of 14). The majority had at least 4 years of previous experience with competitive multiplayer games. The games that were discussed during the interview were based on the game that the participants played, which were Apex Legends (1), Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (4), League of Legends (4), Overwatch (5) and Super Smash Bros. Melee (3).

² The average gamer adult in the United States spends 4.8 hours per week with others online (Entertainment Software Association, 2020).

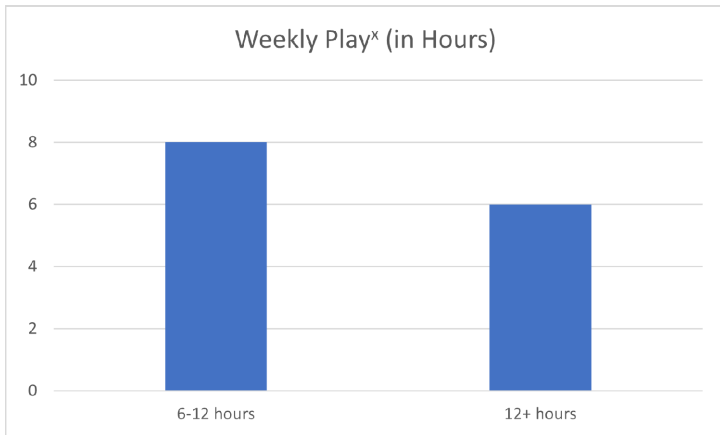


Figure 1. Participants demographics: weekly play in hours. x = of competitive game discussed during interview. Source: Author.



Figure 2. Participants demographics: experience with game in years. x = of competitive game discussed during interview. Source: Author.

Data gathering

The interview guide consisted of two sections, excluding demographics: gaming capital and behaviors in competitive games. The first section aimed to gather information about players' resources in relation to gaming, based on the concept of capital

(Bourdieu, 1984; Consalvo, 2007) which included both internal (within the game) and external (outside of game) factors such as friends, player-created content, among other. The second section covered players' perspective of toxic behaviors based on three categories: awareness (of toxicity), perception, and response (or action). These categories are based on conclusions from previous research in the field and adapted to the structure and theory of Burkart and Andersson Schwarz (2014). Toxic behaviors have previously been studied from the perspective of victims or bystanders (Cook, Schaafsma, & Antheunis, 2018, p. 3325), therefore this study integrated questions focusing on the self to gain insight on players' perceptions of their own behavior.

All interviews were conducted by the author between 26 of March and 26 of April, 2020. The interviews lasted between 34 and 103 minutes and were held over Discord (a communication software) and Facebook Messenger (a communication service). All interviews were recorded with the Open Broadcaster Software (OBS Studio, 2020), and transcribed using oTranscribe (Bentley, 2020).

The responses were in turn analyzed and coded first into the pre-established themes, then re-analyzed based on thematic analysis (Jensen, 2012b) and interpreted with particular focus on the cultural assumptions which could be deduced from them.

Identifying Toxic Behaviors

Most of the participants were aware of the negative outcomes toxic behavior has, both for oneself and others. Interestingly, it was not the actions themselves, but the consequences of such behavior which the participants emphasized. Results indicate there is a difference in gravity of toxic behaviors, for example, trash-talking an opponent would not particularly affect the other players, while doing it to an ally would often result in decreased team synergy, performance and thus, a negative match outcome (losing the match). Some participants described the importance of understanding context, especially when deeming verbal prac-

tices as toxic. As participant N said: "Words are a tricky thing. It usually depends on what the intent of the person is: are you swearing at a person or are you reacting at whatever?" meaning when not directly targeting another person, curse words would be tolerated. Furthermore, verbal toxicity is mostly accepted amongst players when the insult concerns a player's skill or proficiency in the game, as individual performance may depend on having a bad day or experience with the game and can be improved. In contrast, insulting another player based on personal traits such as gender, appearance, and age, would not be tolerated at all.

Three categories of toxicity could be identified from the analysis: verbal, physical and in-game practices. The first concerns language, in spoken or written form. The second category examines physical toxicity, which requires external stimuli for expressing toxic behaviors. This category was primarily explored in console gaming, though it suggests that players may express toxic behaviors when playing alone or when not being seen (eg. pointing the middle finger to someone across the screen who cannot see the action). The last category concerns in-game practices which refer to any disrespectful action made through the game avatar or mechanics. In other words, the action itself is not offensive but rather an exploitation or deviation from its intended purpose was deemed inappropriate. For example, crouching with a character is a feature with a purpose within the game and not considered disrespectful, while crouching repeatedly over a dead character (steered by another person) is deemed disrespectful and toxic (Myers, 2019). Most players considered in-game mechanics as being the worst form of toxicity because it could not be ignored or suppressed. Verbal toxicity could often be "muted" by features in the game rendering victims free of the verbal harassments, while in-game actions could not, and victims and bystanders had to endure these throughout the rest of the match.

There were mixed responses from the respondents as to what actions were deemed toxic. Some cases, such as disruptive behavior through mechanics could be considered bad mannered

and not toxic per se. This may indicate that in order for an action to be considered toxic, it needs to be not only disrespectful but perhaps repeated over a longer period of time and have a harmful intention. In contrast, there was a consensus amongst the respondents, that toxic behavior amongst friends was tolerated. Primarily, because of an “unwritten rule” where the players know each other’s limits and were careful not to overstep those boundaries. This behavior was referred to as *banter*, meaning a harmless, tease-like harassment. The relationship between humorous and harmful toxic practices can be seen in Figure 3, as well as knowledge of toxic practices and game knowledge in Figure 4. These illustrations have been analyzed and mapped based on Burkart and Andersson Schwarz (2014) interpretation of *praxis*, *doxa* and *knowledge* of a field, and pre-established definitions of toxic practices.

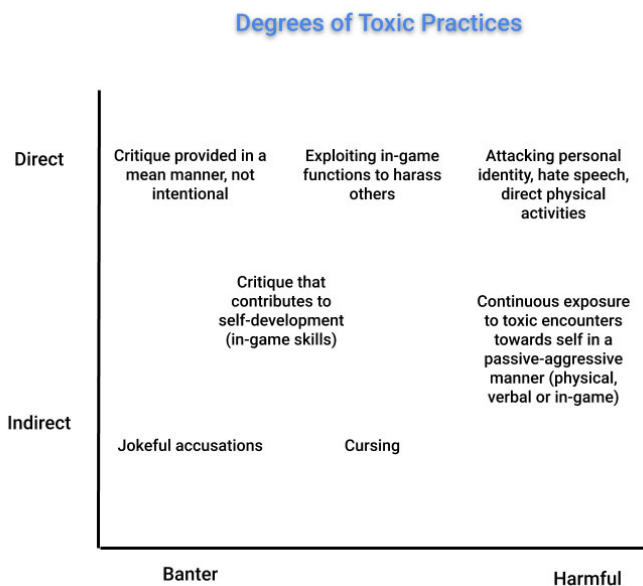


Figure 3. A diagram demonstrating the degree of toxic practices based on humorous (banter) to harmful, and if the intention is direct (targeting a person) to indirect (exclamations, not targeting a specific person). Source: Author.

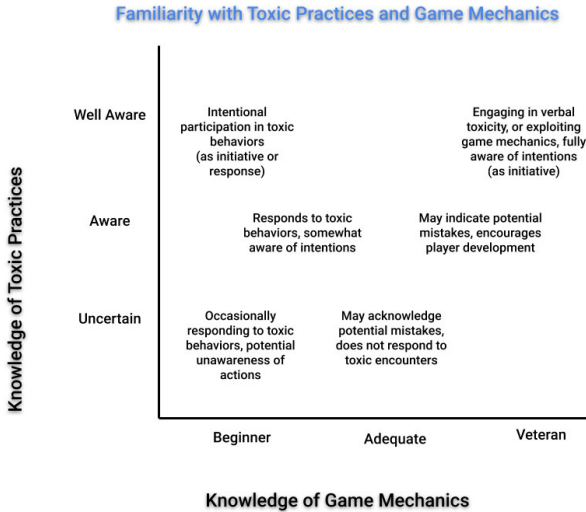


Figure 4. A visual representation of the relationship between knowledge of toxic practices and game knowledge. The axis represents the degree of severity between the aforementioned. Source: Author.

Most participants claimed they usually did not take offense from toxic behavior (directed at them), and some would not respond towards it (directed at themselves or others). There were multiple participants who described that they cared less about when toxicity was directed at them and were more concerned for how it affects others in that environment, such as children or new players. In this sense, toxic behavior would often scare away or hurt others in their community, which was undesired and coincides with previous research (Chen, Duh & Ng, 2009; Kwak & Blackburn, 2014; Kwak, Blackburn & Han, 2015; Mattinen & Macey, 2018; Shores et al., 2014). Interestingly, more players than expected discussed how they could respond both as victims and as offenders. One participant described that “When a situation feels hopeless it’s actually more fun to type in the chat than to play the game.” (Participant L). When intentional, actions could range from joking back (sarcastically), being annoying in the game or trolling, to kicking people out or typing “kill your-

self” to another player. Some participants described they could have been toxic unintentionally and that perhaps they did not notice, or that their actions could have been misinterpreted, but if they noticed their wrongful actions they would apologize. Brian Myers argues that audiences are “always aware of the various factors that shape their particular understandings of texts or cultural practices.” (2013, p.769). This could explain why players might not recognize their own behavior as toxic but could identify when others behave badly. Findings from this study suggest that both males and females, and players of any age group, may engage in toxic participation, men perhaps more frequently than women (or at least, men are more noticeable). Females and younger players are targeted more easily (Cote, 2017; Kniffin & Palacio, 2018; Tang & Fox, 2016), and findings from this study suggest that victims of toxic behaviors are often compared to female or young players when underperforming in a match, although there are no indications that these groups actually perform poorly in comparison to males.

Most game companies have in recent years implemented a Code of Conduct for games, meaning a legal agreement between the game service (e.g. game developer or publisher) and the user (e.g. player), as well as tools or systems for regulating and moderating toxic behaviors in online games (referred to as “report system”). Most participants knew that these rules existed but had never read the agreement themselves. Instead, they relied on common sense or the reporting system for acknowledging unsportsmanlike behavior. This finding suggests that gamers who act toxic because the environment permits it, are actually not aware that it is prohibited (in League of Legends “trolling” is listed as a prohibited action for example), in turn raising the question of whether companies are applying effective measures to inform and regulate their communities. In spite of these rules, there seems to be a lack in engagement by game companies to establish proper consequences, which is surprising since such performances are enacted in traditional sports as well and often penalized when deemed unsportsmanlike or disrespectful, in-

cluding behaviors from players, coaches and the audience (Dunning, Murphy, & Williams, 1986; Kniffin & Palacio, 2018; Simons, 2003) while in gaming contexts, players often get away with such behavior.

Gaming Capital

Regarding players' social capital, the present study examined both influences from direct friends (of the player) and idols or professional profiles whom they followed on social media. The spectatorship of media is nothing new, it has been practiced with, for example, football enthusiasts for many decades. Some games provide features where a player may participate in a match as a spectator (observer) and not as a player (meaning s/he is actively playing). There are also websites such as YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2018) or Twitch (Gandolfi, 2016) where players can observe others play. Most participants frequently used these platforms for entertainment purposes, and some had specific content-creators or professional players and eSport teams they followed. Often, it was the personality of the player which dictated if the participant would choose to follow them. Having a role model, or idol in some sense, may often dictate how one behaves and acts. While this study explored this theory there was not sufficient material to establish an answer.

Moreover, the second reason for watching player-created content or professionals was for learning more about the game in terms of strategies, meta-play or learning about recent upgrades to "stay up to date." These platforms then serve as paratexts for obtaining knowledge of a game and increase the agency of an individual based on their knowledge and engagement with the game. As described in the theoretical context of this study, the field (Bourdieu, 1983) thrives on a collective identity and shared appreciations of value by the agents (Burkart & Andersson Schwarz, 2014, p.229), thus agency can be developed through knowledge which in this case is shaped through observation.

To achieve victory, competitive games are designed so that all others must lose. In turn, players must build effective strategies, have proficiency with the game and coordinate with others to succeed. Such factors are referred to as *game awareness*, meaning how the player is supposed to think or act during the game (Johnson, Nacke, & Wyeth, 2015; Romo Flores, 2018) and becomes of importance when analyzing competition as a plausible cause for toxic behaviors. These strategies and knowledge were considered the most difficult aspect of competitive games, primarily because the game itself does not explicitly tell the player about such strategies, instead players need to learn it by themselves or through paratexts. Results from this study indicate that many players could predict when they would become a target for toxic behaviors because they would underperform during a match, suggesting that underperformance and lack of game awareness (and knowledge) is a strong influential factor for players to become or express toxicity, as the player underperforming becomes a liability to the desired outcome of the match.

Conclusion

Although toxic behaviors have been vastly researched in online games, there is a lack of research exploring this phenomenon from a broader perspective including a diverse sample of games and genres and in illustrating the gravity of toxic practices. Regarding the first issue, this study incorporates both First Person Shooter and Fighting game genres and compares the similarities (and differences) between games. Results from this study indicate that an influential factor for toxic practices is the difficulty of game systems, these design features may not be related to the genre or type of game, rather to the competitiveness origin. There was not sufficient material to fully explore if toxic behaviors may be influenced by the genre.

Despite the existence of behavioral guidelines established by game companies, there seems to be no discourse concerning the efficacy of reporting tools for toxic behaviors and which

methods are suitable for providing players with an understanding of the consequences of their behavior. In other words, there is a need for discussing ethics in competitive multiplayer games. One participant described "if players do not respond to the player being toxic it will naturally cease," but this is rather unrealistic, since deeming toxic behavior as toxic involves feelings and interpretation which differs amongst everyone and it is likely that people will not accept if for example, someone threw rocks at them. Additionally, games are accessible and attract a diverse audience, meaning the games can attract people of various ages and gender.

The audience for games which constituted primarily White boys now includes people of all gender, age, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, which defies the idea that games are still played by stereotypical White males (DiSalvo, 2016; Shaw, 2010). This means that in a digital space where both children and adults co-exist, the space needs to be adapted in a manner where all players are aware of the cause and consequences of their behavior, particularly for children who are not equipped with the right tools to comprehend or critically evaluate the situation they may be in.

As previously stated, toxic behaviors are vaguely defined by a collection of distinct antisocial constructs, like trash-talking and trolling. It is also a difficult task to define what constitutes "toxic behaviors," because in the end, it is the targeted person's interpretation of the behavior who deems the behavior 'bad' or not. We cannot expect young teenagers to understand contextual factors of complex concepts, more specifically when the issue at hand is degrading, and harmful. There are instances of toxic practices where the victim might not recognize the severity of what is being conveyed, and repeated exposure to such behavior may create a distorted perception of what behavior is normative in competitive gaming (or other settings as well). Toxicity should not be a catch-all phrase, as the results from this study indicate, there is a spectrum of harmfulness in toxic behaviors, where sarcastic jokes may be treated more seriously than they should,

and hostile threats may be taken less seriously. Findings from this study present an illustrated description of how to interpret this spectrum and may serve as an initial structure for building an analytical framework for analyzing and understanding toxic behaviors in competitive multiplayer games in the future. Further development on this framework may aid in constructing adaptive and adequate tools for moderating toxicity in games, because as argued, it depends on a broader social context that stems from features outside of the game such as matchmaking systems, community sorting and finding like-minded players. This may explain why the “culture” of toxic practices extends beyond a gendered phenomenon, and why it is proposed by this thesis as medium specific.

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Connectivity, Community and Hypertext: The Digital Architecture of Far Right Communication Platforms

Lisabeth Woll

Background

In 1998, in a book about national identity and race, the political scientist Leonard Weinberg stated that “if feelings of national identity were aroused in an earlier era by the distribution of modern means of mass communication such as the newspaper and the radio, devices that helped overcome parochial loyalties in many parts of the world, it seems reasonable to believe that the Internet may come to play a similar role in the promotion of a common racial identity” (p. 29). Media – and more importantly, the internet – have had an influence in the development and shape of society as we have today and have, therefore, also played a part in growing divisions becoming visible in an increasingly polarised society. Extreme changes in political participation, elections, as well as the increase of far-right terrorism can be seen as the results of this polarised society. The phrasing, sentiments and published manifestos of the people advancing and supporting this polarisation can be traced back to specific websites and online platforms that are available around the world. It is in particular this international connection that turns online platforms into a space to exchange ideas, material, connections to likeminded individuals and supporting exchanges

between far-right organisations, even crossing borders (Froio & Ganesh, 2019, p. 93).

In contrast, the emergence of left-wing ideology and culture on the internet is far from coherent or supportive. Whereas the right has established a system of connectivity between different groups and has gathered together under a larger banner, left-wing online culture is coined by infighting leading to a 'call-out culture', in which members and like-minded people attack and bully each other with a sense of self-righteous superiority, particularly to older members of the movement and older, veteran feminist leaders. Attacks against their own members could be equally vicious as attacks against the right. "A noted difference, however is that the right came out all guns blazing, while the left response was often to be baffled, cowed or apologetic and in some cases to retreat from the left itself" (Nagle, 2017, p. 80). In contrast, the ideological far-right movement, with all its sub-groups, has managed to unite online to perpetuate and spread their ideology. Even groups with different motives and ideas have come together to accept and support each other. "Through forceful play and distributed action the far right, as a political space, has established unity in difference, in ways that the liberal center and Left have failed" (Albrecht et al., 2019, p. 12). It is, in particular, the modern far-right movement, which is extremely well-versed in the use of online tools, online self-representation and its use of outrageous, shocking materials that helps far-right propaganda to be made distributable within the general population. For Angela Nagle, people who participate in this mainstreaming of far-right ideas are "... unwittingly play the useful idiots for those with much more serious political aims. If this dark, anti-semitic, race segregationist ideology grows in the coming years, with their version of the future that would necessitate violence, those who made the right attractive will have to take responsibility for having played their role" (2017, p. 9).

Previous Research and Theory

Although there has already been a variety of studies concerning far-right extremism and the interplay between their modernisation and the internet, so far, there has not been a study concerning the actual digital architecture of this phenomenon. As a result, the purpose of this thesis was to highlight the architecture of three individual websites that are frequently used within the online far-right movement and to study if and how their functionalities, layout and structure helps the spread of far-right ideology. As previous studies have focused mainly on the democratising and positive effect that the internet has on political participation, this study showcased how the same functionalities can be exploited to create a negative impact on political engagement and how they support the development of extremist ideology. The three main theories that were used for this thesis were the study of digital architecture by Michael Bossetta, who argues that the architecture of a platform has a distinct influence of a users' political participation (2019, p.18); hypertext theory by George Landow, whose theory affords power and agency to the reader to create their own information paths, regardless of the author's original idea (2006, p. 9); as well as Mary Chayko's study of portable communities who has studied the dynamics in which communication platforms and the internet help to form collective identities, communities and how these phenomena influence a user's participation (2008, p. 7). The source material for this thesis was collected from three different communication platforms: 4Chan (focusing on its subforum /pol/), Gab (with a focus on its trend page) and Stormfront. Although there are a large variety of prominent and popular far-right websites to supply information for those interested, these above-mentioned websites were specifically chosen since they offer user-to-user communication and do not require the input of a specific far-right leader or organisation. Additionally, these websites have either been proven to be a recruiting ground for new far-right members, such as 4Chan (Hatewatch Staff, 2018), have long been

established as pseudo-intellectual discussion grounds, such as Stormfront (Albrecht et al., 2019, p. 8), and – like Gab – have been established fairly recently to bridge the divide between trolling and ‘fact’- driven discussion and between far-right ideologists and free-speech activists. The methodology focused on a qualitative analysis of the architecture and functionalities of these websites. By randomly choosing discussions and communication paths of a variety of different topics, this thesis explored the digital architecture and functionalities that are connected to each individual website in connection with the content and the users who produce them.

Research Aim

Essentially, this thesis aimed to answer the question of how the functionalities of each platform are influenced by their overall digital architecture, in particular functionalities such as network formation, content production and distribution; in what ways the architecture hinders, promotes or guides communication; how users are afforded possibilities to create their own information paths; how these sites create portable communities and ‘sociomental spaces’; as well as how do all those questions above support the development and spread of far-right ideology?

Analysis

The Platforms

The platforms that were discussed in this thesis differ a lot from conventional, mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. Instead of personal profiles, exchange of pictures, messages and feeds, these platforms are designed in a way that heavily relies on comments, discussion threads and the evolution of a particular thought or conversation. A topic does not necessarily get discussed, but rather, content is added continuously by each individual user who participates. Irrational thoughts, angry shouting and provocative comments, therefore,

can be woven and accepted into any discussion, giving way to a new-age version of right-wing populism. Marc Tuters calls this phenomenon the “deep vernacular web”, which is “... characterized by anonymous or pseudonymous subcultures that largely see themselves as standing in opposition to the dominant culture of the surface web...” and which “... tend to imagine themselves as a faceless mass” (2019, p. 40). He continues, stating that this culture can be seen as a “mask culture”, where individual identity is erased, in favour of collective symbolism (Ibid). For those who are not driven away from the controversies and radical conversations on the 4Chan board /pol/, the platform offers a strong socialization effect, where “... sensationalist behavior helps one to be noticed” (Ibid). However, it has to be noted that even though it can be tempting to blame any kind of far-right political influence or change on technological determinism, this is not the all-encompassing answer to these problems. Rather, there is still a larger, underlying cultural phenomenon that leads to the clustering of ideologies and the development of modern far-right ideas. Nevertheless, the digital architecture still greatly impacts this development and therefore, needed to be examined. This is particularly important in cases where far right rhetoric goes “offline” and their hatred and prejudice cause real harm in the real world, such as the attack in Charlottesville at the ‘Unite the Right’ rally in 2017.

Network Structure: Features of right-wing digital architecture

Within this thesis, the analysis was divided into different sections, starting with the examination of the individual features contained in each site’s digital architecture and the application of Michael Bossetta’s theories. Contained within his theories was, firstly, the idea of network structure, which contains three core elements: searchability, connectivity and privacy. In the case of searchability, all three websites discussed in this thesis have different ways of enabling search options for their users. Whereas

4Chan only offers very limited search options, Stormfront in particular offers advanced searching possibilities, as well as the ability to tag and filter each discussion thread. Finally, very similar to Twitter, Gab offers its users a standard set of search tools, which allows them to search for key words, hashtags and profiles. These differences also have an impact on the ways in which these platforms are used and how they represent themselves. The limited searchability within 4Chan puts enormous emphasis on the immediacy of the topics that are being discussed. As users are not able to search for older discussions, posts or even individual users (as the whole site is anonymous), any post that is not visible can therefore be deemed as irrelevant by the users. As a result, within the site, it is always the newest, most popular and active discussions that will receive visibility and engagement. This immediacy, however, cannot just lead to an abundance of information, but also to information and discussions that are not factual, but is being purposefully outrageous to gain responses and remain active. And since it is being updated so quickly, chances for fact-checking, moderation, thought-out responses or counter-claims can become lost. Far-right content can, therefore, spread unnoticed and unquestioned. Contrary to 4Chan, Stormfront's large emphasis on searchability brings with it a different problem in connection to its spread of white supremacist and far right ideology. As users can also subscribe to different discussion threads and get updates on particular topics, it gives the impression that the content they're subscribing to is important, as well as accurate, since it is worthy enough to be updated on. Granting a large set of tools for updating and searching, allows the users to feel a sense of authenticity for its content. Within Gab, it is in particular the searchability that is offered within its 'trends' page, which is important. Being able to search for individual topics in this section offers the user a sense of justification and that the topic they're looking for is important, since enough people have discussed, viewed or liked this topic for it to appear on the 'trend' page. Although the total membership numbers of Gab are relatively low, having a topic

that a user searches for appear to be – or has been – trending, affirms the belief that it is an important, well-discussed topic and consequentially, the comments to that post gain weight as well. As a result, the functionalities of a website, therefore, are not only tools to be used by each individual, but can also be interpreted in connection with the content and what kind of status each discussion, thread and post can have for a reader.

Connectivity

The second aspect Bossetta uses in his analysis of network structure is connectivity. Here, similarly to the first point, 4Chan does not offer its users much possibility to connect with others. Since the entire website is built on anonymity, there are no individual profiles to search for or to message. However, this aspect also drives the focus again on the content of the website, rather than its sociality. It is no longer the individual that carries importance, but rather the collective group. This is supported by Chayko's theory of sociomental places and portable communities, where she states that "as community members perform the cognitive acts of reading, writing, perceiving, imagining, and interpreting, communities gain a "robust sense of themselves" and "an approximate but functional sense of their own populations"" (Chayko, 2008, p. 38). As a result, connectivity on the site is not being created through connecting profiles, but rather through active participation on a discussion; said discussion, as a result, leads to a clear identification with the topic, since there is no user profile to identify with. Stormfront, on the other hand, offers a different approach to connectivity. On the site, profile creation is necessary to have full access to every discussion board and members are encouraged to participate in conversation with each other and even offers forums for dating advice and single members. Chayko states that "members of these kinds of communities tend to share both confidences and fears, often with candor, warmth, and humor. Communities of support enable participants "to pool their 'collective intelligence' about many

things,” says Patricia Radin” (Ibid, p. 54). Whereas regular self-help groups online can generally be seen as a good influence on individuals, in the case of Stormfront – an openly white supremacist site – this can become a big issue, since their far-right ideology is closely connected with incredibly misogynist and sexist ideals. Contrary to 4Chan, therefore, Stormfront offers an environment where individuals can connect to each other, whilst being allowed to fully embrace their individuality within their own profile and transform themselves into members of this community. Given its similarity to Twitter, Gab also focuses on the possibility for users to have their own profile page and feed. The platform also offers access to its own internet browser ‘Dis-senter’, where users can comment on any given URL and their comments will be shared on their Gab profile page, allowing for a connectivity not just between individual people, but also between people and the rest of the online sphere. In her study of Twitter, Van Dijck stated that “the ideal of an open and free twittersverse in reality comes closer to a public dialogue ruled by a small number of followers” (2013, p. 74). However, within Gab, this reality of open and free dialogue between all might actually be more realistic than with Twitter itself. Being allowed to comment on literally everything online and having all of it visible for other users resembles much more an in-person discussion than a Twitter thread. Additionally, this emphasis on communication also creates incredibly engaged users; as everything can be commented on, everything automatically also becomes worthy of discussion.

Privacy

The aspect of privacy is not a problem for any of those websites. Since 4Chan’s mode of discussion is 100% anonymous, a user’s identity is always protected. Within Stormfront, even though one needs to create a profile to participate fully, the profile does not need to include a real name and also offers a good amount of anonymity. Additionally, Gab also allows each user to choose what type of information about them can be made visible, as well

as who can search and find their profile. This gives the users a large sense of power and control, which then leads to more participation. “Separately and together, the three elements of network structure – searchability, connectivity, and privacy – influence: the network typography formed on a platform, the strength of ties among users, and subsequently, the type of content likely to be generated on the platform” (Bossetta, 2019, p. 34). Furthermore, in his study Bossetta states that “network structure influences how users identify and connect with political accounts” (Ibid, p. 34). The interplay of all the elements above allows for a unique relationship between the users, topics and the websites themselves, which in turn helps to promote agendas, ideologies and shapes opinions. Within the platforms that were analysed in this thesis, this goal is achieved through their unique structures that allow users to create a sense of importance, belonging and acceptance, which then – furthered through anonymity – promotes an unquestioned belief in the content that can be accessed.

Website Functionalities

Bossetta’s second issue within his study concerns the functionalities of each websites, which include aspects such as the graphic user interface, as well as supported media and multiple platform integration. The visual simplicity provided by the platforms in this thesis offers an understanding for each user that the topics on the sites is filtered and focused on priorities, immediacy and content. The interaction with these sites and with their functionalities offers users the chance to form an identity that is compatible with the site itself. Chayko notes that symbols and rituals “... make communities more “visible” and help them to be brought similarly into their member’s minds” (2008, p. 21), and Sparby adds that “... the technological design of an interface – manifested through the actions it allows or prevents – has just as much power, if not more, in constructing a collective identity as the users do” (2017, p. 87). Consequently, visiting, reading or participating on the platforms, users become part of a collective

that is distinctly shaped by the site's visual design and its functionalities and are granted an identity that is in congruence with this collective. In the thesis's case of 4Chan, this identity is therefore based on chaotic, crude individualism and a sense of outrageous sensationalism. In the case of Stormfront, the websites functionality offers users the chance to become part of a collective that is based on a pseudo-intellectual, simplistic, but argumentative debate, where outrageous opinions and ideals are treated as common knowledge and intellectual argumentation. With Gab, its similarities to Twitter are undeniable. However, the site manages to create perfect example of a far-right mirror universe to its mainstream counterpart. The dark colours that the website uses and its sleek design, as well as the previous use of a frog as the logo with a clear connection to Pepe the Frog, highlight the sites aim to attract people from a modern right-wing, free-speech, technology-enthusiasts collective.

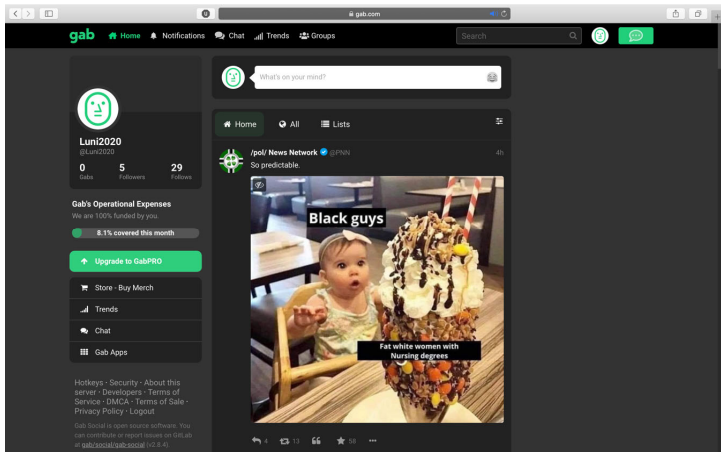


Figure 1: Gab Home Site 5th May 2020: <https://gab.com/home> (Last accessed 05/05/2020).

Another distinct difference is that Gab does not showcase its trending topics on the front page like Twitter. Rather, the website offers the trending-section – and in particular the section for

trending news – its own page. As a result, by inhabiting their own page, trending topics can be talked about and commented on in more depth, they can be displayed in higher numbers on one page and they can be sorted differently, adding to their importance, affording a higher standing within the site itself and offering a sense of democracy for all users. In her study of sociomental spaces and portable communities, Mary Chayko states that “... the reality of something can not be measured by its physicality, but by the reality of its consequences [...] – that is, the extent to which it has a real and genuine effect on something else” (2008, p. 10). This argument can be combined with Van Dijck, who states that investment in trending topics “... could be regarded emblematic for the platform’s divergent ambitions to simultaneously measure, engineer, and mobilize the public’s mood. [...] Jürgen Habermas (1989) theorized that media channels, far from registering the free exchange of ideas, constitute a social space through which norms for communication and interaction are produced” (2013, p. 78). Through their functionalities, layouts and appearances, these sites create unique spaces that have a distinct influence on the type of content and on the user that circulates on its site, be it outrageous behaviour, ‘intellectual’ conversations or a seeming influence in trends. As a result, their functionalities and structures help to develop a certain type of rhetoric, discussion topics and development.

Algorithmic Filtering

The final aspect of Bossetta’s theory within this thesis was the issue of algorithmic filtering. Since these websites do not make their money from advertising and individual profiles in the conventional sense are only required for Gab, algorithmic filtering based on advertising is not obvious. On the contrary – 4Chan’s emphasis on immediacy guarantees that the newest, most talked about threads will appear on the top of each list, Stormfront actually gives the user a lot of tools for filtering and sorting content themselves and Gab actively advocates against

algorithmic filtering, emphasising the transparency and user engagement through ‘citizen journalism’. Beer stated that when “the distribution and visibility of content is decided by algorithmic ranking, the coded operations implemented by developers have the power to shape users’ shared perception of culture, news, and politics” (Beer in Bossetta 2019: 35). However, the fact that algorithmic filtering does not apply to these websites, does not necessarily mean that they do not have an impact on their users’ perceptions. Leaving filtering options up to the users’ own decision or having no algorithmic filtering whatsoever, allows the website to establish themselves a serious source of information, where users are trusted enough to navigate the flow of information and content themselves. If a user is given more freedom to choose, more responsibility to filter information, they are more likely to engage more as they have the opportunity to solely focus on the topics that interest them (see Landow’s hypertext theory, 2006, p. 330). This lack of algorithmic filtering has a clear advantage for the promotion of far-right content; since it is not filtered or moderated, the content will be available the same way it is being posted and does not depend on trends, activities or filters. “The power to influence language and norms translates into the power to create a knowledge monopoly of sorts, in which, political scientist and cyber culture scholar Jodi Deans claims “the interest of the marginalized and disenfranchised... are less likely to be served than those of well financed and well connected, the wired and the savvy, who may benefit from a monopoly on certain ideas, images, and technologies”” (Chayko, 2008, p. 184). Consequentially, it is exactly in an environment that does not use algorithmic filtering and does not influence the portrayal of content, where it seems that marginalized and disenfranchised groups would have the opportunity to have their voices heard. Since far-right groups do not represent the majority of a population, this is also true for them in some ways. The lack of algorithmic filtering on these websites does not so much support the users’ experience, but more importantly, it gives the whole far right movement a

sense of legitimacy and a sense of democracy that is usually difficult to promote in combination with their political ideology.

Hypertext

The second part of this thesis' analysis focused on the theory of hypertext and how it could influence the spread of far-right ideology on these platforms. The questions that were asked in this analysis were based on the status of the text, the author, the reader and the power dynamics and control over the text itself. How each text is connected to another and how a reader can choose their own path through said text determines these power dynamics. In short, hypertext theory implies that each text can be added to through links and pathways to additional information. The implementation of these links, however, is solely up to the reader, who, as a result, can create their own information and reading path to gain knowledge tailored to their interests, understanding and learning goals. Within 4Chan, this theory can be applied in two different ways. First, each additional comment on a discussion thread can be seen as a link with additional information to the first post, and secondly, the individual comments are themselves linked to those who seem relevant by the author. In a sense, 4Chan's discussions can be perceived more like speech acts than written text and, therefore, possess hyperimmediacy. However, even though they are perceived as immediate, real-time conversations, it shows that "although electric writing has the multiplicity of print, it does not have the fixity – and hence the reliability and stability – of either written or printed texts" (Landow, 2006, p. 34). Nevertheless, since written text online is perceived to have similar strengths and seriousness than written text offline (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 7), these speech-like comments on 4Chan possess a great amount of value, since they can be compared to print. Written, speech-like content online, therefore, has a similar impact than offline written text, whilst still possessing no reliability and stability – a mixture that can have seriously dangerous consequences, such as a distinct lack of

fact-checking and sourcing. Within Stormfront, even though hypertext connections are not as clearly visible, they nevertheless provide a thread of information that makes connections seem more authentic, intellectual and thoroughly researched. In particular their ability to insert direct quotes into posts offers a direct comparison between comments and allows for an argument to be built up coherently. “The evidence of hypertext, in other words, historicizes many of our most commonplace assumptions, thereby forcing them to descend from the ethereality of abstraction and appear as corollary to a particular technology rooted in specific time and places” (Landow, 2006, p. 52). Within Gab, this also plays a big part in their trending topics page. As all users are allowed to comment on these topics, the comment-section can resemble an in-depth conversation. Users are not only allowed to comment on the topic itself, but also to comment on previously posted comments. As a result, the discussion gets nested within each other and users reading the conversation have the option to expand the comment section in order to read the full conversation. This style of hypertext reflects what Landow called stretchtext, which – at least for him – included a number of positive functionalities and elements. He stated that stretchtext was useful since it did not split the text like other forms of hypertext, but rather ensured that context could be provided without fracturing its flow. He stated that “stretching the text provides a more immediate perceptual incorporation of the linked-to text with the text from which the link originates. In effect, the text becomes *context* as new text is added; or rather, the previously present text remains while the new text appears and serves as its context” (Ibid, p. 95). This style of hypertext can also be seen within 4Chan, where it is possible to immediately read the comment that is linked having to leave one’s reading-path.

Hypertext Implications

This type of reading, as a result, resembles much more an oral conversation than a written presentation of information. Its written nature threatens correct and factual information as it is

given the same importance as an offline written text, without the necessary fact-checking and responsibility. In addition to the navigational aspect of hypertext, Landow also offers two more features, which he argues are positive, liberating and educational. First, he stated that hypertext offers the reader a large amount of information, which requires them to become active readers, searching for their own path, and secondly, said readers also gain power over the text, being able to make their own decisions and removing the traditional gap between author and reader (Ibid, p. 343). He specifically promotes these features as positive and as tools that could have a positive impact on education, information gathering and personal development. However, if users have unlimited access to information, but do not possess the skills or knowledge to evaluate and sort the information, a hypertext system – as the one that can be found in 4Chan – can lead to the promotion of untrue, hurtful, provocative and populist content. Additionally, hypertext also leaves the ending of a conversation or reading up to the individual and whether or not they are satisfied with the type of information they have collected. “If hypertext makes determining the beginning of a text difficult because it both changes our conception of text and permits readers to “begin” at many different points, it similarly changes the conception of an ending. Readers in read-write systems cannot only choose different points of ending, they can also continue to add to the text, to extend it, to make it more than it was when they began to read” (Ibid, p. 112). As a result, the power dynamic has shifted from the original author to the reader, who now gets to determine their own path and whether or not to stop, become active or participate. Chayko also mentions this phenomenon in her study of sociomental spaces, stating that “as blogs are linked to other blogs, a wide-ranging, nonlinear kind of conversation can begin. This occurs, in fact, in many kinds of online sites and documents, for in hyperlinking, people can trace ideas backward or forward and link to related ideas” (2008, p. 169).

Hypertext in Conversation

Within the analysis of this thesis, hypertext theory also provided insight into the development of far-right conversations and discussions. In the analysis, it became evident that distinct words such as ‘Faggot’, ‘Jew’, ‘Trump’ and ‘Fuck’ were amongst those words used most predominantly in example conversations from 4Chan’s subforum /pol/. Very early on in conversations, for example, conversations would derail and turn from questions and answers to diatribes filled with crude and offensive language and easy to follow for any reader following along with the conversation. Landow stated that “one sign of the disappearance of boundaries between author and reader consists in it being the reader, not the author, who largely determines how the reader moves through the system, for the reader can determine order and principle of investigation” (Landow, 2006, p. 343). As the use of hypertext gives readers the ability to jump easily back to previous posts, to connect issues and follow external links, the information they gather from the website is uniquely tailored to their reading-path, their opinions and interests, and does not necessarily connect to the writer’s main intent. The seemingly democratizing effect of hypertext – where readers can determine their own paths – does not, however lead to the outcome that Landow originally intended, who stated that “what this principle means in practice is that the reader is not locked into any kind of particular organization and hierarchy” (Ibid, p. 58). On the contrary, for platforms such as Stormfront, whose demeanour promotes an egalitarian and even intellectual forum, this effect and sense of democracy for each user helps to legitimise the far-right content that is being distributed on the website. A similar effect can be seen with Gab, where additionally, the platforms emphasises their users are all promoting ‘citizen journalism’, the issues that are being discussed and that are trending on the website appear to be authentic representations of general opinion, identity and conviction. In general, hypertext has the ability to place any topic in any chosen context. This can lead to a greater

understanding, greater integration of knowledge, but also, if not guided by experts or rules, these topics can be put into contexts that distort their meaning, their history and their accuracy. If anything can become connected, alternative realities, inaccurate information, falsehoods can become popular and believed, simply because they have been put into a large enough context that they are believable by their audience.

Dangers of Hypertext

Landow's theory about hypertext provides two essential dangers; an unsurmountable quantity of information and the possibility of control by machines over all information (Ibid, p. 376). However, in particular when studying hypertext theory in the context of social media platforms, it becomes evident that there is a third, namely the possibility of incorrect information and a lack of critical engagement with content. If people are left alone to search for information themselves, to find their own paths through a sheer endless amount of information, without guidance or expert influence, places such as 4Chan, Stormfront and Gab can turn into hubs for misinformation, prejudice and far-right influence, where, backed by enough context, the extreme views of a few can seem legitimate and attractive. A tool for further democratization, decision-making and freedom of thought is therefore used to promote the exact opposite.

Political Participation

The final aspect of the analysis within this thesis was the question of political participation. This aspect particularly examined the specific content that was being distributed and shared on each website and analysed it in coherence with two of Michael Bossetta's three stations of political participation, namely Latent (Reading and Discussing) and Mobilizing (calling on others) (Bossetta, 2019, p. 24). As for Bossetta, political participation is a process, rather than a set of specific activities (Ibid, p. 23), it became important for the thesis to understand how the digital

architecture and hypertext influence the development of the two phases mentioned above and how political participation can be seen manifested in various forms on the communication sites. Within 4Chan and in connection to the previous mentioned aspects of hypertext and the general digital architecture, it became evident that ‘factual’ statements would be able to elicit great participation from others and could also develop into mobilizing statements, based on the interconnectivity that each individual post offered. By ‘backing up’ a statement and connecting it to a variety of other statements, the content of the discussion became plausible for others and could be seen to have a mobilizing effect. This flow of conversation could also be seen within Stormfront’s content, where discussion could build up on each other’s comment and a long list of arguments could be made to emphasize a user’s point of view. Additionally, with one example of a discussion about the Coronavirus on Stormfront, it became evident that its variety of quotes, long, substantial texts without much crude language, hypertext-links between posts and additional third party information via links could provide the perfect combination to make the text’s content seem coherent and factual. Since this thesis only examined Gab’s trending section and the comments that were added to trending URLs, it could be seen that the majority of comments on the site were focused on latent participation (reading and discussing) with mobilizing elements only available within comments that were answering or building up on a previously posted comment. Out of the information that was collected for this thesis, the majority of comments within Gab’s trend section are partisan statements, with attempts at mobilization. This is easily explainable, since the comments are generally aimed at existing headlines, rather than an individual respond to another user’s statement.

Commenting

In general, partisan comments were most often found on the pages, highlighting the fact that these websites encourage people to post about their own extreme, political beliefs. Additionally, to

voicing opinions and having them be justified, backed up and legitimized within each platform, partisan comments also have the added benefit to form a more personal, emotional connection to the people writing them. Mary Chayko states that “as people express their feelings and share events and activities in blogs, they are in effect documenting their lives. Seemingly unconnected thoughts and experiences (and links to other people’s thoughts and experiences) become connected, as we move from link to link to link, “hyperlinking” across the internet. A blog forms a story that can be no less than the story of a life, a story that can be updated, archived, accessed by others and linked to others – sometimes many others – at any time” (Chayko, 2008, p. 168). Even though the individual comments people write on these websites are not necessarily meant as a blog, they nevertheless offer the opportunity to get an insight into people’s personal lives, their feelings, opinions and convictions. Partisan commentary also shows to which extent platforms have become politicized. Gab for instance advocates that it is a free-speech platform, made for technology enthusiasts and those in search for no moderation. However, the obvious partisan commentary that can be found on its trend page clearly showcases that the website itself has become host to far right ideology, rather than offering its neutral, free speech, ‘both sides allowed’ spectrum.

The third, and last, type of comment that could be found within this thesis was that of the moral argument, where users could be seen justifying their extreme beliefs with arguments against other types of evil, such as paedophilia or impending doom, like an expected race-war. These moral arguments could be found on all three websites and it became evident that the digital architecture supported the impact that these arguments could have. Stormfront’s ability to quote entire posts, for example, helped a user to systematically go through another’s post and comment, explain and criticise each individual aspect. With the commented post still visible, a new reader could therefore easily make the connections and follow the line of thought. Additionally, since a sense of morality often also requires a sense

of intelligence, Stormfront’s ‘egalitarian’ architecture, their seemingly intellectual posts and possibilities ensure that moral arguments on the website can become discussed in a manner that offers validity and truth. Michael Bossetta states that “citizen adoption of the moral style indicates forms of participation that transcend national social or political interests, potentially positing to a community of citizens that does not correspond to pre-existing national configurations” (Bossetta, 2019, p. 54). Within Bossetta’s argument, moral style political engagement aims at those groups or people who do not follow mainstream conventions, regulations – those with extremist, excluding views and opinions. However, the examples within this thesis have shown how this notion can be turned around to address the ‘mainstream’, the government or regulations and that it can be just as effective, if not more so, since it is outrageous commentary, backed up and supported by a closely connecting, supporting and functioning digital architecture.

Conclusion

As “portable technology provides us with the means to communicate our thoughts and feelings to many with whom we may have something in common, and therefore increases our opportunities to find cognitive resonance with others” (Chayko, 2008, p. 27), how these platforms provide the functions and tools to influence its content to steer and guide political ideologies is crucial. This thesis examined how the digital architecture and not just the content helps to spread far right ideology, how they support the development of conversation and certain types of rhetoric that support this ideology and make it accessible for a wider, mainstream audience. Additionally, it looked very critical upon theories such as the hypertext theory and ideas about connectivity, by highlighting their limitations and arguing that tools seen as positive for democracy and education can also be used to enhance the spread of harmful, extremist and populist content, generally having the opposite effect of their originally intended

equalitarian purpose. In her analysis of far-right content online, Angela Nagle highlights this threat of unsupervised, unguided collection of information, stating that “it was the utterly empty and fraudulent ideas of countercultural transgression that created the void into which anything can now flow as long as it is contemptuous of mainstream values and tastes” (2017, p. 105). Studying the digital architecture of online platforms can help to understand the fast development of the far-right online sphere and the long-lasting implication that come with its unhindered, unmoderated spread. The fluidity and move between the roles of users, writers and readers that is made possible through online communication platforms shifts the power dynamic and the strength of our ‘spoken’ word in the online sphere and with it its offline consequences.

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Authors

Lucie Váňová holds a Bachelor of Arts in Design, Business and Technology from Copenhagen School of Design and Technology (KEA) with specialisation in Communication Design and Media and a Master of Arts in Media, Communication and Cultural Analysis. She is currently a freelance designer, illustrator and content creator based in Stockholm.

Azul Romo Flores (MA) is a lecturer in Media Technology at Södertörn University. She teaches game design and development courses.

Lisbeth Woll has been staying in her hometown after moving back to Germany due to Covid-19 in March 2020. There, she had the opportunity to meet up with a local anti-discrimination organization to potentially develop guidelines and ideas together for a better understanding of media participation to prevent individuals shifting into extremist behavior and combat the uneducated interaction with fake information through the media. Additionally, she has been working on film and photography projects, am hoping to also expand her theoretical knowledge and possibly, one day, get a PhD.



In 2020, the programme coordinator, programme council and department council, Media, Communication and Cultural Analysis, chose to distinguish three theses in one volume. This volume presents adaptations of these works that were written and defended within the framework of the international master's programme at Södertörn University. It is the first in a series and includes chapters by alumni who graduated in 2020.

The contributions deal with discussions of how those in the creative industries manage day-to-day life in hyperconnected pandemic times, how toxic language is experienced and reproduced in gaming environments and what is specific to right-wing digital platforms. Each contribution challenges aspects of digital communication: work overload, toxic language, and behavior or extremist communities, and helps us develop a better understanding of contemporary digital culture from a critical perspective.

