

# THE AMBIVALENT INTERNET

*Mischief, Oddity, and  
Antagonism Online*



WHITNEY PHILLIPS  
& RYAN M. MILNER



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WHITNEY PHILLIPS and  
RYAN M. MILNER

polity

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To Mulder & Scully





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# Introduction

## **Some initial oddities to set the scene**

In the mid-aughts, a t-shirt company called The Mountain added a new item to their Amazon.com product page. Listed as Three Wolf Moon, this 100 percent cotton offering featured a mystical moon, glowing star nebula, and three vertically stacked wolf heads howling into the night. In November 2008, an Amazon reviewer using the handle Amazon Customer posted a review of the shirt. Review, however, doesn't quite capture it. Amazon Customer's assessment, entitled "Dual Function Design," was more like magical realist short fiction. First, he checked to see whether the shirt would properly cover his "girth." He then wandered from his trailer to the neighborhood Wal-Mart, where he was promptly flocked by women looking for love and, as he put it, "mehth." Once inside the Wal-Mart, he mounted a courtesy scooter "side saddle" to show off his wolves and was approached by a woman wearing sweatpants and flip-flops. She told him she liked his shirt and offered him a swig of her Mountain Dew. Amazon Customer attributed these exciting felicities to his wolf shirt, and concluded that, although the shirt was pretty sweet already, it would be better if the wolves glowed in the dark.

After being posted to Amazon, "Dual Function Design" was linked by an amused onlooker to the forums on BodyBuilding.com (a site devoted to exactly that, and, perhaps unexpectedly, a longstanding hotbed of various online she-nigans), and eventually to Facebook. As the Three Wolf Moon legend grew, more and more people began penning

their own *odes de wolf*, many of which lauded the shirt’s aphrodisiacal, spiritual, and overall magical powers, including the power of flight and reversing vasectomies. Countless photoshopped versions of the shirt began to circulate – cataloging an exotic bestiary of sloths, sharks, camels, hippopotamuses, unicorns, hippopotamus unicorns, *Star Trek* captains, Charlie Sheens, and Rowlf Muppets (Figure 1) – with a few up for sale on Amazon as actual shirts. The Mountain itself even got in on the joke, crafting and selling a parody shirt featuring the popular internet meme “Grumpy Cat.” Three Wolf Moon reviews and parodies drew so much attention to the shirt that in May 2009 it topped Amazon’s top-selling apparel list (Applebome 2009).



**Figure 1.** The Three Wolf Moon t-shirt alongside parody designs. Left: the original sold on Amazon.com by t-shirt company The Mountain. Top right: a design featuring hippopotamus unicorns. Center right: a design featuring Rowlf from the Muppets franchise. Bottom right: a design featuring Captain Jean-Luc Picard and Commander William T. Riker from the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Collected in 2015.

The person posting as Amazon Customer – who in 2009 outed himself to Peter Applebome of the *New York Times* as a 32-year-old law student from New Jersey – wasn't alone in his desire to bizarrely review a commercial product for laughs. Beyond Three Wolf Moon, there exists an entire genre of what the online reference site *Know Your Meme* calls “fake customer reviews,” with Amazon serving as the nexus of such activities (“Fake Customer Reviews” 2015). The premise is simple: head to Amazon (or any other site that supports public-facing customer reviews), choose a strange product (or at least a product that can serve as a conduit for strangeness), and then post something that will highlight, criticize, or poke fun at said product. For instance, reviewing the Hutzler 571 Banana Slicer, reviewer IWonder offered “I would rate this product as just ok. It's kind of cheaply made. But it works better than the hammer I've been using to slice my bananas” (“Banana Slicer Reviews” 2015). Assessing a gallon of “Tuscan Whole Milk” up for sale on Amazon, reviewer Prof PD Rivers commented “I give this Tuscan Milk four stars simply because I found the consistency a little too ‘milk-like’ for my tastes” (Zeller 2006). And when the consumer plastics company BIC released a line of “Cristal For Her” ballpoint pens – i.e. pens for some reason designed specifically for women – reviewer E. Bradley gushed “I love BIC Cristal for Her! The delicate shape and pretty pastel colors make it perfect for writing recipe cards, checks to my psychologist (I'm seeing him for a case of the hysterics), and tracking my monthly cycle” (Zafar 2012). In these and other cases, the point is to harness customer review capabilities for a wholly unintended collective purpose: to make strangers laugh on the internet, or at least furrow their brow in consternation.

2013 was a big year for R&B artist Robin Thicke. That summer, the 36-year-old warbler took the music world by storm with his jaunty, sexually assaultive hit “Blurred Lines,” in which Thicke croons about knowing his paramour “wants it” even

though she has already indicated that she does not. Then came his infamous 2013 MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs) performance with then-20-year-old pop singer Miley Cyrus. During this performance, a scantily clad Cyrus rubbed herself all over Thicke, who grinded right back, smirking and sunglassesed in a striped black-and-white zoot suit. Facing backlash for their performance, Thicke said he hadn't even noticed what Cyrus was doing. "That's all on her," he shrugged in an interview with talk show host Oprah Winfrey (Jefferson 2013).

In the year following the VMAs, Thicke navigated a very messy separation from his wife Paula Patton, whom he attempted to win back in a series of public reconciliation attempts. Thicke's efforts culminated in 2014's highly confessional (and accusatory, and salacious) *Paula*, a record that critic Sophie Gilbert (2014) described as "one of the creepiest albums ever made." In the run-up to the album's release, Thicke teamed up with music television channel VH1 for some interactive promotion via Twitter. Fans were encouraged to use the hashtag #AskThicke to do exactly that: ask Thicke questions about his upcoming album. Instead, Thicke hecklers, feminist critics, and other amused onlookers inundated Thicke with antagonistic messages decrying everything from his seemingly permissive attitude toward sexual assault to what was deemed "stalkerish" behavior towards his estranged wife. Nestled alongside pointed cultural critiques were more (apparently) tongue-in-cheek assessments of Thicke's VMA wardrobe; many participants tweeted, retweeted, and giddily commented on comparison photos of Thicke and Beetlejuice, the iconic stripy-suited film character who is, by his own insistence, "the ghost with the most" (Parkinson 2014).

#AskThicke was, in other words, a disaster for Thicke and VH1. But it wasn't the first or the last time a celebrity, company, or organization would court public participation and walk away with a wounded brand. In the wake of his ever-lengthening list of rape accusations, for example, disgraced comedian Bill

Cosby invited his followers to “meme him” on Twitter, and included a link to a meme generator featuring a photo series ready for captioning. The response was swift; participants began flooding the #CosbyMeme hashtag with images designed to humiliate Cosby one punchline at a time (Arthur 2014). In similarly ill-advised fashion, McDonald’s encouraged patrons to share feel-good dining experiences with the hashtag #McDStories, but instead were inundated with increasingly outrageous tales of fast food grotesquerie (Sherman 2012). The New York Police Department’s #myNYPD (Jackson and Foucault Welles 2015), Donald Trump’s #AskTrump (Lapowsky 2015a), and Fox News’ #OverIt2014 (Harrison 2014) all experienced a similar fate, yielding an overwhelming percentage of caustic, comedic, and at times outright bizarre responses. These and other cases suggest that if you want to extend an olive branch on the internet, don’t slap a hashtag to the front.

In May 2015, the Facebook fan page of an infamous American cultural figure was graced with yet another swooning tribute image. Edited in Blingee, a now-defunct online platform that allowed users to add sparkly animations and graphics to uploaded photos, the image features a grinning white teenager tagged with stamps reading “perfection,” “my love,” and “sexy,” as well as animated kisses and hearts. The teenager in the photo is Columbine High School shooter Eric Harris; the Facebook fan page was dedicated to him. In another image posted to microblogging platform Tumblr, the yearbook pictures of Eric Harris and second gunman Dylan Klebold are decorated with hearts and captions. Dylan’s images are captioned with the inscriptions “cute but psycho” and “3000%,” while Harris’ images are captioned with “now real life has no appeal” and another “psycho” (this one inscribed in cartoon hearts). Harris and Klebold are both wearing photoshopped princess flower crowns.

Andrew Ryan Rico (2015) analyzes these and other apparently laudatory images in his exploration of the online fandom

surrounding the Columbine High School shooters. As Rico explains, he is interested in the “dark side” of fandom, and foregrounds how these and other images allow fans to express sympathy for and sexual attraction to Harris and Klebold, and provide an outlet to explore complex feelings about death. If that’s what these fans are actually doing, of course; Rico concedes that some of these images may also be works of irony, hyperbole, and mischief.

Just looking at the images themselves, it’s difficult to know what the posters were hoping to accomplish. What is clear is that spree killers, particularly in the post-Columbine, social networking age, have elicited a great deal of ambiguous online participation. Following the 2012 Aurora, Colorado, movie theatre shootings, for example, *BuzzFeed*’s Ryan Broderick (2012) discovered a tumblog (an individual blog on Tumblr) featuring fan art dedicated to the shooter James Holmes. These images – created by a very small group of self-described “Holmies” – were similar in tone and content to the Columbine shooter adoration described above. They also made celebratory reference to the plaid jacket James Holmes had been wearing at the time of his arrest, as well as his apparent love of slurpees. Disgusted, Broderick published an article featuring the best (that is to say, the worst) examples he could find. This, in turn, resulted in an explosion of media interest and attention, which in turn resulted in a great deal of antagonistic play with the emergent Holmies phenomenon (Phillips 2012). A similar narrative unfolded following the arrests of Boston Bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (Read 2013) and the Norwegian right-wing extremist mass shooter Anders Behring Breivik (Flavia 2012). In these and other cases, the question of “is this a joke or are these people serious?” is a common refrain amongst journalists and citizens alike.

### **Ambivalence and the internet**

For those familiar with the, let’s say, *unique* contours of collective online spaces like Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, Reddit,



and 4chan – and before that, subversive alt.\* Usenet bulletin boards, LiveJournal blogs, various shock forums, and other early sites rife with playful participation – the above examples probably won't seem all that shocking or unusual. The question is – and this was the question that initially piqued our research interests – exactly how might one assess these sorts of behaviors? Or more basically, how might one describe them? What words should one even use?

Before we zero in on our chosen explanatory lens for this book (spoiler: it's ambivalence), we want to address two descriptors that are commonly used to label cases like those above: that they are examples of *online trolling* or that they are artifacts from the *weird internet*. On the surface, both options seem like intuitive choices, particularly because both of us (Phillips and Milner, nice to meet you) have written quite a bit about both. But neither framing adequately subsumes the examples or arguments presented in this book.

First, as many readers likely know, online behaviors with even the slightest whiff of mischief, oddity, or antagonism are often lumped under the category of *trolling*. Though specific definitions of the term can vary, its use tends to imply deliberate, playful subterfuge, and the infliction of emotional distress on unwitting or unwilling audiences. Each of the cases that opened this book could be read through this lens; in fact, in popular press and academic coverage, all were explicitly described as “trolling,” and often in the story lede. Based on these framings, it would appear that trolls are everywhere, doing everything – even when the behaviors are only loosely related, or even outright incompatible. Like writing a satirical Amazon review and tweeting deadly serious, firsthand accounts of police brutality. Or posting thoughtful feminist critiques of rape culture and mocking someone's sunglasses. Or photoshopping one of the Muppets and photoshopping a mass murderer. All, apparently, trolling, at least if the headlines are to be believed.

As illustrated by the above examples, “trolling” as a behavioral catch-all is imprecise and, in terms of classification,

ultimately unhelpful. Further, as it often posits a playful or at least performative intent (“I’m not a *real* racist, I just play one on the internet”), the term also tends to minimize the negative effects of the worst kinds of online behaviors. Hence our decision to minimize its use throughout this book.<sup>1</sup> Other vague linguistic framings akin to trolling – like “hating/haters” (slang implying that someone on the internet dislikes something and says so with varying degrees of virulence) or, even more nebulously, “just joking around” – are similarly imprecise and similarly unhelpful, and therefore similarly sidestepped in this analysis.

What is needed, instead, is a framing that addresses the underlying tonal, behavioral, and aesthetic characteristics of these kinds of cases. The most obvious option is that they are, well, pretty weird. Or at least are the sort of things that inspire a brow furrow, confused chuckle, or maybe both. The presumption of the weirdness of digital content (“...what did I just see?”) is common in some online circles, and the “weird internet” is foregrounded as a discursive space with its own absurd logics and twisted norms. Journalist Eric Limer (2013) exemplifies this assumption when he casually notes that “weird” online content outnumbers “normal” content at a 2:1 ratio. Limer’s point, uncontested by his article’s commenters, is seemingly evidenced by phenomena like “rule 34,” a common online axiom asserting only somewhat jokingly that if something exists online, there is porn of it. Limer’s “weirdness” framing is also underscored by the assertion (again only somewhat joking) that the internet is, in fact, “made of cats,” given their predominance in images and videos shared on various forums and social networks.

Researchers have also explored the apparent weirdness of online spaces. In his discussion of the spread of global internet memes, for example, internet activist and media scholar Ethan Zuckerman (2013) takes for granted – and in fact celebrates – the transglobal weirdness of memetic content. Similarly, media critic Nick Douglas (2014) traces the rise of what he

loosely describes as “Internet Ugly” on the English-speaking web, an aesthetic privileging absurdist, ambiguous, and poorly made content, which he argues is pervasive online. Even scholars who don’t use *weird* specifically often point to the prevalence of silliness, satire, and mischief in online spaces, as participatory media scholar Tim Highfield does in his study of what he calls “the irreverent internet” (2016, 42), and as we both have done in our respective studies of subcultural trolling and memetic media (Phillips 2015; Milner 2016). The topic of online weirdness is so resonant amongst academics that it inspired a “Weird Internet” panel at the 2015 Association of Internet Researchers meeting in Phoenix, Arizona. We presented on that panel alongside digital media scholars Adrienne Massanari, Shira Chess, and Eric Newsom; as we crafted our submission proposal, the deceptively straightforward question of what “weird” even means online precipitated a 51-email thread hashing out the issue.

But as with trolling, the reality of the “weird internet” is more complicated than a singular descriptor. Regardless of how weird or irreverent certain corners of the internet might seem to some, weirdness is a relative term; what might be indescribably weird to one person is just a Tuesday afternoon for another. The three cases that opened this book may be “weird” in that they subvert some audience members’ expectations (i.e. that customer reviews, celebrity Q&As, and fannish fawning should be earnest expressions of sincere intentions), but are sensical to those who regard this subversion as entirely the point. *Normal* by their own standards, if not always laudable by the standards of others. Even participants who concede that their behavior is indeed weird (whatever that term might mean to them) may embrace this weirdness as a point of amusement or pride, perhaps echoing the kinds of responses proffered by confused bystanders. Something punctuated with a quick “lol,” which someone might mean literally (they actually laughed), metaphorically (they’re referring to the platonic ideal of laughter), or ironically (they didn’t laugh). Or some

silly emoji combination, including, perhaps, an upside down smiley face coupled with cartoon pile of poo. Or even a “shruggie,” the emoticon gracing the cover of this book, which functions, variously, as a way to signal “I don’t know,” “I don’t care,” or, as *The Awl* writer Kyle Chayka notes (2014), as “a Zen-like tool to accept the chaos of the universe.” The variety of reactions to (presumed) weirdness is endless, and often inscrutable – even to those producing that presumed weirdness.

The fact that such expression can inspire divergent responses in divergent audiences – just as behaviors described as trolling can erroneously subsume divergent practices with divergent ends – highlights a more fundamental characteristic of our leading examples, and in fact of all the cases present in this book: they are *ambivalent*. Simultaneously antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed, the satirization of products, antagonization of celebrities, and creation of questionable fan art, along with countless other examples that permeate contemporary online participation, are too unwieldy, too variable across specific cases, to be essentialized as *this* as opposed to *that*. Nor can they be pinned to one singular purpose. Because they are not singular; they inhabit, instead, a full spectrum of purposes – all depending on who is participating, who is observing, and what set of assumptions each person brings to a given interaction.

This polysemous framing directly reflects the Latinate prefix of *ambivalent* (*ambi-*), which means “both, on both sides,” implying tension, and often fraught tension, between opposites – despite the fact that in everyday usage, the word *ambivalent* is often used as a stand-in for “I don’t have an opinion either way,” sometimes stylized as the blasé “meh.” It should be emphasized – neon-flashing-lights emphasized – that our usage of the term reflects the “both, on both sides” use, not the blasé sense of indifference. This book is full of cases that could go either way, in fact could go any way simultaneously,

immediately complicating any easy assessment of authorial intent, social consequence, and cultural worth.

Satirical play with the Three Wolf Moon t-shirt, for example, could be read as simple collective fun. But as evidenced by Amazon Customer's initial review – and the dozens of similarly framed reviews that followed – this fun hinged on ridiculing the shirt and its buyers' presumed “white trash” lifestyle and aesthetic. Some of these participants may have set out to sincerely mock the lives of low income white individuals. Some may have set out to celebrate these lives, or to signal what they regard as “white trash solidarity.” In other cases of fake customer reviews, participants, observers, or even targets might regard the behaviors as harmless fun, even as the behaviors meet the criteria of what media scholar Ian Bogost (2016) calls “weaponized subversion” directed at independent businesspersons just trying to sell their banana slicers.

Some of these reviews, including those apparently undertaken in the spirit of mere silliness, may even serve valuable public ends. Feminist satirizations of BIC's “Cristal For Her” pens, for example, call attention to sexist delineations between the things women do and the (ahem, presumably) “real” work done by men – an especially notable point to make when those things are *exactly* the same, like using a damn BIC pen. Similarly, one could distill meaningful feminist critiques of rape culture from the #AskThicke Q&A, though maybe not so easily from comments making fun of Thicke's Beetlejuice wardrobe or Ken doll hair or how he stands like a mannequin or his musical talent more generally (then again, maybe so). Even playful fawning over mass shooters could be seen from several co-occurring vantage points, from excessive attachment to excessive dissociation to a pointed satire of the idolatrous 24-hour news coverage that invariably follows American mass shootings. Maybe the people who post Columbine sweetheart photos are just assholes. Maybe all of the above.

The purpose of this book is to explore these layers of polysemy, a “both, on both sides” that becomes “all, on all sides”

thanks to the vast constellations of participants and perspectives constituting digital media. Its contribution lies in this explicit focus on the fundamental ambivalence of digitally mediated expression. Previous studies have, of course, explored ambivalent behaviors; anthropologist Gabriella Coleman's (2014) analysis of the loose hacker and trolling collective Anonymous, feminist media scholar Adrienne Massanari's (2015) study of participatory play on the massive content aggregation site Reddit, Highfield's (2016) previously mentioned exploration of political participation online, and many others, all critically engage with behaviors that could, and do, go either way. Here, we seek to explore the underlying thread of ambivalence that weaves together so many of these and other online communities, interactions, and practices.

### **Dirt work and the “so what?” question**

So the internet is ambivalent. Who cares? What's so important about ambivalence, and why have we chosen to write a book about the subject? More importantly, why would you, our esteemed readers, bother reading a book about it?

The short answer is that, as a mode of being and engaging, ambivalence is every bit as revealing as it is opaque. Most notably, ambivalent behaviors call attention to socially constructed distinctions between “normal” and “aberrant.” Mary Douglas (1966) explores a similar notion in her analysis of dirt and taboo. As Douglas argues, the concept of dirt – which she famously describes as “matter out of place” (44) – only makes sense in relation to the concept of cleanliness. Clean comes first; dirt comes second, and is what sullies the clean. Based on this reasoning, one surefire way to reconstruct a specific culture's value system is to unpack what that particular culture regards as dirty, i.e. strange, abnormal, or taboo. Similarly, weirdness can only exist in relation to existing norms. Close analyses of (what are regarded as) non-normative, liminal, or otherwise just plain weird cultural elements can

therefore reveal, and in many cases complicate, exactly the opposite – elements that are taken as a given. Preferred elements, normal elements. At least, what that particular culture or community deems normal, allowing for the possibility that one group's normal is another group's weird.

Or the possibility that the norms are themselves quite weird, as Phillips (2015) argues in her exploration of subcultural trolls. As she notes, although these self-identifying trolls' antagonistic behaviors are often framed as aberrational, in reality they replicate many cultural motifs and logics – the privileging of rationality over sentimentality, media sensationalism, and chest-thumping American exceptionalism, to name a few – that are regarded as commonplace and even desirable in ostensibly non-trolling contexts. Similarly, as matter out of place (at least for confused bystanders), the cases that opened this book illustrate as much about common expectations surrounding earnest communication, proper interaction, and sincere emotion online as they do about the form and function of irony, subversion, and play.

In this way, ambivalence collapses and complicates binaries within a given tradition. Not just between normal and abnormal, but, as we'll see in the chapters to follow, between then and now, online and offline, and constitutive and destructive. Studies of ambivalence, in turn, can shine a light on the tangled, messy binary breakdown both precipitating and resulting from everyday expression.

Building on the “dirt work” afforded by ambivalence, these expressive behaviors also butt up against – and therefore help to call attention to – issues related to power, voice, and access, for better or for worse. Or perhaps more accurately, for better *and* for worse. On the one hand, communication that is social *and* antagonistic can silence or otherwise minimize diverse public participation by alienating, marginalizing, or mocking those outside the knowing ingroup. On the other hand – as the *ambi* in *ambivalent* might predict – that same alienating, marginalizing, and mocking communication can also provide

an outlet for historically underrepresented populations to speak truth to power. Women, queer people, trans people, people of color, people with disabilities, and members of economically disenfranchised populations – whose voices have historically been undervalued or muted – can thus push back against regressive hegemonic forces, and engage in assertive, confrontational, and empowering expression.

In short, the same behaviors that can wound can be harnessed for social justice. By embracing this ambivalence, essentially by saying yes to each fractured binary, one is better able to track who is pushing back against whom, and to thoughtfully consider the political and ethical stakes on a case-by-case basis. For example, who is speaking, who is listening, and who is refusing to engage? Are members of the dominant group targeting members of historically underrepresented groups (“punching down”), perpetuating even greater marginalization? Are members of historically underrepresented groups targeting members of the dominant group (“punching up”), in the process challenging structural inequalities between races, genders, and classes? What precipitated the behaviors, and what is at stake for whom? Perhaps most importantly, who might be empowered to speak more freely as a result, and who might be alienated, silenced, or shamed? There can be no justice without these answers, and there can be no answers without the right questions. By not filling in any of the relevant blanks, ambivalent behavior forces us to consider each situation on its own terms – in the process providing the necessary building blocks for critical, ethical thinking.

### **Situating the study**

In order to contextualize ambivalent online participation, this book engages with an overlapping spectrum of social sciences, humanities, and cultural studies approaches. It’s especially steeped in folklore, Phillips’ specialization, and communica-



tion, Milner's specialization. This is a natural combination, as both disciplines are concerned, first and foremost, with human expression, whether creative, interpersonal, or political. And both disciplines investigate this expression through complementary lenses: folklore through the lens of tradition, and communication through the lens of interaction. Even as we consider technologies, platforms, and infrastructures, the social and cultural dimensions of mediated interaction will therefore be our principal emphases.

These lenses are also broader and older than the internet, and we will draw from that lineage even as we explore emergent digital media. To that point, some readers might be surprised by the number of embodied and mass media examples (i.e. "offline" examples, though the online/offline binary is one we will complicate) in a book titled *The Ambivalent Internet*. But these examples are critical to understanding why and how the contemporary internet is so overrun with ambivalent expression. In fact, without considering the through line between then and now, embodied and digitally mediated, it is impossible to assess the extent to which these behaviors are, in fact, "new," and, further, what difference that distinction might make. As we will see time and again in the chapters that follow, these lines are often quite fuzzy.

Our opening case studies point to this blur. Amazon Customer's Three Wolf Moon review, for example, may depend on digital communication platforms and tools, but the underlying stereotypes he draws from have a long history in embodied spaces. Likewise, the issues foregrounded in much of the antagonistic commentary directed to the #AskThicke hashtag speak to very embodied and very persistent issues of sexual violence and rape culture. And regardless of what the underlying motivations of (professed) online fans of spree killers might be, their behaviors are highly precedented; as we'll see in the following chapter, ambivalent play with death and disaster has been so pervasive for so long that it is almost expected following mass mediated tragedy. As these and other

examples illustrate, established traditions precede and contextualize even the strangest, most absurd, and most apparently emergent online behavior. The older, embodied world outside the networks, protocols, and platforms colloquially framed as “the internet” is therefore essential to understanding emergent online ambivalence.

At the same time, the affordances of digital media change the ethical stakes and even some basic behavioral and aesthetic dimensions of everyday expression. Specifically, they throw already-existing ambivalence into hyperdrive. Certain ambivalent behaviors – satirizing brands, mocking celebrities, joking about tragedy – are certainly possible in embodied spaces, and may have ample precedent. But they can’t be amplified as quickly to as many people, with as many possible repercussions, as behavior online – even when these behaviors are directly analogous or outright identical to pre-internet behaviors. The following chapters will focus on the hyperdrive ushered in by the tools of digital mediation, and will consider the ethical and political stakes of the ambivalence specific to online spaces. And yet we will continue to consider old alongside new, then alongside now, analog alongside digital. It’s a brave new world, we will argue, and there is nothing new under the sun; and only by embracing this ambivalence can any of us hope to successfully navigate the contemporary digital media landscape.

Our focus on the social and cultural significance of online ambivalence also guides our selection of case studies. By and large, we have confined our analysis to examples embedded within North American cultural contexts, particularly the United States. This does not guarantee, of course, that these examples – and their various iterations – were created by US citizens, nor that they circulated exclusively within US borders. It does mean, however, that the examples spread in English, and are reflective of an American, or at least a broadly Western, perspective.