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The Tensions of Mediated Outrage: Performing Dissent Toward and Through Digital Platforms

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of the author's knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

Sean Alexander Ward

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Previously Published Works

Several sections of this thesis have been published externally.

Chapter 7: The key arguments, methods, analysis, and significant portions of text appear in:

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Abstract

Outrage is widely perceived as a pervasive and problematic feature of media platforms. Recent concerns posit the erosion of public dialogue through issues such as mob-driven censorship and the commodification of emotions. These concerns are not simply about outrage itself, but outrage that has been shaped in some way by digital platforms – that is, mediated outrage. What is particularly interesting about mediated outrage is that it often targets the very digital platforms through which it is performed. In this sense digital platforms act as both the mediator and target of outrage. This thesis explores this dynamic, asking - *How do digital platforms act as both mediators and targets of outrage?* I explore this question through a mixed methods analysis of three case studies: the 2021 Spotify boycott as it developed on Twitter, the GameStop short squeeze that began and unfolded through Reddit, and the #TwitterMigration to Mastodon following Elon Musk's acquisition of the platform in 2022. These empirical accounts reveal various *tensions* through which mediated outrage operates. This means understanding mediated outrage through its various potentials, challenges, and contradictions. These tensions are analytically rich, offering unique insight into how outrage manifests on, with, and through platforms.

Through the case studies, I develop and apply a conceptual model which covers the *spread*, *social functions* and *moral actions* of mediated outrage. Each component of the model is emphasized in a contained case study, after which I weave the pieces together. Specifically, I explore *spread* through the Spotify boycott; *social functions* through the GameStop short squeeze on Reddit, and *moral actions* through the #TwitterMigration. Within each component of the model I locate a general *tension*. First, on the *spread* - mediated outrage rapidly captures public attention, but spreads in a way that is constricted by, and reproduces, existing expressive access. Second, on the *social functions* - mediated outrage fosters cohesion and collectivity, but does so through various forms of exclusion. Finally, on the *moral actions* - mediated outrage fuels collective action against platforms' perceived moral violations, but the mediation of this action shapes dissent within the platforms' logics.

This thesis provides a two-fold contribution. First, the conceptual model gives a lens through which to explore the complexity of outrage events that both target and are performed on digital platforms. This lens extends beyond my case studies and retains broad relevance within a highly digitized communication sphere. Second, the thesis advances sociological theories of media, drawing on and adding to accounts of platform *ambivalence*. This perspective challenges bifurcated claims that attach neat value judgements to social media platforms as sites of social and political dissent.

List of Abbreviations

AOC – Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

API – Application Programming Interface

DFV – DeepFuckingValue

GME – GameStop

IRC – Interaction Ritual Chain

JRE – Joe Rogan Experience

MMNH – Morally Motivated Networked Harassment

NPC – Non-player Character

OWS – Occupy Wall Street

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Context

Are digital platforms making us outraged? In popular discourse, there is a widespread perception of *outrage* as a pervasive and problematic threat. Slate magazine declared 2014 to be the “year of outrage” and documented an “online firestorm” for every day of the year (Turner et al., 2014). In 2018, the Atlantic more simply declared that “every year” is now a year of outrage. As of 2024, this assertion seems to have ringed true with the Guardian publishing that “We’re living in the age of rage” (Cohen, 2024), and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) asking if “we have become addicted to outrage” (Bennett, 2024).

The term “outrage” conveys a strong emotional response to perceived moral violations. In itself this does not convey a sense of irrationality, or absence of justification. However, the *pervasiveness* of outrage often comes with an explicit critique of the state of contemporary discourse. This is less a constant state of anger, and more so a constant state of acute episodes of anger. Take for example the firestorms which spread on Twitter and TikTok in 2023 calling for the boycott of the video game *Hogwarts Legacy* due to J.K. Rowling's views on transgender issues (Smith, 2023). Or, from the other side of the political spectrum, the 2023 boycott of Ben and Jerry's due to the company tweeting that “it's high time we recognize that the US exists on stolen Indigenous land and commit to returning it”; leading to many conservatives sharing videos of themselves “destroying” Ben and Jerry's products due to the company's perceived “wokeness” (Hagstrom, 2023). Both these examples have been described by terms such as “cancel culture” which capture a widespread public sentiment of fear over the impacts of mob-driven censorship. Even established academic terms such as the “moral panic” have emerged as ways problematise contemporary instances of platform fuelled outrage – such as the #MeToo movement or Black Lives Matter protests – a usage which has been critiqued by sociologists for obfuscating cultural dynamics and reframing legitimate resistance as irrational and oppressive (Phillips and Chagnon, 2021). This public sentiment towards

online outrage is often captured to frame academic work on outrage. In her oft cited *Moral Outrage and The Digital Age* (2017), the cognitive psychologist Molly Crockett writes;

“Worldwide, more than a billion people now spend at least an hour a day on social media, and moral outrage is all the rage online. In recent years, viral online shaming has cost companies millions, candidates elections, and individuals their careers overnight.”

Indeed, over the three years I have been working on this PhD - whenever I told someone that I was doing a PhD on “outrage on social media”, the frequent response was “well there is certainly no shortage of case studies”.

What is important is that this sense of pervasiveness of outrage, as well as the associated fears, are not simply over outrage itself, but outrage that was amplified, or in some way shaped, by digital platforms. This posits a sense of artificiality – it is not just the issue or injustice that is making us angry, but the platform’s manufacturing of this feeling and its expression. By reference this also posits a sense of a “pure” or “natural” outrage that we have always had, but that has been commodified by platforms and malformed. We might call this outrage that has been substantially performed on digital platforms, and therefore shaped by such platforms, *mediated outrage*.

Indeed, just as outrage has become the dominant emotion of the past decade, platforms have emerged as the dominant media. The structures and services of platforms have become so pervasive that they resemble public utilities, despite them overwhelmingly operating as for-profit companies (Plantin et al., 2018). This pervasiveness extends beyond their role in mediating social interaction, to many areas of daily life, such as music listening (e.g. Spotify, Apple Music), stock trading (e.g. Robinhood), online payments (e.g. PayPal), shopping (e.g. Ebay, Amazon), health and fitness monitoring (e.g. Strava, Apple Health), or transportation (e.g. Uber, Didi). Such systems are characterised by their interconnectedness and interdependence, operating as a sort of “platform ecosystem” (Van Dijk et al. 2018).

As a term, the “platform” seems to invoke an image of neutrality, whereby platforms are mere conduits –responsible only for the curation of content, but the users are responsible for the content itself (Gillespie, 2010). However, this presumed neutrality exists in direct contradiction to the power that platforms hold in shaping social life. Mediated outrage is a phenomenon where this contradiction becomes acutely observable. This is first in the sense that I have already discussed – in that we see an emotional performance (outrage) that is formed and shaped by platforms. But more importantly, mediated outrage is also often *targeted at* platforms themselves – users are often aware of the powers, responsibilities, and roles of platforms and utilise outrage when these expectations are violated.

We see this in the growing negative sentiment towards “big-tech” since the mid 2010s which has been called the “techlash”. A series of major scandals have gripped major tech companies in recent years, with criticisms coming from both sides of the political spectrum. Take for example, the Cambridge Analytica data scandal of 2016, which saw a mass movement to #DeleteFacebook based on their mishandling of private user information (Confessore, 2018). Or in 2020, the acute campaign to #CancelNetflix due to the platform’s inclusion of the *Cuties* film which allegedly sexualised young children (Morales, 2020). These scandals sometimes even implore platforms to totally remove the veil of neutrality and take an explicit political stance. For example, when *Uber* was the target of a firestorm to #DeleteUber in 2017 due to their perceived support for Donald Trump’s Muslim ban, their competitor *Lyft* issued a statement condemning Trump’s order and pledging a one-million-dollar donation to the American Civil Liberties Union (Lee, 2017). What is so interesting about these examples of mediated outrage is not *just* that platforms are amplifying or intensifying our outrage, or *just* that we seem to be constantly outraged at the practices of platforms, but that these two points so commonly intersect. That is, because platforms have become an entrenched means to perform outrage, those same platforms play an integral role in shaping the outrage which targets them. These cases, for example, both target a digital platform (Facebook, Netflix, Uber) and are substantially performed on a digital platform (Twitter). My interest lies at the intersection of these points – those instances where outrage is both substantially *performed on* and

in some way *targeted at* a digital platform. Bringing this together, I define mediated outrage as an acute reaction of anger and disgust to a perceived violation of a moral standard, which is shaped in some way by the communication medium through which it is transmitted and received. My focus is specifically on acute moments of collective attention in which widespread public indignation is both directed at a platform and performed on a platform. I develop this definition of mediated outrage further in Chapter 3 by clearly outlining perspectives on “mediation”, “outrage” and “platforms”, and then providing a detailed description of mediated outrage through its components.

1.1 Research Question and Aims

For clarity we could split this focus into two questions. First, *how do digital platforms shape outrage through their features and related affordances?* That is – how does platform design and policy shape outrage? Second, *how does this mediated outrage shape public perceptions of platforms?* That is – how does mediated outrage shape platforms as cultural objects? However, what is so interesting about each of these questions is precisely that they are *not* isolated but entangled with each other. As such, rather than try and force such a separation, I ask more simply- *How do digital platforms act as both mediators and targets of outrage?*

This is understandably quite a broad overarching question – especially given that platforms are so diverse in their intentions and affordances, and outrage events can be so fluid in contexts and issues of focus. Each platform posits its own distinctive way of mediating outrage. Moreover, each outrage event posits its own social and cultural dynamics. Together these complexities render each instance of mediated outrage as a unique empirical object in its own right, which would in turn result in an entirely different answer to the question “How do digital platforms act as both mediators and targets of outrage?”.

One approach is to lean into this complexity, and deliberately avoid generalising to provide a detailed exploration of distinct empirical instance. Another approach is to lean into the abstract similarities between events, and attempt to make generalised

comments on specific components of mediated outrage. This latter approach is what Eviatar Zerubavel (2021) calls *concept-driven sociology*. This does not preclude the specific, but makes a conscious effort to look towards those findings which are generic. I draw particularly from Zerubavel's application of Herbert Blumer's (1954) work on sensitising concepts. These concepts, he argues, allow researchers to derive general conclusions from specific observations and cases as they provide a lens that can continuously adapt to the complexity of the situation. They act like "magnets", pulling the researcher towards relevant data and shaping how it is perceived (Zerubavel, 2021). This approach is especially useful in the study of digital platforms as they are objects of study which constantly morph and change. Looking for general insights allows for findings to remain relevant despite the inevitable change in the specifics.

This thesis explores three case studies of mediated outrage events which are both substantially performed on platforms, and in some way targeted at a platform. Specifically,

(1) The Spotify boycott due to platforming Joe Rogan's misinformation.

In December 2021 podcaster Joe Rogan hosted prominent vaccine sceptic Robert Malone on the *Joe Rogan Experience* (JRE). The episode sparked a widespread public firestorm targeted at Spotify for platforming COVID-19 misinformation.

(2) The GameStop short squeeze and associated outrage at Robinhood for restricting trades.

In January 2021, GameStop's stock experienced an unprecedented surge in price, fuelled by retail investors on the Reddit. Many of these investors were using a commission-free trading platform called Robinhood. During the height of the squeeze, Robinhood briefly restricted trading on "meme-stocks", leading to intense backlash on Reddit.

(3) The mass user migration to Mastodon in the wake of Elon Musk's Twitter acquisition.

In October 2022 Elon Musk finalised his acquisition of Twitter¹, promising to turn the platform into a haven for “free speech”. The acquisition resulted in a period of chaos on the platform, with a substantial portion of its user base organising a migration to a twitter alternative called Mastodon.

A more detailed explanation of each case study will be given in Chapter 4. My aim in exploring these studies is first to build on the existing sociological literature around mediated outrage to situate a general conceptual model, or way of thinking about such outrage events. Specifically, by highlighting the components of mediated outrage – how outrage *spreads*, the *social functions* of outrage, and the *moral actions* of outrage. I aim to draw from and synthesise existing work to develop a conceptual lens for analysing each. This I hope, can provide a conceptual scaffold for future work which also seeks to explore similar instances of what is an increasingly common dynamic of public discourse. Second, I argue that rather than thinking of mediated outrage as entirely problematic, we should instead see mediated outrage as characterised by *tensions*. These generally exists as competing positive potentials that come with a certain thorniness, challenge, or contradiction. These tensions emerge specifically when we place platforms in dual and simultaneous positions – that is as the target and the mediator of outrage.

Returning to my overarching research question of “*How do digital platforms act as both mediators and targets of outrage?*”, my approach as outlined above is to treat mediated outrage as a multi-focal object. Each case study addresses this question with regard to an individual component of this object - the spread of outrage, the social functions of outrage, and the moral actions of outrage. Through these empirical accounts I then aim to reveal various tensions through which mediated outrage operates.

¹ Musk changed Twitter’s legal name to “X” in April 2023. This change occurred after my data collection and analysis, so I refer to the platform by “Twitter” rather than “X” throughout the thesis.

1.2 Thesis Roadmap

Chapter 2 outlines and reviews several key perspectives on mediated outrage within and adjacent to the sociological literature. From these perspectives I note a tendency for work to problematise mediated outrage, which I discuss tandem with the growing public perception of mediated outrage as problematic. I use this as a background to move to works which specifically examine outrage that is both targeted at and performed on a platform. These examples, I argue, necessitate a focus on the various *tensions* of mediated outrage.

Chapter 3 situates a clear way of thinking about “mediation”, “platforms” and “outrage” in light of the perspectives reviewed. This then informs the development of the scaffold my model of mediated outrage – comprised of the *spread*, *social functions* and *moral actions* of outrage. These components serve as the general guide for the subsequent chapters and overall argument of the thesis.

In Chapter 4 I outline my research design in more depth. I start by filling out these components by identifying a series of sensitising concepts for each component. Here I explain in detail Zerubavel’s concept driven approach, specifically highlighting how he applies Blumer’s notion of sensitising concepts to identify general patterns and develop generic insights. I then outline how I intend to use a case study design to look for such patterns. This involves first selecting a case study which exemplifies a particular dimension of outrage, and exploring this case in-depth. This is then reinforced by a cross-case synthesis (Chapter 8), where the conceptual outputs from each case study are applied to conduct a micro-analysis of the other cases. I also provide a general outline of and justification for my digital methods approach, looking to marry this with Zerubavel’s concept driven sociology.

Chapter 5 explores the *spread* of mediated outrage through a case study of the Spotify firestorm of early 2022. I challenge previous efforts to explain online firestorms as a type of moral panic (e.g. Johnen et al., 2018), and instead explore the online firestorm through Alice Marwick’s model of Morally Motivated Networked Harassment (MMNH) (Marwick,

2021). I follow the firestorms movement over three key *amplification events*, identifying both the key users amplifying the firestorm and ways in which each amplifier provides distinctive framings of the outrage. In conjunction I follow the *counter-firestorm* that emerged in response to each amplification event, and explore how this counter-firestorm operates through similar dynamics. I abstract this general process to make a critical comment on how mediated outrage spreads in a way that is constricted by, and reproduces, existing forms of expressive access.

In Chapter 6 I explore the *social functions* of mediated outrage through a case study of the GameStop (GME) short squeeze and subsequent firestorm targeting Robinhood. I outline the process of becoming a collective through the lens of Randall Collins' (2005) work on *Interaction Ritual Chains* (IRCs). I explore how the shared focus on meme stocks, and the mutual entrainment of buying said stocks and posting screenshots on r/WallStreetBets produces a sense of community. This community formed through a shared sense of elation when the stocks were rising, and a shared sense of righteous indignation following Robinhood's trading restrictions. However, I note the various forms of *exclusion* that this community was premised on.

Chapter 7 explores the *moral actions* of mediated outrage through a case study of the mass user migration to Mastodon during Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter. I bring together Howard Becker's (1963) work on moral enterprise with contemporary work on materialised action (Schraube, 2009) and affordance theory (Davis, 2020) to develop a model of *mediated moral enterprise*. I then utilise this model to explore Mastodon and Twitter as competing forms of moral enterprise, each of which posit different ideals of what a social platform should do and should be. I follow the user migration, investigating the extent to which decentralisation is actualised in the mass movement of users. In doing so, I illuminate pressures that arise in organising a movement away from Twitter, on Twitter.

Chapter 8 brings these three case studies together through a cross-case analysis. I conduct six micro case studies, applying the general findings and concepts from each

dimension to the two other cases. I outline the relevance of each component to the other case studies, given the new mix of events, platforms and methods posited by each. The aim here was not to show that these are universal aspects of outrage that are rigidly generalisable, but to identify generic consistencies in the components and tensions.

Finally, Chapter 9 brings together each component of mediated outrage and discusses the tension identified with each in detail. I formulate these into three statements of the tensions of mediated outrage – one for each component of outrage. I then outline the broader significance of both the conceptual model of mediated outrage developed in this thesis, as well as the more general implication of the *tensions* identified. Finally, I discuss the limitations of my approach, and suggest directions for further research.

Chapter 2: Perspectives On Mediated Outrage

Outrage is an increasingly common part of everyday discourse. I have so far discussed this in quite general strokes, briefly highlighting some key popular discussions in the news media. I noted that these discussions tend to focus specifically on *mediated outrage* –that is outrage that has in some way been shaped by a digital platform. Moreover, I noted the tendency to problematise both the outrage and the role of the platform in amplifying or shaping it.

These popular discussions of outrage have coincided with a burgeoning academic interest in mediated outrage, especially in media sociology and adjacent disciplines. This interest is of course not new, and not unique to platforms. Concepts such as the “moral panic” for example, were developed in the 1960s to analyse cases of mass-media fuelled panic. Before moving to my specific focus on those manifestations of outrage which both target and are mediated by a digital platform, it is useful to build a picture of the sociological literature on mediated outrage more generally.

In this chapter I will outline several key perspectives on mediated outrage. To narrow my focus, I have looked predominately to perspectives within or adjacent to media sociology which discuss acute manifestations of mass outrage. That is, those events whereby a large group of people become rapidly outraged at some social or moral transgression, which then quickly dissipates over time.

From these perspectives I note a tendency for work to problematise mediated outrage, which I discuss tandem with the growing public perception of mediated outrage as problematic. I use this as a background to move to works which specifically examine outrage that is both targeted at and performed on a platform. Here I argue that these perspectives – which include the platform at both ends of mediated outrage - highlight a need to move towards understanding the *tensions* which arise.

2.1 Perspectives

2.1.1 *The Outrage Industry and Shame Machine*

Berry and Sobieraj (2013) locate the increasing prevalence of outrage as the result of the hyper-competitive media environment, which they fittingly title *The Outrage Industry*. Outrage here arises through economic incentives – it is a “genre” of content that is highly engaging and easy to produce, and as such provides a highly profitable type of content for media producers.

“Every day, new compelling content must be generated. And each day much of that content is outrage, which is inexpensive to produce, dramatic enough to cut through the clutter of alternatives, resonant with our current cultural milieu” (p. 120)

The author's key argument is that the rapid proliferation of outrage is the product of structural changes in the media landscape, rather than the increased political polarisation. That is, the deregulation of the mass media and technological shifts have encouraged the mass production of outrage as an easy, and highly profitable form of content. Those change have in turn has led to a more antagonistic, polarised and emotion-centric public sphere. Berry and Sobieraj are commenting specifically on the United States, and draw primarily from examples in what might be called the “legacy-media” - that is, cable-news and radio. The authors do also discuss blogs at length, and include speculations on the role of social media. However, the contemporary relevance of such speculations are limited by the time they were written.

More recently, Cathy O’Neil (2022) developed a similar argument that homes in on “shame” (and by extension, outrage), as it applies to social media. Like Berry and Sobieraj’s *Outrage Industry*, O’Neil’s *Shame Machine* argues that media platforms are incentivised to optimise for outrage driven content as it drives clicks, attention, and ultimately advertising dollars (O’Neil, 2022). However, rather than themselves producing content that stokes outrage, O’Neil argues that social media platforms amplify attention to “highly engaging content” through their algorithms. This content is often that with an

immediate affective intensity, such as outrage. The production of outrage is thus distributed to the users, but encouraged by the platform so as to maximise attention.

“This is the nature of automated platforms governed by machine-learning algorithms. If the system’s objective is to maximise traffic and revenue, it automatically distributes and promotes the information that leads to the most clicks, comments, and shares. And since we’re much more likely to respond to threats and attacks than pleas for civil and nuanced discourse, we click on nastiness and soon find ourselves enmeshed in it.” (p. 143).

Both the *Outrage Industry* and *Shame Machine* work to place focus on how the business practices of the media, whether it be broadcast television/radio or social media, encourage the production of outrage and facilitate its spread. Each develop the premise that that outrage (or shame) is pervasive in contemporary discourse, and then present an argument as to why. These answers both locate the primary driver of this pervasiveness of outrage in structural changes in the media landscape, and the general economic incentives of profit-driven media organisations.

2.1.2 Moral panics

A related approach can be found in moral panic studies. Rather than seeking to understand a general pervasiveness of outrage, this body of work generally explores a specific moment or event of exaggerated public anxiety, and seeks to illustrate the extent of distortion, the actors involved, and the social consequences of the panic. Broadly defined, a moral panic refers to the social process in which a deviant group is constructed as a critical threat to societal values in such a way that provokes exaggerated concern and hostility towards the deviant group (Goode and Yehuda, 1994). Outrage best understood as a component of the process of a moral panic – the moral panic develops conditions by which outrage arises and the situates the target to which indignation is directed. Studies of moral panics have traditionally blended the analysis of such economic incentives for panic production, as illustrated in the *Outrage Industry* and *Shame Machine*, with a broader focus on the political uses and powers of panic episodes

(Garland, 2008). This is often complemented by a more micro focus on the processes and rhetoric of claims making (Critcher, 2008).

Rather than outrage, per se, it was fear and social anxiety that were central to early conceptions of moral panic. Studies focused on “cultures of fear” – “pervasive, free-floating anxiety” that can be “manipulated by hegemonic forces to scapegoat outsiders and shore up existing social forms” (Falkof, 2020, p.223). Importantly, when these authors invoke “anxiety” as a concept, they are not so much referring to an emotional state directed at something specific, but rather to the perceived breakdown in social order brought about by a disruption in the material supports and social maintenance of the ideological hegemony. Social anxiety in this sense is felt internally but is invisible – it is not consciously directed towards a specific target, object or cause. To remedy invisibility the elite construct “folk devils” to whom are attributed “the role of causing the various elements of disorganisation and dislocation which have produced 'social anxiety'” (Hall et al., 1978, p. 157). Outrage, in this sense, is understood as part of the public response that result from the processes of scapegoating and moralisation. The public is given an outlet to express indignation towards those constructed to be responsible for the breakdown of social order.

Key here is that such widespread outburst of emotion were not so much a spontaneous reaction that appeared without organisation, but outbursts that were intentionally stoked by various actors. Central to Cohen’s work particularly were the moral entrepreneurs who played a central role in stoking panic and encouraging its spread. In Cohen’s work, the moral entrepreneur specifically referred to those “community members who played an agitational leadership role in the first forms of grass-roots organisation against the perceived moral threat” (Jones, 2023, p. 16). This generally preferred a “structurally advantaged activist”, who held the power to “influence mass-media narratives and shape public opinion” (Hier, 2019, p. 386). Such moral entrepreneurs sought to instigate a public reaction that would result in some change or reform to the moral order, or to combat a perceived threat to the moral order. These community members of course relied heavily on the press. As Jones argues, “without the ‘oxygen of publicity’... figures

fail to become more than local agitators, if that. They rely heavily on whatever affordances provided by innovations in means of communication in overcoming their localism.” (p.16)

As such the mediation of such processes was central to moral panic analysis. Indeed, Cohen (2011/1972) originally devoted much of his original analysis to understanding the role of journalism in the creation and maintenance of a moral panic. He argued, the media played a crucial role in constructing “folk devils” through the *exaggeration* of events, *prediction* of future threats, and the *symbolic* representation of deviants. Panic was constructed through the reportage of journalists, and through the selective amplification of narratives pushed by “moral entrepreneurs”. In each case, the mass media took a central role.

"The media have long operated as agents of moral folk devils and moral panics indignation in their own right: even if they are not self-consciously engaged in crusading or muck-raking, their very reporting of certain ‘facts’ can be sufficient to generate concern, anxiety, indignation or panic. The media focus on events disrupting social order, using implicit explanations to interpret and amplify these events, which primes society for panic.” (p.11).

As Garland (2008) highlights, it was the *collective effervescence* of moral panic episodes that provided the “precondition for the recurring investment of the mass media and the political class in panic-producing processes...” (p.18). Here, we see the strength of moral panic studies in situating the panic as both an “institutionalised need of the commercial media” due to its effervescence (Young, 1971, as cited in Garland, 2008) but also in its social functions – its maintenance of “symbolic universes” which defined normative contours of society (Goode and Yehuda, 1994; Heir, 2011).

This focus on the role of the press in the creation and maintenance of moral panics persisted throughout the concept's usage. As such, drastic changes in the media environment in the past 50 years have resulted in significant rethinking of the concept. As early as the mid-nineties criticisms such as that of McRobbie and Thornton (1995) highlighted that conceptions vastly minimised the complexity of media. They argued that moral panic theory must recognise the “proliferation and fragmentation of mass, niche

and micro-media and the multiplicity of voices, which compete and contest the meaning of the issues subject to 'moral panic'" (p. 560). Moreover, such moral panics are no longer an uncommon occurrence but a regular part of everyday life. These factors have arguably been accelerated by the proliferation of digital media in recent decades (Walsh, 2020; Hier, 2019).

Scholars have made several efforts to update moral panic analysis for changing media environments (see Ingraham and Reeves 2017; Hier, 2019; Walsh 2020; Zielińska and Pasamonik, 2022; Walsh and Hill, 2023). For example, Ingraham and Reeves argue that "the evolving orientation to public life fostered by these new technologies has created a culture of shaming whereby citizens often prosecute their own discrete moral panics amid the more sustained sense of political crisis that characterises contemporary life" (p.455).

Others have taken a slightly more media-centric approach. One recent and prominent approach comes from James Walsh (2020). Walsh's central proposition is that social media affordances increase the frequency of panics and amplify their severity. He focuses on several dynamics to support this assertion. Firstly, he highlights social media's tendency to promote homophily by pushing people into "information silos" or producing "filter-bubbles". Secondly, he argues that the participatory nature of new media encourages people to "police social boundaries" through "mob-ocratic" means. Thirdly he highlights that social media architectures are engineered to optimise for engagement, which often leads to the promotion of acerbic content and false information. Fourth, he highlights the prevalence of big data computations that facilitate highly targeted messaging and predictive knowledge. Fifth and finally, he touches on the introduction of artificial actors such as social bots, which can be engineered to inflate or direct panic through artificial participation.

2.1.3 Online firestorms

Another approach has been to link moral panic analysis to adjacent concepts such as online firestorms (Johnen et al., 2018). The firestorm concept had seen development

primarily in the marketing and public relations literature. Here, online firestorms are broadly defined as the “the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative WOM and complaint behaviour against a person, company, or group in social media networks” (Pfeffer, 2014, p. 118). The concept has been applied often with a degree of flexibility – however there are several general points of commonality which can build on this definition. Firstly, the “online firestorm” is usually applied to describe cases which are precipitated by a specific trigger – a spark that ignites outrage. Studies will often point to a specific norm violation (e.g. a racist tweet) which is assumed as the cause of public outrage (Lamba et al., 2015 ; Gruber et al., 2020). Secondly, although the formative definition points to groups as a potential target, most studies focus on outrage that is targeted a specific entity or entities, such as brands or individuals, rather than social groups (Gruber et al., 2020). Finally, firestorms are generally short term, volatile, and theorised as being driven by personal exposure and social motivations (Rost et al., 2016; Johnen et al., 2018; Gruber et al., 2020).

Johnen et al., (2018) attempt to form a conceptual link between online firestorms and moral panics through the application of Goode and Yehuda’s (1994) attributional model of moral panic as an explanatory framework. They highlight that the online firestorms are distinctive from traditional panics due to the affordances of digital media. Specifically, the authors comment that speed of dissemination may be greater due to the dynamics of diffusion on social media, and also suggest participants in panics may engage in more extreme outburst of hostility due to the disinhibitory effects of social platforms. Most importantly though, they highlight that the formation of online firestorms is inherently participatory – a consensus of concern and hostility is produced through networked co-production and co-distribution rather than through mass media framing. The authors thus direct their analytical focus towards the *motivations* for participation in firestorms, arguing that individuals participate both to achieve social recognition and because they perceive a violation in a moral standard.

2.1.4 Outrage as a contagion

This growth in psychological and interdisciplinary orientations has coincided with an increased focus on the individual participatory dynamics of networked media. This is relevant both to the well-established area of moral panic studies but also to moral outrage research more generally. Indeed much of the development of the term “moral outrage” has been in the realm of psychology, where the concept is firmly rooted in the discipline’s vocabulary. This work has developed in active dialogue with the sociological work on moral panics (Puryear et al., 2024) as well as a growing focus in sociology and media studies on moral outrage (see for example, Marwick, 2021; Sharma, 2023; Workneh, 2021; Gharavi; 2020; Lee and Abidin, 2024).

Brady et al.’s (2020) oft cited “MAD” (Motivation, Attention, Design) model posits a contagion based process by which moral-emotional content is transferred on social media. They broadly conceptualise moral contagion on social media platforms as being categorised by motivations for sharing, the attention that content draws, and platform design decisions which amplify the spread of content. Foundational to their perspective is the assertion that group-identity plays a key motivational role in the spread of moral-emotional content. They support this assertion through references to psychological literature that shows how moral-emotional communication (1) maintains the salience of boundaries between in-groups and outgroups, (2) further a sense of belonging within the in-group, and (3) reduces uncertainty about aspects of the self through group identification. The authors also begin to hypothesise potential impacts of design, stating that platforms may make group identities more salient through deindividualization and feedback-mechanisms, increase the speed of transfer of emotion, and amplify attention to such content through algorithmic filtering and notifications.

We can see this in contrast to much of moral panic analysis, of which generally starts from a social state and then moves towards individuals feelings and experiences. For example, take Hall et al.’s (1978) conception of social anxiety as a free-floating sentiment of social breakdown that engulfs society but is felt individually. Much of the moral outrage literature, in contrast, explores outrage first and foremost as a psychological state then

seeks to understand how this is transmitted between individuals. Rather than a societal sentiment, this lends itself to understanding outrage as a *psychological contagion* that is passed on.

2.1.5 *Morally motivated networked harassment*

Marwick's (2021) model of *Morally Motivated Networked Harassment* (MMNH) marries existing psychological work on moral contagions with existing sociological work – particularly so those found in cultural sociology. Though Marwick's primary aim is to understand “why people engage in online harassment”, in doing so she also outlines a workable model of how outrage spreads through digital platforms. MMNH begins with a target who is accused of a norm violation, or violations, which serve as the moral justification for networked harassment. This “accusation” is frequently constructed by a highly connected account that acts as an “amplifier”. The amplifier plays a central role in bringing visibility to the controversy. Because the violation and target are constructed in relation to the norms of the networked community, the performance of outrage through harassment serves to signify collective membership as well as draw symbolic boundaries between online communities.

Key to Marwick's model is a focus on those highly connected accounts who bring the violation to the attention of their networked audience. That is, outrage spreads through key users who play a pivotal role in framing and distributing outrage. This analytical focus on identifying key users, or leaders, in the spread of outrage provides a useful conceptual tether back to the work on moral panics, specifically in its parallels with Cohens' usage of the “moral entrepreneur”. Similar to how the moral entrepreneur works with the affordances of the legacy media, the amplifier works with the affordances of digital media to situate an accusation of moral violation. This then encourages mass shaming and harassment in response to the violation. This perspective provides a useful way drawing our attention to those key users in the spread of outrage – asking questions over how they frame issues to stoke outrage, and how they work with the affordances of digital platforms to amplify their messaging.

2.1.6 Outrage as a ritual

Lance Gharavi (2020) provides a theory of outrage which is critical assertion that outrage is “expressed” at all, arguing instead that it is performed. Gharavi (2020) draws heavily from Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (2001/1912). Gharavi argues that outrage, like religion, is produced by a sort of collective effervescence – that is, a “sort of electricity” that it generated in the closeness of gathering individuals, in which “every emotion expressed resonates without interference in consciousnesses that are wide open to external impressions, each one echoing the others” (Durkheim, 2001/1912; pp. 217-218). Durkheim originally explored these moments of collective effervescence arise through religious rituals, highlighting that when groups would come together to perform ceremonies they are bound together in collective energy and emotion. The ceremony, through this effervescence is productive of a moral community - of a communal sense of belonging and shared essence. In this way, religion served key functions in society – it provided groups with a social solidarity, guided individual behaviour in line with this solidarity, and maintained the boundaries between the “sacred” and “profane”. Gharavi (2020) argues that outrage provides many of the same social functions, though moments of outrage arise through the effervescence of “anger, indignation, and contempt” rather than the effervescence of religious life. Outrage, to this view, characterised by five key social functions:

- (1) Productive: Outrage draws the boundaries between communities. It defines identities and delineates the in-group and out-group.
- (2) Cohesive: Outrage brings groups together under shared imaginaries.
- (3) Disciplinary: Outrage defines the normative standards of behaviour in communities.
- (4) Vitalising: Outrage contributes to the continued salience of existing identities.

- (5) Euphoric: The performance of outrage enables a sense of righteousness and belonging.

Gharavi then explores how such “functions of outrage” are shaped by digital media. He argues that the effervescence of outrage encourages platforms to optimise its spread, and the design elements and material structures of platforms “amplify, multiply and lubricate outrage performances”. This in turn is positioned largely as a “corrosive” force which threatens the civility of public dialogue. This is a similar argument to that made by authors such as O’Neil (2022).

The strength of such approaches is that it pushes our focus towards understanding what outrage does and connects that which is felt to the interactions and energy of the collective, rather than the internal cognitions of individuals. Such a focus provides a useful pushback to contemporary popular discourse which minimises contemporary outrage expressions to be no more than virtue signalling, or academic work which seeks to discern between legitimate and illegitimate forms of outrage expression through concepts such as “moral grandstanding” (e.g. Tosi and Warmke, 2020). This is because it recognises the *euphoric* feelings of outrage as an essential part of the process, rather than as a means of discerning between legitimate and illegitimate expression.

Of course, leaning too hard into a functionalist perspective steeped in Durkheimian sociology comes several distinctive challenges. Functionalism firstly risks of neglecting the role of individual agency. Durkheim has often been criticised for his tendency to position moral systems as “unequivocally top-down” in that they must exist from a source higher than the self. Durkheim especially emphasised the constraining role of morality in guiding one’s individual agency in-line with the collective values of society. This takes a rather pessimistic view of human nature - that is, if our impulses are left unchecked by moral systems societal disorder will result, as individuals would act solely in self-interest. Without the morality acting as an external guiding force, human nature could undermine the cohesion and stability of social groups. Hookway (2015) aptly describes this as the “Durkheimian fear that not far beneath the surface of the socialised

self lurks a wolf-like individual ready to puncture a functioning social order” (p. 277). Moreover, this is relevant not just to the maintenance of social order, but also an individual’s sense of purpose. As Durkheim argues (2005/1897):

It is not human nature which can assign the variable limits necessary to our needs. They are thus unlimited so far as they depend on the individual alone. Irrespective of any external regulatory force, our capacity for feeling is in itself an insatiable and bottomless abyss. (Durkheim, 2005/1897, p. 208)

In this way, the individual requires morality to regulate their needs and desires, just as just as social order depends on moral regulation. In line with a pessimistic view of human nature, a functionalist view is also limited insofar as it conceptualises morality as a source of solidarity. This can encourage an overly optimistic view of moral systems, discouraging a more critical perspective. That is, essentialising morality as the source of social solidarity may minimise the oppressive roles of morality, insofar as it provides an argument against social change for the sake of social solidarity.

Gharavi (2020) does balance this focus by considering outrage as a “performance” that is “produced to be witnessed” (p. 130). That is, in-line with the interactionist tradition - morals are produced in the processes of interaction; as Gharavi argues:

“Outrage is typically framed as reactive. Common sense would suggest that the norm-violating news, event, statement, or what have you, always precedes and produces the outrage. This understanding comports with how outrage is framed by researchers. I want to suggest something more radical. Outrage is productive rather than reactive. It produces a narrative that is constitutive of that which it appears to interpret; that is to say, outrage is constitutive of social reality. It is generative, not generated. It is world-making. Outrage is an act that precedes and produces a narrative as its retroactive allergen.” (p. 130-131).

This pushes back against the idea that morality is essential in imposing external constraints on self-interested individuals, and instead considers morality as something actively produced and reproduced through the ongoing practices of social actors. In

doing so, it still places an analytical focus on what outrage is *doing* through these interactions – what norms are generated, identities produced, or communities formed.

Another way we can understand the ritualistic aspects of outrage in a way that avoids some of the pitfalls of functionalism is to look to the radical microsociology of Randall Collins, particularly so his work on Interaction Ritual Chains (IRCs) (2005). Collin's makes a somewhat similar proposition to Gharavi, focusing on the communities which shared emotions produce and the symbolic objects which hold these emotions. However, his focus is significantly broader than outrage. For Collin's interaction rituals are simply moments of mutually shared emotion and attention, through which feelings of group membership, solidarity, symbols, and shared morality are produced (Collins, 2005; p. 42). This can involve anything from routine and strictly organised activities, such as going to a church service or a sporting event, to more spontaneous and ephemeral events such as protests. Rituals here quite simply refer to any event in which multiple individuals are co-present and display a shared focus of attention. Though his focus is considerably broader than outrage, his work has been used to explore outrage (see van Haperen et al. 2020; Boonstra and Söderberg, 2024), especially so in the social movements literature (see Jasper, 2014).

Collin's main aim was to blend Durkheim's work on collective effervescence and group solidarity, with Erving Goffman's micro sociological approach to interaction rituals. Goffman's (2017/1967) theory of Interaction Rituals took a more micro approach to studying the often mundane face-to-face interactions of everyday life. Specifically, he highlighted the subtle rules which govern, and are reproduced in everyday interactions. These could be as simple as a conversational routine, for example – starting with a greeting, moving to small talk, saying farewell. Each step implies a certain order, of which is common to total strangers, and when enacted conveys meaning of the social relationship – as Collins argues, citing Goffman, these seemingly simple encounters “are reminders of how persons stand toward each other, with what degree of friendship (i.e., solidarity), intimacy, or respect” (p.18). Importantly, Goffman also stresses that these rules must be actively produced, and reproduced in interaction. Individuals feel a moral

obligation to uphold the interaction order, and meaning of the situation, and in doing so actively produce such an order in interaction. This places an immediacy of focus on the interaction itself, rather than the larger structural focus on society that was common to Durkheim.

This means that the analytical concern of IRCs is not so much how they maintain a sense of solidarity at the level of society, as was the focus for Durkheim, “but rather memberships that are local, sometimes ephemeral, stratified, and conflictual.” (p. xi). This means that rituals are not *just* a force for producing morality and solidarity, but that they are also essential way in which existing moralities are reorganised, reinterpreted, and challenged. As he argues,

“Intense ritual experience creates new symbolic objects and generates energies that fuel the major social changes. Interactional ritual is a mechanism of change. As long as there are potential occasions for ritual mobilisation, there is the possibility for sudden and abrupt periods of change. Ritual can be repetitive and conservatizing, but it also provides the occasions on which changes break through.” (p. 42-43).

This potential for stratification is also relevant to how distinctions are drawn within rituals. An interaction ritual is itself stratified in terms of who has access to the cultural repertoires to feel the energy of the group – someone for example, with no prior interest in sports may still be caught up in the emotion of a team’s chant, but they feel something quite different to those individuals who have been lifelong members of the club. Rituals are also stratified in terms of *power* – some individuals may be afforded greater control over the focus or movement of a ritual, such as a leader or key figure. In each case the access to the ritual “outcomes” as well as control over the ritual “ingredients” have the potential for stratified distribution.

2.1.7 Summary of perspectives: the moralisation of mediated outrage

Each concept or theoretical perspective provides a slightly different way of thinking about of mediated outrage. A general consistency in each of these works, despite their level of focus (macro, micro) or even disciplinary orientation is a general tendency to take an

explicit normative stance on mediated outrage – that is, to moralise mediated outrage. This generally problematises both the media and its role in amplifying outrage, as well as problematising those specific cases of outrage. This is not a problem with the existing literature – in many cases, such as the moral panic or MMNH it is a strength, as it draws attention to a problematic social reaction, or explains problematic action such as harassment.

Labelling something a moral panic implies an irrational public reaction that has been fuelled by exaggerated journalistic reportage, and is often a disproportionate legal or regulatory response. Again, this has been a key strength of the concept and it has allowed those in sociology, cultural studies, and adjacent disciplines to highlight regressive social reactions which scapegoat marginalised groups and entrench generally conservative values (Hier, 2017). Given the media's central role in the panic, this analysis similarly issues a distinct criticism of the mass media, or in later cases social media (Walsh, 2020). This posits a way of thinking about the spread of outrage as disproportionate to some real threat, and in a way that is especially volatile and fuelled by irrationality. Moreover, it encourages us to think about symbolic production in terms of a scapegoated folk-devil, and moral action in terms of a problematic regulatory response.

The online firestorm similarly takes a normative stance on outrage, however this generally of a slightly different vein to the moral panic. Here the problematic nature of outrage is often damage to the brand being targeted or the intensity of hostility, rather than broader sociological questions. Again, the media - in this case social media - takes a central role. Here social media is seen to be amplifying outrage - making it spread faster and wider, and increasing the level of hostility displayed. Again, this posits a way of thinking about the spread of outrage as explosive and especially hostile – both of which are captured aptly in the imagery of a firestorm.

Much of the work in psychology makes a similar point about social media's amplification of outrage. Here we see that social media platforms are designed to interact with cognitive processes in a way that rewards outrage expressions, despite what one may

actually feel. Such work is used to problematise the pervasiveness of outrage, but also criticise the role of social media platforms (see Crockett, 2017). This has occasionally been used to more directly criticise those individuals engaging in outrage, such as accusing individuals of engaging in moral grandstanding - that is, performing outrage for a “recognition desire” rather than genuine feeling (see Tosi and Warmke, 2020). This posits that those feelings of euphoria and the performances which place on in a community are often the primary drivers of outrage rather than actually feeling outraged.

In MMNH, the focus is on harassment as a type of action. Outrage here is the motivating force which justifies harassment, often toward those who are already marginalised. This again posits a type of moral action which is especially destructive, and explores the role of outrage in motivating such action.

What is especially interesting is that this general sentiment which problematises both outrage and the media (i.e. mediated outrage) appears even more pertinent to popular discourse. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Slate magazine dubbed 2014 as the “year of outrage” and published an interactive article explaining an outrage event for each day of the year (Turner et al, 2014). The authors lamented the role of digital media in the proliferation of such problematic dialogue stating, “A new media order that should be teeming with more vibrant viewpoints than ever is at risk of calcifying into a staid landscape, where original thought is muffled by the wet blanket of political correctness”. In 2020 the now widely discussed “Letter on Justice and Open Debate” was published in *Harper's Magazine* where the signatories declared that

“The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted. While we have come to expect this on the radical right, censoriousness is also spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty.”

The letter included a range of high-profile signatories ranging from left-wing public intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky, to the previous chess world champion Gary Kasparov.

In addition, recent years have seen the proliferation of labels such as “cancel culture” in popular discourse. As Eve Ng (2020) argues, these digital practices “often follow a trajectory of being initially embraced as empowering to being denounced as emblematic of digital ills” (p. 621). Terms such as cancel culture have developed as a signification of a critical appraisal of online outrage, and regularly seep into outrage discourse to bring a critical awareness of what is being performed. As public attention to outrage and its effects have grown, practices such as cancelling – which in essence are the utilisation of networked outrage by marginalised groups to reclaim power over elites through withdrawal or boycotting – have been narrativized as existential threats to free and open debate (Clark, 2020; Lee and Abidin, 2024). This exemplifies the need for academic research to “continue framing their endeavours in contradistinction to the reductiveness of so much digital discourse, addressing the losses of nuance and complexity in specific spaces while being mindful of not contributing to them” (Ng, 2020, p.625).

2.2 Towards the tensions of mediated outrage

These perspectives provide a useful basis for understanding what mediated outrage is doing and how it is spreading. However, much of the literature I have identified so far concerns primarily outrage that is performed through the media, but not necessarily that which targets the media. We see that the moralisation of outrage is often not just about outrage but mediated outrage. That is, perspectives generally problematise both the media and its role in amplifying outrage, as well as problematising outrage itself. This brings us to another essential point – that such mediated outrage often targets the very platforms it is performed on or through. That is, just as platforms shape outrage, outrage also shapes platforms.

The aforementioned concept of the moral panic has been utilised by researchers when describing how outrage operates with and through social media platforms. Carlson (2020) for example explores the “symbolic deviancy” of social media during the 2016 United States presidential election in their role in facilitating the spread of fake news and the pollution of the information landscape. Carlson argues that fake news represents an “informational moral panic” which “symbolises the danger of opening up content

creation, the epitome of a polarised media environment, the gullibility of audiences, and the negative externalities of click-driven digital economics” (p.386). Marwick (2008) similarly draws from moral panic theory to describe “technopanics” as heightened states of societal concern that problematises the effects of new media technologies, particularly as they pertain to young people. Marwick describes this in terms of the “Myspace moral panic” through which Myspace was seen to be actively facilitating relationships between online predators and young children. The concept has since been applied to issues ranging from social media’s role in encouraging ISIS recruitment (Shaban, 2020) to the role of toy vlogger sets in encouraging the exploitation of child influencers (Rodriguez and Levido, 2023). In each case, work on technopanics as well as Carlson’s informational moral panic, work to critically analyse the moralisation of technologies by illustrating why the real threat (or absence thereof) posed by the technology is disproportionate to the level of concern given.

Other works look less towards the disproportionate reaction and instead examine the challenges and inadequacies of this reaction in having long lasting effects. Ananny and Gillespie (2016) discuss the ongoing cycles of platform “shock, indignation, and exception” in detail. They argue such “shocks” becoming especially common ways of challenging how platforms are governed. These generally involve public outrage and indignation as a center piece,

“Some shocks are followed by a public outcry, which often takes the form of some general expression of outrage and criticism... These public outcries may include calls for change, in either specific or general terms. Sometimes such outcries stop there: there is often no organised response, or what does emerge the platform can defuse with a quick public apology. Some of these incidents were followed by substantive changes in design or policy. If critics press on the platform hard enough, and publicly enough, they may call forth from the platform some kind of reversal or exception to business-as-usual.” (p. 6-7)

Their focus is particularly in the field of platform governance, which concerns the rules, norms, and structures that guide the operation and regulation of digital platforms. As such, they problematise the reliance on such shocks as a mechanism of governance

because they often result in temporary exceptions rather than lasting structural changes, and these exceptions are frequently insufficient to address the broader issues at play. Platforms tend to absorb or defuse outrage without fundamentally altering their practices. Similar arguments have been made across the platform governance literature (see Quodling, 2019; Gillet et al., 2022). This dynamic has also been discussed more broadly as the “techlash” (Hemphill, 2019; Marchal et al., 2024). Here, some have stressed the need for more work studying such platform shocks (Marchal et al., 2024).

Another slightly different focus comes from the area of controversy analysis. Here focus is on utilising such platform controversies to make visible the inner workings of platforms. Controversy analysis is more broadly applied to issues of science and technology, however much work has explored controversies which target platforms (Hallinan et al., 2020) or are about digital politics (Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). In controversies, those processes which have been “black-boxed” or a “taken for granted” are articulated and reshaped. To this view contestations reveal that which is generally taken for granted, or invisible in the operations of platforms. As Venturini and Munk (2021) argue, this draws particularly from Harold Garfinkel's (1991/1967) work on “breaching experiments”, in which those background social norms were made visible by disrupting everyday situations. For example, Hallinan et al. (2020) draw from controversy analysis to explore the public reaction to Facebook's emotional contagion experiment. They argue that the public outrage stemmed from a lack of awareness about research practices and the perceived violation of trust and neutrality by Facebook. This is in turn brought to public attention just how much data Facebook were collecting, and how this data could be actively misused to manipulate personal emotions. In a related vein, though not specifically utilising controversy analysis, Myers West (2018) explored the reactions of users who had reported having their posts removed or accounts banned on social media. She found that the ambiguity of platform moderation practices “led users to develop their own folk theories about how platform moderation works that placed blame on human intervention as the primary cause for the removal of their content, rather than the broad and complex range of sociotechnical factors that make up content moderation systems”.

Each of these perspectives – informational moral panics, techno panics, platform shocks, and controversy analysis – each provide a rich angle on mediated outrage that comes specifically from their inclusion of the platform as a target of outrage. In the case of technopanics and informational moral panics we see the need to retain the utility of perspectives such as the moral panic which highlight over-reactions to the threats posed by digital platforms. However, in the discussion of platform shocks and controversy analysis more broadly, we see the ability of outrage to reveal that which is taken for granted with platforms, or to challenge the workings of platforms.

More generally though, here we begin to see the *positive potentials* of mediated outrage. That is, when we view platforms as both mediators and targets of outrage, we see a need to avoid reducing mediated outrage to a problem to be solved. Certainly, some manifestations of outrage such as harassment can have especially problematic implications, but outrage in a general sense retains the potential for pro-social change. As Spring et al. (2018) argue, outrage can have an “upside” - it can encourage collective action that leads to lasting social change, especially when it targets broad, deep-rooted issues that require largescale intervention.

This distinction between outrage (or shame) that is problematic, versus that which may have positive impacts is key to O’Neil’s *Shame Machine*. Here she notes a distinct difference to outrage which serves to “punch-up” versus that which “punches-down” (O’Neil, 2022). Concept such as the moral panic often highlight outrage that “punches-down” - that is media fuelled reactions which scapegoat a marginalised group or actor. This is often not the case when outrage targets platforms. In these cases, the power asymmetry between the target of outrage and participants in outrage are often reversed. That is, outrage at platforms will often “punch-up” by virtue of the fact that platforms are such dominant actors in contemporary society. This changes our relationship to mediated outrage. The amplification of outrage by digital platforms now provides a certain potential to hold such powerful platforms to account. Thus, rather than problematising outrage we may see it as providing a set of positive potentials.

However, seeing mediated outrage for its *potentials* introduces a new set of challenges – namely that just as the negative aspects of outrage may be shaped by platforms, so too may the generative potentials of outrage. The undoubtedly introduces certain complexities, pressures, and contradictions. That is, mediated outrage may best viewed as ambivalent - as a site of various *tensions*. It is these *tensions* which I aim to drawn out in detail in this thesis.

Specifically, I have two complementary aims -

- (1) First, I seek to contribute to the sociological literature on mediated outrage by developing a general conceptual model for understanding cases of outrage which both target and are performed on a digital platform. This model will develop a way of thinking about the *components* of mediated outrage – that is, providing a way of understanding what exactly mediated outrage is, and what it does. From this, we move to understanding how platforms mediate each of these components of outrage, and how these components in turn mediate platforms.
- (2) Second, using the proposed model, I aim to identify specific *tensions* within each component of mediated outrage, shedding light on the complex interplay between its constructive and problematic aspects.

Chapter 3: Conceptualising Mediated Outrage

I have so far positioned my interest in mediated outrage and outlined several key perspectives. From this, I have articulated my intention to understand mediated outrage that is both targeted at and performed on digital platforms, with a focus on examining the tensions that arise in these processes. These aims align with my overarching research question: How do digital platforms act as both mediators and targets of outrage?

To approach this question, this chapter will develop a model of mediated outrage – comprised of three core components of outrage. Each component pertains to some core consideration when analysing mediated outrage events – how outrage *spreads*, the *social functions* of outrage, and the *moral actions* of outrage. Embedded within each of these three components are a series of sensitising concepts which guide attention towards relevant aspects of analysis. These sensitising concepts will be developed in the following chapter.

However, before moving to developing this model we first need clarification. The term mediated outrage brings with it some base level assumptions which need to be clearly defined. What exactly is mediation? What is doing this mediating? What is outrage? How can outrage be mediated? What aspects of outrage are mediated? This is not to mention the complexity of the platform and how it might mediate, or be mediated by, performances of outrage. What is a platform? How does a platform mediate outrage? How does outrage target platforms?

Each of the perspectives I have so far identified provides a slightly different answer to each of these questions. For example, for several perspectives outrage is not the primary focus, but is an essential component or an interchangeable term – whether that be MMNH’s focus on harassment that is motivated by outrage, moral panics focus on social anxiety and resultant states of public outrage, or Cathy O’Neil’s focus on the largely interchangeable concept of online shaming. Or, while each of these concepts speak to “the media”, what exactly this constitutes is often quite different. For authors such as Cohen (2011/1972) doing early moral panic analysis, the focus was primarily on

journalists and the press. This contrasts with the more tech-centric understandings of the media as adopted by authors such as Walsh (2020) or Marwick (2021).

This chapter will first clearly situate consistent and clear way of thinking about “mediation”, “platforms” and “outrage”. This then informs the development of a model of mediated outrage – comprised of the *spread*, *social functions* and *moral actions* of outrage. Each of these components poses a distinctive sub-question about mediated outrage, and guides our attention to something pertinent that mediated outrage is doing. Finally, I will outline how each component provides guidance for identifying a distinctive *tension* within mediated outrage.

3.1 Conceptualising mediated outrage

3.1.1 Mediated communication, affordances and materialized action

Across sociology, cultural studies, and media studies, there have been a variety of theoretical projects devoted to understanding mediated communication (for a review see Couldry, 2008; Couldry and Hepp, 2016). Broadly speaking, in the context of media studies, mediation quite simply refers to the process of “transmitting something through the media” (Couldry, 2008, p. 379). Focus here is usually on the ways in which a communication medium shapes how a message is transmitted and received. This shaping refers to both the content of the message and the interpretation of this content.

Much of this traces back to the medium theory of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan. A key point from medium theory is that the media are not neutral (Davis, 2020). The media “do” something. The media play a central role in shaping our social and material world. This position puts a central focus on the medium of a message rather than the content of a message. The medium refers to the technology or channel through which communication occurs, while the content refers to the specific messages or information transmitted. Medium theory sought to situate a focus on the medium as a primary object of analysis, considering how the forms and formats medium itself comes on to create the

social world. This is captured well in McLuhan oft-cited maxim that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1994/1964).

For McLuhan, this focus was primarily on the media’s influence on sensory experiences and ways of thinking (Carey, 1998). The shift from oral cultures to print media, for example, worked to “disassociate the senses” (i.e. sight and sound) and allowed one to develop individualised opinions in solitary spaces, outside of communal activities. Harold Innis, who was a major influence on, and close collaborator with, McLuhan, similarly situated a medium centrality, however his focus was more broadly the media as infrastructure. Innis illustrates this in his discussion of media being “time-biased” or “space-biased” (Innis, 2007/1950). Time-biased media (e.g. clay, stone tablets) allowed messages to be stored and preserved over long period of time, fostering the development sacred traditions, hierarchical societies and the growth of religion. Space-biased media (e.g. paper, papyrus) allowed messages to be moved transmitted across large distances and to large audiences, fostering the development of the nation-state, empires, and secularism. In each case, the forms of social organisation which emerge are dependent on the relevant bias of the media – certain forms of organisation are fostered and encouraged at the expense of other forms (Carey, 1998).

One risk with positioning mediation in this way is that it may overemphasise the role of the media, and lead to technological determinism. That is, the suggestion that media technologies are the primary agent of change and have a deterministic relationship with society. This is a point that both Innis and McLuhan have been criticised for. One way to avoid this determinism is to recognize the “mutual shaping” of the media and the social world. Indeed, just as the social world is mediated, so too are those media technologies developed with and through a mediated social world (Couldry and Hepp, 2016). Roger Silverstone (2005) offers a definition of mediation which captures this dialectical relationship.

“Mediation is a fundamentally dialectical notion which requires us to address the processes of communication as both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded. Mediation, as a result, requires

us to understand how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other. At the same time it requires a consideration of the social as in turn a mediator: institutions and technologies as well as the meanings that are delivered by them are mediated in the social processes of reception and consumption.

Whereas mediation generally captures this dialectic as a more micro process – i.e. focusing on specific events, media technologies and social realities – mediatization captures the macro level of analysis (Livingstone, 2009). That is, “mediatization describes the higher-order processes of transformation and change across society that result from mediation going on at every level of interaction” (Couldry and Hepp, 2016, p. 35). For this reason, work often makes an effort to distinguish between *mediation* and *mediatization* (Hjarvard, 2008; Couldry and Hepp, 2016).

Another approach is to use mediation to ground one’s analysis in the micro, situational understanding, but then develop from there an attunement to the more macro analysis. This involves beginning with a detailed examination of specific situations whereby some social practice is mediated by a media technology or technologies. From a detailed analysis of this specific case, we can then move to understand how such mediations may be shaped by, and themselves shape, broader societal structures. This is the general approach which I aim to take in using the term mediation.

How though can we understand such shaping? There are many different theoretical and conceptual models to aid in understanding how media technologies shape communications. One such perspective that has grown in tandem with a burgeoning focus on social media platforms is the concept of *affordances*. In short, social media affordances refer to the “perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social and contextual that enables and constrains specific uses of the platforms” (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). In this way, “affordances mediate between a technology’s features and its outcomes...Affordances are how objects shape action for socially situated subjects.” (Davis, 2020).

Davis and Chouinard (2016) offer conceptual framework of affordances that goes beyond the binary of “enabling” and “constraining”. The mechanisms and conditions framework allows one to explore *how technologies afford, for whom and under what circumstances*. The mechanisms component considers how technologies afford: technologies can *demand, request and refuse* actions by users, and users can attempt actions that can be *encouraged, discouraged or allowed* by the technology. The conditions component considers for whom and under what circumstances technologies afford. This involves assessing three factors: *perception* (recognising what a feature does), *dexterity* (having the skill to use it), and *cultural and institutional legitimacy* (power dynamics that reflect how access is distributed and for whom technologies are intended).

Davis’s work is theoretically grounded in Schraube’s (2009) notion of materialised action. This posits that technologies are the materialisation of social and cultural values, and that these materializations then go on to shape the social world. This mutual shaping comes with an important caveat, however – it is always the human subjects who display agency, not the objects. Technologies may display pressures through their material force, but must do so through interactions with users. As Davis (2020) argues

“Designers engrain their own agency into technologies, and users agentically employ those technologies. The force of technological objects can be immense, but that force is inextricable from the values, desires, and interests of human actors.”

This recognition of technological *efficacy* and but not technological *agency* differentiates the materialized action perspective from similar approaches such as Actor Network Theory (ANT). We can see how this framework meshes neatly with our understanding of mediation both as a dialectical process. That is, it considers both how the user of the medium perceives and interacts with the medium, as well as how the medium provides the possibilities of action. In doing so, it encourages us to consider the broader social context in which users are situated.

3.1.2 *Digital platforms*

Contrary to the emphasis on “the media” as a political force, “the platform” seems to invoke an imagination of a neutral space, where responsibilities lie with those using the platform rather than the platform itself. Gillespie (2010) argues that this imagination of the platform is a political concept – it “emerges not simply as indicating a functional shape: it suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon it”. He argues that this imagination of the platform is strategically constructed to place the platform as the “curator of public discourse”, limiting their liability for what users do or say on the platform. In his later works, Gillespie (2018) highlights how this strategic construction of the platform as a neutral” space exists in tension with the realities of how platforms operate. The commodity which platforms offer, he argues, is precisely the moderation and organization of content. This results in a profound tension between the imagination of the platform and the realities of the platform; “platforms face what may be an irreconcilable contradiction: they are represented as mere conduits and they are premised on making choices for what users see and say” (p.21).

Indeed, much of popular debate around platforms has centred around issues of too much or too little moderation (Gillespie et al., 2023). Of course, moderation is but one way that platforms may mediate and shape social life. Poell et al. (2019) offer a definition of platforms that captures this shaping, and the ways in which such shaping may occur: To them, platforms are

“(re-)programmable digital infrastructures that facilitate and shape personalised interactions among end-users and complementors, organised through the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monetisation, and circulation of data.”

Here we see a focus on platforms as *digital infrastructures*. This posits that structures and services of platforms have become so pervasive that they resemble public utilities (Plantin et al., 2018). Despite this, platforms maintain private ownership – and thus shape the social world through the capture, processing and monetisation of data for private

profit. In line with this, we also see that the platform captures much more than just social media. Indeed, platforms today encompass much of daily life – from music listening (e.g. Spotify, Apple Music), to stock trading (e.g. Robinhood), online payments (e.g. PayPal), shopping (e.g. eBay, Amazon), health and fitness monitoring (e.g. Strava, Apple Health), or transportation (e.g. Uber, Didi).

One area where platforms have become especially pervasive is in the field of journalism (Van Dijk et al., 2018). Platforms and news media are so deeply entangled that it is now difficult to meaningfully divide the two as separate objects of study. This entanglement is first evident in the sense that platforms are a primary channel through which journalists and the news media distribute their content. News content is regularly selected and edited to fit the engagement drivers of social media platforms. However, journalists must concurrently balance these platform demands with the professional standards and values of journalistic practice (Lischka, 2018; Barnard, 2022). The result is “a hybrid, networked habitus that integrates values and practices from the traditional journalistic field with those from digital and nonprofessional origins” (Barnard, 2022, p. 190). This entanglement is also evident in the mutual amplification of content between the news media and social media platforms. Phillips (2018) highlights this dynamic as it applies to extremist and harmful content, describing this as the “oxygen of amplification”. She shows how journalistic coverage, even when critical, can inadvertently expand the visibility and legitimacy of extreme material. While problematic content often first gains traction on social media platforms, the extent of its spread turns it into a necessary and newsworthy issue to report on. In turn, news coverage boosts the reach and legitimacy of that content on platforms. Similar arguments have been made with specific regard to acute moments of collective outrage, such as online firestorms (see Einwiller et al., 2017).

This pervasiveness of platforms in so many aspects of society is often referred to as platformisation (Nieborg, et al. 2022). That is, the “penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganisation of cultural practices

and imaginations around these platform” (Poell et al., 2019). What is important about platformisation, is that the transformation of society does not occur through *a platform* but rather through interlocking and interconnected *platforms*. This dynamic of mutual shaping between platforms has provided a challenge in studying platforms as singular objects and encouraged a focus on how platform ecosystems shape sociality (Plantin et al., 2018; Van Dijk et al., 2018).

The platform ecosystem is an interconnected network of platforms that operates under a specific set of governing mechanisms (Van Dijk et al., 2018, p. 4). In the west, this ecosystem is a corporate space that is largely controlled by the “big five” technology companies – Apple, Google, Facebook, Microsoft and Amazon. These five companies make up much of the “sectoral platforms” (that is, platforms which operate in a certain market sector, e.g. health applications, streaming services) but also dominate the “infrastructural” core of the ecosystem (that is, they provide the space in which data is stored and hosted, and on which sectoral platforms can be built).

Perhaps most important here though, is that this platform ecosystem is largely characterized by its *ambivalences*. At each layer of the platform ecosystem exists a certain tension, or contradiction – much like Gillespie (2018) highlights in his discussion of moderation. As Van Dijk et al. (2018) argue;

“it looks egalitarian yet is hierarchical; it is almost entirely corporate, but it appears to serve public value; it seems neutral and agnostic, but its architecture carries a particular set of ideological values; its effects appear local, while its scope and impact are global; it appears to replace “top-down” “big government” with “bottom-up” “customer empowerment,” yet it is doing so by means of a highly centralized structure which remains opaque to its users.” (p. 12).

A focus on platforms and their ambivalences has evolved as an important line of inquiry in recent years. Phillips and Milner (2017) for example, applied the lens of ambivalence to describe the internet culture more generally, arguing that much of internet culture is characterized by a certain sincerity and irony. This duality creates a space where both genuine expression and parody coexist, blurring the lines between earnest participation

and trolling - complicating the dynamics of online interactions. Similarly, Bucher (2019) details the transition of social media research from being characterized by largely hopeful, and celebratory accounts towards more critical approaches. She argues that we should instead shift to our contemporary focus to recognize the ambivalent relationship between digital technology and society. Importantly, she highlights that this is not an “indifference” or “absence of critical perspective”

“an ambivalent position means having to negotiate an ongoing tension without necessarily finding resolution. The kind of ambivalence I have in mind is not about occupying an indifferent position. It’s not an “anything goes” attitude, nor does it involve compromise. Ambivalence isn’t a lack of belief, but rather the ability to “stay with the trouble” of questioning basic assumptions and to be transparent about them.”

Taking a step back to the quite formidable question of “what is a platform” - I have so far glossed over quite a number of important works, of which I will unpack in more detail in the chapters to come. But for now, four key points should be clear: (1) platforms are pervasive digital infrastructures which shape much of contemporary life; (2) platforms are not neutral – they are private entities which collect, shape, and monetize data in a way that in turn shapes our society; (3) platforms do not exist in isolation, but instead as an ecosystem; and (4) platforms are deeply *ambivalent* – they introduce various tensions and contradictions at each layer of their operations.

3.1.3 Outrage

Much like “platforms” and “mediation”, “outrage” is a somewhat slippery term. Outrage is most commonly defined as a reaction of anger and disgust from a perceived violation of a moral standard. In this sense, outrage is outwards looking, as it occurs through the witnessing of a violation which targets someone or something outside the self. This differentiates outrage from personal anger, which is triggered by violations which specifically harm the self (O’Mara et al., 2011). This is not to say the self cannot be targeted in experiences of outrage – in many cases, outrage results from the witnessing of a transgression which affects a collective or community to which one belongs. The

important difference is that outrage must be positioned in terms of this collective – such an attack on society, race, class – or on the moral principles which bind them, rather than solely as an attack on the self. This means that outrage wields a certain power, and is often just as political as it is personal.

Already here we see some difficulties in studying outrage – How do we know someone is *experiencing* anger and disgust? Moreover, how would we pinpoint this state of experience from expressions of outrage online? In psychology and philosophy, where there is a burgeoning focus on moral outrage, this separation between “experience” and “expression” of outrage are the primary analytical drivers. This distinction facilitates the exploration into the factors which influence the translation of outrage experience into outrage expression. This often encourages exploration into cognitive and social *motivations* for expression. In an influential paper on outrage expression on Twitter, Brady et al. (2021), for example, define outrage expressions as:

“A person can be viewed as expressing moral outrage if (i) they have feelings in response to a perceived violation of their personal morals; (ii) their feelings are composed of emotions such as anger, disgust, and contempt; and (iii) the feelings are associated with specific reactions including blaming people/events/things, holding them responsible, or wanting to punish them.”

They then go on to argue that in networks where individuals receive “positive feedback” (e.g. likes, retweets, comments) for their outrage expressions, they are more likely to continue to express outrage. These are undoubtedly interesting aspects to consider, however as Gharavi (2020) argues, framing moral outrage in such a way risks positioning it as a purely *reactive* phenomenon. This leads to studies adopting an analytical focus on the factors which precede or precipitate a reaction of outrage, the relationship between experience and expression, or the motivations for expressing more outrage.

Outrage is not just a reaction to a perceived violation, it’s is also productive; it “produces a narrative that is constitutive of that which it appears to interpret; that is to say, outrage is constitutive of social reality” (p. 130). To Gharavi, the experience of outrage as an affective state, and the expression of outrage are not necessarily congruent – that is,

outrage is not simply the expressions of some internalized emotional state of disgust or anger. In fact, Gharavi explicitly avoids framing outrage in terms of expression, formulating outrage as a “performance” that is “produced to be witnessed”. To this view, outrage is inherently social – it is witnessed and performed, operating as a sort of collective effervescence. Through this lens we might see outrage as a cultural practice, and focus on what it does rather than felt (Döveling et al., 2018).

3.2 A model of mediated moral outrage

Bringing this together, we can identify *mediated outrage* as an acute reaction of anger and disgust to a perceived violation of a moral standard, which is shaped in some way by the communication medium through which it is transmitted and received. My focus is less on differentiating between individual instantiations of outrage, such as by measuring the emotional valence of individual tweets, and on studying broadly constructed *outrage events*. That is, acute moments of collective attention whereby there is widespread public outrage directed at some common object.

While this definition serves as a strong grounding, it is also important to understand *mediated outrage* by what it *does*. To achieve this, I have developed a model which conceptualises outrage based on what it is doing. This is comprised of three core *components* of outrage - each of these components each posits a sub-question about the relationship between outrage and digital platforms. For now, I will just present the scaffold of this model, however in the following chapters it will be filled out in more detail. Importantly, the components of this model are not isolated, but interlocking and often overlapping:

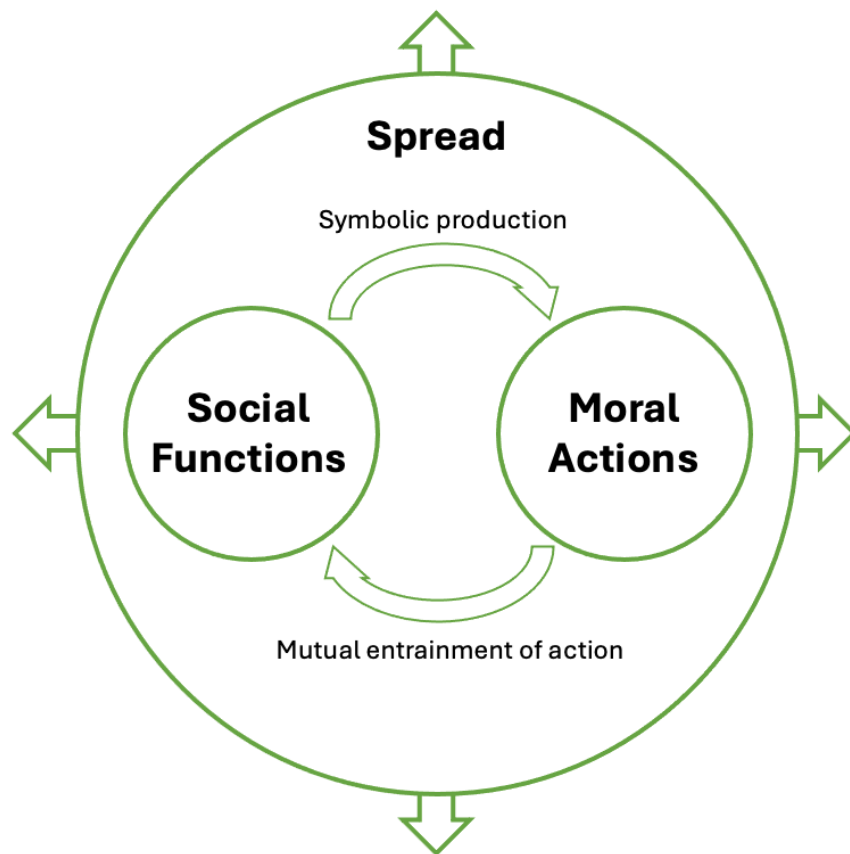


Figure 1 A Model of Mediated Outrage

(1) The *spread* of outrage - How does mediated outrage spread on and across digital platforms?

The first component is the acute spread of outrage – that is, such outrage events are not just felt by an individual, but a group of individuals. This means that outrage is somehow transmitted, or shared between individuals. Moreover, outrage is often sparked by a specific event or violation, but expands to be inclusive of different issues, actors, or violations as it spreads. The first step in understanding an outrage event is understanding how it spreads through communities, and what issues/actors it grows to encompass.

(2) The *social functions* of outrage - How does mediated outrage construct collectivities and imbue symbols with emotion?

When outrage is spreading, it is doing something socially. Through the mutual entrainment of actions, and shared performances of emotion, a sort of collective effervescence is created in outrage. This in turn produces transient communities, norms, and symbols. While these emerge as transient in acute moments of outrage, such symbols can also hold the emotions of the event have lasting effects.

(3) The *moral actions* of outrage - How does mediated outrage mobilize groups towards collective action?

As outrage spreads, it is being performed through actions. This could include, for example, the harassment of a target, the boycotting of a company, an acute protest, or even a movement of solidarity. Through these actions, outrage can have lasting social and material effects. Of course, these actions inform, and are informed by, the social functions of outrage. That is, the mutual entrainment of these actions is productive of symbols, norms and communities, and the social functions of outrage shape the process of mobilization and what/how collective actions are performed. This reciprocal relationship is represented by the two arrows connecting moral actions with the social functions – i.e. the *mutual entrainment* of moral action produces social functions, and the *symbolic production* of outrage go on to shape the actions taken.

Chapter 4: Research Design

I earlier outlined two key aims of this thesis – first, is the conceptual task of developing a model of mediated outrage, and second is the empirical task of using this model to understand the tensions in such events. I have so far provided a background on “mediation”, “platforms” and, “outrage” and given an overview of key perspectives on mediated outrage. From this, I presented the scaffold of a conceptual model. This was comprised of three core components of outrage. Each component pertains to some core consideration when analysing mediated outrage events – how outrage *spreads*, the *social functions* of outrage, and the *moral actions* of outrage. However, this model still needs to be filled out.

This chapter first outlines the concept driven approach that I am taking. I then develop each component by linking them to relevant *sensitising concepts*, of which I draw from my discussions in Chapters 2 and 3. These concepts fill out each component by guiding attention towards the relevant aspects of each case. I then outline how I intend to generalise from a series of case studies. Specifically, I outline my approach to so through a combination of exemplary cases as well as a cross-case analysis and synthesis. Following this, I provide a high-level overview of the digital methods approach that I use to explore each case – linking such to concept driven sociology. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the ethics of this research project.

4.1 Concept-driven sociology

My conceptual model of provides a general scaffold for understanding occasions of mediated outrage. However, this model does not provide much guidance on its own. For this, we need to relate the *components* of outrage to relevant *sensitising concepts*.

Zerubavel (2021) argues that much of sociological theorising falls into a false binary of *data-driven* approaches and *theory-driven* approaches. Data driven approaches generally take an inductive approach to theorising. The researcher starts with a series of empirical observations, and moves towards a general theory based on these

observations. On the other hand, theory-driven approaches generally take a deductive approach to theorising. The researcher begins steeped in theory with a “testable” theoretical lens, then moves towards empirical observations to test the theory.

Zerubavel offers a *concept-driven* methodology as a third approach to theorising, “defying such seemingly binary choice between inductive (“bottom-up”) empiricism and deductive (“top-down”) positivism” (p.3). This approach takes a theoretical orientation – that is, like “theory-driven” research, the researcher starts with theory before moving to data collection and analysis. However, rather than testing or validating the theoretical, the research seeks to synthesise from the theory concepts which guide subsequent stages of the research.

“Concepts, of course, constitute the metaphorical lenses through which concept-driven researchers access the empirical world, their role being defined primarily in terms of attentional sensitisation. Essentially sensitising researchers’ attention, they thus help give them a general sense of what they might find relevant to attend to by effectively suggesting to them ‘where’ to look” (p.3)

By focusing on concepts, we can uncover more general patterns that might be missed by more rigid approaches. This promotes a flexible approach through which we can identify abstract social patterns that transcend specific cultural, historical, or situational contexts. By prioritising theoretical exploration over strict hypothesis testing or data-driven theory development, concept-driven sociology facilitates the development of *generic* insights.

Generic should not be confused for universal here. The aim is not to develop a universal grammar of outrage, or make causal claims as to how a certain platform’s features determines the shape of outrage. The value of this thesis is not it’s predictive utility. Such aims would be antithetical to our understanding of outrage an interactional practice. Any attempt to define these universals would freeze a moving concept. Our perception of what outrage is, what it does, and how it is propagated on digital platforms, influences both how we perform outrage and how we witness it.

This of course is not an issue unique to research on outrage, but one which characterises the social sciences more broadly. Herbert Blumer notably made a similar argument in distinguishing between definitive concepts and sensitising concepts in his 1954 essay *What Is Wrong with Social Theory*. A definitive concept, he argues “refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed bench marks... clearly identifying the individual instance of the class and the make-up of that instance that is covered by the concept”. In distinction, sensitising concepts “merely suggest directions along which to look... they lack precise reference and have no bench marks which allow a clean-cut identification of a specific instance and of its content... they rest on a general sense of what is relevant”. Blumer argued that the social sciences, at least at the time of his writing, were too often focused on the pursuit of a definitive concept, as to replicate the methods found in the natural sciences. These pursuits too often minimised the complexity of the empirical social world, and encouraged a line of thinking that could close off access to individual experience and interpretive inquiry. Sensitising concepts, on the other hand, allow researchers to derive more general conclusions from specific observations and cases as they provide a lens that can continuously adapt to the complexity of the situation. They act like “magnets”, pulling the researcher towards relevant data and shaping how it is perceived (Zerubavel, 2021).

Just as one must avoid universalising, one should also avoid being too specific and neglecting to recognise the common patterns between contexts. This is especially relevant to diverse contexts, as the commonalities which transcend seemingly different contexts suggest a strong degree of generality. Zerubavel makes this point well, stating:

“just as epistemically dangerous as the problem of overgeneralising is the diametrically opposite problem of undergeneralising, so aptly captured in the metaphorical image of ‘unable to see the forest for the trees’... it was that very readiness to transcend singularity, after all, that likewise enabled Goffman to extend his analysis of the social interaction patterns he observed in the Shetland Islands beyond that specific setting and famously produce *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* rather than *The Presentation of Self in the Shetlands*” (p. 60, 61)

The goal of researcher is thus to identify formal commonalities between substantively different situations, while still retaining a degree of empirical depth in the analysis of individual situations. The generalities we notice, and theories we develop through this process, should be treated as tools that guide further inquiry rather than define exactly what must be seen. By constructing theory and concepts with an eye to generalise but not universalise we can transcend the singularity of a situation, providing further research with a fluid lens through which to approach similar instantiations of mediated moral outrage.

At first glance, concept-driven sociology appears considerably grander than my aims to understand how digital platforms shape performances of mediated outrage. Indeed, concept driven sociology aims to be trans-historical, trans-contextual, and trans-situational. In comparison my focus appears to be more attuned to a study of the specific, rather than generic. However, if we return to our understanding of platforms not as singular but as an ecosystem then we begin to see the strength of a concept driven approach.

As previously outlined, platforms are by no means a narrow object of study – they are pervasive, and have a wide range of intentions, usages, and functions. A study of specific instantiations of outrage on Twitter may look very different to that on Reddit. Much like a traditional concept driven sociologist may explore the formal similarities between situations occurring in a hospital, a home or a church, we too can treat platforms like diverse but interconnected sites.

Moreover, digital platforms are sites which constantly morph and change. A study of specific instantiations of outrage on Twitter in 2010 may look very different to a study of such on Twitter (now X) in 2024. These differences would not just be in terms of the cultural and social issues which may animate outrage, but also in the specific affordances for performing such outrage on the platform. By drawing on a concept-driven approach, and looking to the generic, we can develop understandings of mediated outrage that are resilient to the inevitable changes in the specifics.

The aim then, is to move from a set of adjacent sensitising concepts – each connected within an aforementioned component of outrage – to their synthesis and refinement within the model. Together, these will form a general model of mediated moral outrage which covers the spread, social functions, and moral actions of outrage. Just as I treat the conceptual inputs of this research as sensitising, I expect the conceptual outputs to take a similar form and be applied in a similar way. Ideally, this will allow future work to use and adapt the model beyond the cases at hand to elucidate other phenomena that share abstract qualities with mediated outrage.

4.2 Linking components to concepts

4.2.1 The spread of outrage

The first, and perhaps most intuitive dimension of mediated outrage is that it spreads. Outrage is certainly felt at the individual level, but it is often felt by lots of individuals. Witnessing someone else's performances of outrage often leads one to also be outraged. This is both in the sense that one may also share the sentiment towards whatever the cause of that outrage is, or, at a reflexive level one may be outraged at another's performance of outrage. When we speak of mediated outrage this spread necessarily extends to media dynamics. That is, asking questions of how the designs, incentives and infrastructures of the media shape the spread of outrage.

Each of the concepts and theoretical perspectives outlined sensitises our attention to different primary mechanisms of spread, however there is often significant overlap. In the interaction ritual, it is primarily the build-up of emotional energy that facilitates the rapid spread of outrage. As individuals witness each other feeling and displaying common emotions, a collective effervescence arises. Through this group symbols begin to hold the emotional energy of the crowd, extending the emotions beyond the immediate event. The moral panic similarly operates with a sort of collective effervescence, however here the focus is more so on the commercial or strategic production of such states by the press and interest groups. Work has done well to highlight the central actors, or moral entrepreneurs who rose to prominence as key agitators in the panic generation process.

These actors had to work with the mass media to amplify their messaging. As focus has shifted to the more horizontal forms of communication found on social media platforms, so too has grown a focus in the motivations for participation. The spread of online firestorms, for example, is often understood through networked co-production and co-distribution rather than through mass media framing. Here, the focus on the reasons why individuals might participate – e.g. social recognition, or perception of moral violations.

4.2.1.1 Identifying sensitising concepts

Each of these concepts provides a useful perspective on the spread of outrage. We can see a general trend away from examining the central actors and their relationship with the media, and towards a more horizontal account of how individuals interact with the affordances of platforms. Much of this work has retained a critical assessment of the media, however here the focus is more so on how media platforms amplify outrage through their design and commercial interests, rather than through their selective amplification of the narratives of moral entrepreneurs.

Marwick's MMNH model provides a useful conceptual lens that retains the early strength of moral panic analysis in studying the intersection between central actors and the media, while accounting for the dynamics of digital platforms. However, it sensitises our attention specifically to harassment motivated by outrage, which does not necessarily fit the platform-targeted outrage which is the focus of this thesis. These events are perhaps better explained as *online firestorms*. As such, I will look to synthesise the work on online firestorms with Marwick's model to explore the spread of outrage. I will also discuss work on moral panics, however my main focus here will be in distancing the extant link between panics and firestorms.

4.2.2 Social functions of outrage

As outrage spreads it also does something. That is, outrage has *social functions* - it produces norms, communities, objects of indignation, and feelings of solidarity. In *The Outrage Industry*, for example, Berry and Sobieraj (2013, p. 135) highlight that outrage

works to “dissolve the fear of social isolation by connecting fans to like-minded others in an imagined community” but does so in a way that radically emphasises division from an ‘out-group’ that pose a threat to insiders most cherished values”. O’Neil (2022, p. 3) echoes an almost Durkheimian argument, opening her book with a discussion of the religious shaming rituals of the Hopi Tribe in North America. She highlights how these rituals “reinforce the norms and ethical standards of the community” – that is, they teach community members “how to be more Hopi”. She then goes on to relate this ritual practice to the rituals of shaming on social media.

Marwick (2021) argues that moral outrage works to “establish and reinforce symbolic boundaries” by delimiting the moral differences between groups. This is similar to how online firestorms are often positioned as a way of reinforcing social norms, and punishing outsiders (Rost et al., 2016). Moral panic studies were also well attended to understanding who is constructed as a folk devil. As Garland (2008, p. 21) argues, exemplar studies on moral panic were able to explore issues of “symbolic meaning (why this folk devil, construed as this kind of monster, with these specific connotations and associations?), social relations (why this group, with these interests, in this place?) and historical temporality (why at this moment, after these events, in this period?)”. Both Cohen (2011/1972) and Hall et al. (1978) examined how moral panics to specifically scapegoat groups which were already marginalised or lacked power in society. This worked to draw boundaries between “civil society” and “folk devils”, contributing to the further marginalisation of social groups. Moreover, the specific symbolic constructions of folk devils worked to define the perceived identity characteristics of social groups – Hall et al. (1978) highlighted how combinations of class, race and age (poor, black youths) were symbolically associated with theft, aggression and violence. However, perhaps the most deliberate focus on the *social functions* of outrage comes from Gharavi’s Durkheimian approach, where he specifically outlines the functions of outrage as a type of religious ritual.

4.2.2.1 Identifying sensitising concepts

Each perspective draws our attention to various things that outrage does socially. One work that draws much of this together, and fits well with a concept-driven approach, is Randall Collin's work on IRCs. Blending the work of Goffman and Durkheim, Collin's positions the point of focus of IRCs as the situations in which multiple individuals share physical co-presence, mutual focus, and rhythmic entrainment, with a material or imagined barrier to outside involvement. When situations display these "ingredients", they actively produce "solidarity, norms, group symbols and emotional energy" (Collins, 2005, p. 48). This provides a useful conceptual frame which is closely connected to much of the existing social functions identified so far. However, being concerned with physical co-presence, it requires further development to understand the mediated aspect the ritual. These issues will be further explored in Chapter 6.

4.2.3 Outrage and moral action

Each of the perspectives identified posits the action of performing outrage in different ways. In MMNH the action motivated is harassment. In a firestorm the action may be boycotting a company, or review bombing it on Google. In the lens of IRCs it is the very mutual entrainment of these actions – whatever they may be – which begins to create a sense of collectivity. Intersecting with the symbolic components of the moral panic, were the direct forms of and control that were provoked – whether that be through the creation of new laws, increased policing, or punitive sanctioning. In each case, what is interesting about the outrage events are not just that they spread explosively, or have diverse social functions, but that they are performed through some sort of action with tangible effects.

4.2.3.1 Identifying sensitising concepts

To understand the moral actions of outrage, I will draw particularly from Howard Becker's (1963) work on moral enterprise. Becker's (1963) moral entrepreneur is represented through two ideal types (1) the "rule creator" and (2) the "rule enforcer". Rule creators are those who influence the content of rules - they are unsatisfied with the current normative order and seek to define new rules in line with their moral vision. On the other

hand, rule enforcers are those who administer said rules and ensure they are upheld. Becker sees rule enforcers as the result of a “successful crusade”. The crusade “becomes institutionalised” in the creation of new bodies to enforce rules, or adoption of rules by existing bodies of enforcement. Traditional accounts of moral enterprise generally locate the means of enforcement in a top-down process of state-based enforcement, such as the introduction of new laws or governing institutions (Becker, 1963).

The strength of this approach is that it sensitises our attention to the ways in which to outrage is sustained beyond initial emotional responses and incorporated into systems of governance or law. It brings together the intentions behind an outrage event with distinct mechanisms of action. Moreover, it encourages us to draw out those key actors involved in both the crusade and enforcement, tying in with how I have positioned the spread of outrage. This being said, the types of “enforcement” involved in the case studies of this thesis (e.g. platform migrations, boycotts) differ significantly from those top-down processes analysed by Becker. As such, I will look to rethink Becker’s work with Davis’s mechanisms and conditions framework of affordances and Schraube’s theory of materialised action, to provide an updated concept of mediated moral enterprise.

4.3 Filling in the model of mediated outrage

Having now outlined my conceptual model of mediated outrage and linked this to relevant sensitising concepts. We can now update the earlier model to reflect the concepts for each component.

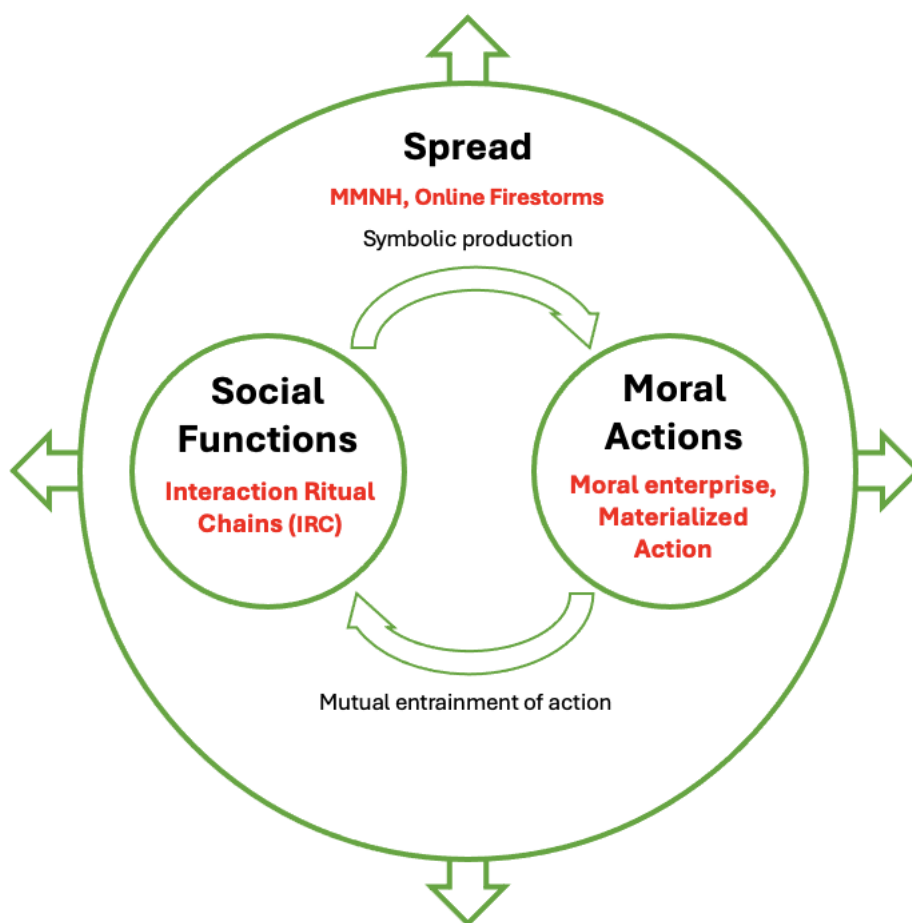


Figure 2 A model of mediated outrage (with concepts)

Primary Question	<i>How do digital platforms act as both mediators and targets of outrage?</i>		
Component of Outrage	<i>Spread</i>	<i>Social Functions</i>	<i>Moral Action</i>
Sensitising Concept(s)	MMNH, online firestorms	IRCs	Moral enterprise, materialised action

Table 1 Breakdown of movement from question, to components, to concepts.

This table illustrates the development so far, from (1) a broad primary question, to (2) components of outrage, and (3) sensitising concepts for each. Each of these components apply to mediated moral outrage generally. While each of the concepts identified are not understudied their own, the novelty of this model comes in their mutual application, blending and synthesis. Each of these together contribute to a broader theoretical framework of mediated moral outrage which remains broadly generalisable while providing a room for situational variance.

4.4 Why case studies?

There is longstanding wisdom that you cannot generalise from case studies, that they instead best serve as rich analyses of independent events (Flyvbjerg, 2006). While case studies certainly do afford rich situational analysis, this does not preclude the ability to generalise from a single case, or set of cases. Through the strategic selection of case studies one can draw out patterns that extend beyond that instantiation. Bent Flyvbjerg (2006; 2011) outlines several strategies to case study selection that allow one to generalise. One strategy is to use cases studies as tools of falsification. That is, one can start with a theoretical proposition or idea, and then find a critical case that is contrary to that idea (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In this way, the case can provide specific observations that contradict general theories, refining those theories and generalising through contradiction. However, this posits a form of theory-driven research that relies on a definitive concept or theory to be falsified. Another approach is to randomly select a large number of cases to generate a probability sample of the issue at hand (Flyvbjerg, 2011). This allows one to make generalisations for the overall population, based on the analysis of a representative sample of cases. This is suited to either data driven or theory driven research, however it places the external validity largely on the number of cases that have been studied in comparison to the general population. This may neglect the depth afforded by smaller samples, and the miss the richness of information in “non-typical” cases. A different approach, that aligns more closely to concept driven research is to look for a set of extreme cases (Bent Flyvbjerg, 2011). This involves starting with existing concepts or theory, then looking for cases which serve as extreme examples of the

dynamics proposed by the concept. These serve as rich examples, or “cases in point” (Zerubavel, 2021), of the issues at hand. Thus, researchers can “empirically ‘ground’ their ideas by essentially instantiating those typically abstract and therefore initially difficult-to-grasp patterns” (p.24). Like sampling critical cases, this strategy achieves generality by starting with theory, then moving to specific case(s), and then generalising back to theory, however rather than seeking to falsify the goal is to push and shape theory through extreme or exemplary instantiations.

While this sampling strategy of selecting extreme cases, when applied correctly, could allow us to generalise from a single case, an even more robust strategy is to conduct multi-situational analysis through a variety of different cases (Zerubavel, 2021). In practice, this means utilising a variety of different cases to identify formal similarities across context. To achieve this, I have broken down the process of case study design into three stages:

(1) Case selection

This involves the strategic selection of three cases based on their expected tendency to exemplify one of the aforementioned components of outrage (spread, social functions, moral actions). One case was selected for each component.

As the central question asks how digital platforms act as both mediators and targets of outrage, each case matches a set of common criteria. The specific mix of these factors also serve as primary points of variation between cases. That is, an issue whereby:

- a. A digital platform is the central mediator of the issue - the outrage originates and is substantially performed on digital platforms, it is “born-digital” (also see Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández, 2016)
- b. A digital platform is a central object in the issue - the outrage is targeted in part at a digital platform.

As well as serving as general points of commonality between cases, the specific mix of these factors (e.g. which platforms are the central mediators/objects?) serve as a primary point of differentiation between cases.

(2) Case analysis and conceptual development.

Each case study involved the application of the relevant sensitising concepts to understand the outrage event at hand. My aim here was first to situate a general way of thinking about the component. This usually involved the synthesis of the relevant sensitising concepts, or thinking through how a concept may apply to digital platforms. This usually required iterating between the concepts and the empirical case to draw out both the specific methods as well as the generalities of the concept. I then used this to provide an empirical examination of the events at hand, with specific focus on identifying the general tensions which arose. I outline this approach further in the following digital methods discussion.

(3) Cross-case analysis.

Finally, I then reapplied these generic theoretical constructs to each of the other cases, resulting in six micro case studies (two for each component). The general aim here was not to show a universal model of outrage that is rigidly generalisable, but rather to explore what aspects of the concepts remain generic across contexts. In addition, here I looked to identify what aspects of each of the tensions remained generic, as to develop three general statements (one for each component of outrage) regarding the tensions of mediated outrage.

Using the criteria put forward in step (1) and the three components of mediated outrage outlined earlier, I selected the following three cases for analysis:

4.4.1 *The boycott of Spotify due to their platforming of Joe Rogan*

In early 2020 Spotify signed an exclusive licencing agreement with controversial podcaster, Joe Rogan, which was rumoured to be worth over \$200 million. This deal placed Spotify at the centre of controversy when Rogan hosted prominent vaccine sceptic Robert Malone on his podcast in late 2021. The episode sparked a widespread public firestorm revolving around Spotify's platforming of COVID-19 misinformation. Calls to boycott the platform were initially amplified by public health researchers but later spread to prominent artists such as Neil Young and Joni Mitchell. Much of this occurred on Twitter through hashtags such as #DeleteSpotify. As the firestorm spread, issues cascaded to Spotify's platforming of Rogan's explicit racism and sexism, and even issues not directly related to Rogan, such as poor music quality and underpayment of artists. This also sparked a distinctive *counter-firestorm* in response, which attacked the participants of the firestorm and expressed solidarity for Rogan and Spotify. As such, this case provides potential to explore the spread of outrage. Specifically - how a firestorm may cascade through amplifiers on Twitter to draw attention to new issues and actors, and ignite attention in different communities.

4.4.2 *Robinhood and the GameStop short squeeze*

In January 2021, GameStop's stock experienced an unprecedented surge in price, fuelled by retail investors on the Reddit, specifically so the r/WallStreetBets community. At the time, GameStop had been heavily "shorted" by large institutional investors- that is, a bet that the stock would go down in value. In response, reddit users were attempting to perform a "short squeeze" – that is, rapidly increasing the price of the stock such that short sellers also have to purchase shares to mitigate losses. This resulted in a feedback loop, driving the price up further, allowing the retail investors to profit of the short position of the institutional investors.

To purchase stocks, many of these retail investors were using a commission free trading app called Robinhood. However, during the height of the short squeeze Robinhood temporarily restricting the trading of GameStop and other volatile "meme stocks", citing

market volatility and regulatory requirements. This decision sparked an instant firestorm targeted at Robinhood as many perceived it as an intervention favouring institutional investors and limiting the financial autonomy of retail traders. What was particularly interesting about this short squeeze and firestorm was that it brought mass attention to the complexities of r/WallStreetBets's unique vernacular – so much so that news outlets were running segments on how to understand r/WallStreetBets lingo (see for example ABC News, 2021). Moreover, the later outrage received unified support from both Alexandra Ocasio Cortez and Ted Cruz, providing an ephemeral binding between individuals at opposite ends of the political spectrum. The short squeeze and associated firestorm provide thus strong potential to explore the social functions of outrage, specifically so in understanding how symbols and communities emerge on Reddit and become imbued with emotion.

4.4.3 The mass user migration to Mastodon in the wake of Elon Musk's Twitter purchase

Elon Musk completed his acquisition of Twitter on October 27, 2022. The \$44 billion purchase saw Musk to take control of the company, with promises to reshape it in line with his political vision. Musk had long criticised Twitter for holding a "left-wing" bias and having restrictive moderation policies. He promised to bring a sort of "free-speech absolutism" to the platform. The acquisition was met with fear and outrage from much of Twitter's userbase, and saw a mass user migration to alternative platforms. One such platform, Mastodon experienced a surge in growth immediately after the acquisition. Mastodon was not simply a Twitter clone, but rather a Twitter alternative that was designed to be decentralised through a network of *instances*. What was particularly interesting about this migration is that it both targeted Musk's Twitter as the object of indignation, and was performed on Twitter. As such, the migration provides strong potential for exploring the *moral actions* of outrage, specifically so in understanding how users attempted to actualise a Twitter alternative through a mass migration and how Twitter's affordances for movement organisation shaped this process.

4.5 Digital methods

The specific methods used in each case study will be unique to the mix between case, concepts and platform(s). As such, the specific methods will be drawn out in detail in each of the case study chapters. This being said, it is necessary to first outline my overarching methodological approach.

Digital platforms operate both as an object of study and as well as the as a resource to study mediated outrage (Marres and Moats, 2015) This places the thesis at the intersection of social research and medium research (Rogers 2013, 2019). Medium research refers to questions over how platform affordances influence online content, while social research refers to understandings of the “stories” which this content produces (Rogers, 2019). Again, for clarity we could separate this into two different questions (1) what are the ways in which digital platforms shape outrage through their affordances? (2) what are the ways in which mediated outrage shapes platforms? Both these questions are inquiries of “medium research” and “social research” however they position the primacy of each slightly differently. The first question points to an inquiry in to the medium – that is, it asks how the medium (digital platforms) influence a social phenomenon (moral outrage). This is primary a question of media effects. The second question, points to an inquiry into the social – that is, it seeks to explore a substantive social dynamic (moral outrage), specifically in how these dynamics render the medium (digital platforms) as a social object. This is primary a question of social phenomena.

This posits a certain entanglement between medium research and social research. One way of addressing this would be to attempt to separate these questions, much as I have done here, and conduct a case study focusing on media effects, and a case study focusing on social issues. Another approach is to lean into this entanglement. Indeed, though these questions are positioned separately for clarity, both are clearly in service to each other – the aim is to understand how mediated moral outrage shapes and is shaped by digital platforms. To do so, we can utilise a digital methods approach.

Digital methods are a set of techniques that aim to analyse and interpret the data generated within digital platforms, leveraging the native functionalities and algorithms of these online environments (Rogers, 2013). This means “repurposing” the affordances of digital platforms – or following the “methods of the medium” – when doing internet research (p. 1). Digital methods are placed in contrast to virtual methods – which seek to do internet research by “digitising” traditional research methods, such as surveys, interviews, or participant observation. This generally means using these methods in digital contexts to understand the social phenomena at play. However, as Rogers (2013) highlights, digital platforms already gather and present data in a way that is somewhat similar to social research - “on the web, information, knowledge, and sociality are organised by recommender systems — algorithms and scripts that prepare and serve up orders of URLs, media files, friends, etc.” (p. 26). In this sifting, sorting and visualising, digital platforms develop a sort of “web epistemology”, that is they develop a form of knowledge that is distinctive from non-digital environments. Instead of imparting traditional research methods onto the web, we can follow the mediums and repurpose these ways of knowing to tackle both medium research and social research in tandem. As Rogers argues,

“the conceptual point of departure [from virtual methods] is the recognition that the Internet is not only an object of study but also a source. Knowledge claims may be made on the basis of data collected and analysed by devices such as search engines” (p. 21)

The strength of this approach is that it provides an online groundedness that allows us to explore the entanglement of medium and social research. Specifically, it requires a form of medium research in both the collection and analysis of digital data. Before collecting data, it posits an initial appraisal of the methods of the medium – that is, an inquiry into how the digital platform in question is organising knowledge, and how these methods may be repurposed for analysis. At the analysis stage, it encourages a critical reflection on the ways in which the data may have been shaped and influenced by such methods of the medium. This ties in directly with the focus overarching focus on affordances as it

requires constant and critical engagement with the mechanisms of the platform – what specific forms of knowledge organisation they *encourage, demand* or *request* and how these mechanisms may be repurposed for analysis. Moreover, in evaluation of these mechanisms to be attuned to medium practices, or the conditions of the userbase. As Venturini et al. (2018, p. 4206) argue, “While the technical infrastructures clearly influence the interactions that take place through them, they are also open to interpretation...your operationalisation, therefore, should be adjusted not only to the technical infrastructure of your medium but also to the practices of its users”. In this way, we are doing a form of affordance analysis in both our selection of methods, as well as our subsequent analysis of the issue at hand.

In Data Theory (2020) Simon Lindgren expands on this point. He argues that research building on a digital methods approach should take an iterative stance between “theory” and “data”. He argues, “approaching not theory, not data, but data/theory – with an iterative I/O setup – can ground data science, contextualise it in a lineage of social analysis, and counteract the mythological belief that the bigger the data the less the need for critical analysis and interpretation” (p. 310). In practice, this moving into data collection with clear theoretical sensibilities, (e.g. inputting theory into the data gathering process) and analysing this data through an interpretive theoretical frame (e.g. understanding the outputs of the data gathering through theory). Much like Zerubavel in his discussion of concept driven research, Lindgren draws directly on Herbert Blumer’s emphasis on the inseparability of theory and method.

“Theory, inquiry and empirical fact are interwoven in a texture of operation with theory guiding inquiry, inquiry seeking and isolating facts, and facts affecting theory. The fruitfulness of their interplay is the means by which an empirical science develops” (Blumer, 1954, p.3, as cited in Lindgren, 2020)

Our theoretical frameworks not only inform the selection of our research methods, but also shape how we perceive the empirical world - what we consider observable and relevant when doing research. As a result, theory plays an integral role in shaping how we observe, but also how we interpret and ascribe meaning to our observations. “Developing

and maintaining theoretical sensitivity is about knowing which parts of the data will be the most important in developing the analysis” (Lindgren, 2020).

In this way, Lindgren’s approach provides a clear bridge between digital methods and the concept driven research design that this thesis will take. Concept driven sociology encourages one to sensitise their attention in line with core theoretical concepts, thus shaping how the researcher approaches the empirical world – guiding us in both how we find and interpret data. These concepts lack definitive restrictions, encouraging researchers to be attentive to conceptual ebbs and flows when applied to a specific empirical example. Digital methods encourage one to consider the methods of the medium – specifying how this empirical world is organised and constituted by digital platforms, and how we may utilise this organising for our own analysis. Synthesising these approaches means that we employ sensitising concepts to guide us in our selection of which “methods of the medium” are of relevance, and critically reflect on how such methods of organising knowledge may impact our understanding of the concept in question. We must first ask - what is core or generic to this concept – what does it sensitise our attention to? Then ask, how do this platform’s ways of organising knowledge shape these generalities? In doing so, we iterate between generic and specific. In this way, we are iterating between theory and method, shaping our understanding of each, before we even begin collecting or analysing data. This iteration continues as we move through the collection and analysis.

For example, how might we apply Marwick’s (2021) amplification to Reddit versus Twitter? This concept posits a focus on the key users which amplify outrage by situating an accusation of moral violation and signal-boosting it through a social network. This sensitises our attention towards such key users, accusations, and signal-boosting. However, how one might situate or signal boost an accusation, or what defines a key user, or even how significant key users are, varies depending on what platform is of focus. A digital methods approach encourages us to then consider how this concept applies in platform contexts – that is, how knowledge may be natively organised in such a way that allows us to study amplification. For Twitter, this is rather trivial, as this appears platform

is organised around networks of signal-boosting. In this context, we can think of an amplifier as a user who displays a high indegree in a mention network. For Reddit, this is slightly more complicated. We could similarly attempt to identifying key-users based on upvote count. However, Reddit's design and platform vernacular seem to dissuade the pedestalling of individual users. Thus, perhaps we see form of amplification that is community-based or subreddit based than individual-based. This process - which I have only provided a rudimentary example of here - involves iterating between a concept (e.g. amplification) that is abstracted from the specificities of individual platforms, and concept that is specific to the platform affordances of Reddit. In this process of iteration, we can begin to distil what is generic or core to the process of amplification, as well as what is specific to an individual context, thus formulating a general understanding what amplification is, and what exactly may vary between platforms.

This methodology also posits a distinctive blending of qualitative and quantitative research methods. One common characteristic of social research in digital environments is the sheer quantity of data available to the researcher (Marres, 2017). This data is often “produced as part of social life”, and “serves many purposes besides social research” rather than being captured by “single-purpose methods” such as surveys or interviews (p. 85). When working with such quantities of data we may be tempted to move towards purely quantitative studies (Lindgren, 2020). But, as Lindgren argues, we might also see this as providing opportunities for methods which blend more interpretive approaches with computational methods, bridging the qualitative-quantitative divide.

In this way, we can adopt a mixed methods approach, with an important caveat. Mixed methods research can sometimes imply a separation between a quantitative methods and qualitative methods, such as through a quantitative stage of research, and qualitative stage of research. For example, one might conduct a quantitative survey as a pilot study, then use this to inform qualitative depth-interviews to enrich the analysis. This implies a staged separation between qualitative and quantitative, even if they are later blended in the analysis and discussion. In line with the digital methods approach, this thesis will instead take a blended approach to mixed methods research. Specifically,

one which is grounded in interpretive (qualitative) sensibilities in analysis, but informed by computational (quantitative) approaches to gathering data. This relies less on a strictly defined quantitative method and separate qualitative method to enrich findings, and more on an ongoing iteration between quantitative collection and qualitative analysis. Lindgren (2020, p. 56) defines this as bricolage, which is a term popularised by Claude Levi Strauss to describe the process of “putting pre-existing things together in new and adaptive ways”. This denotes flexibility in method over rigidity, encouraging open movement between qualitative and quantitative as the research develops.

4.6 Ethics

Doing digital methods research comes with important ethical considerations. This is especially relevant when dealing with moral outrage as a subject matter due to its tendency to evoke sensitive cultural issues and potential for displays of aggression or incivility. This exacerbates the issue of informed consent during data collection. Rambukkana (2019) argues that the data gathered in digital methods research is best described as “grey data”, as it exists “in the grey area between textual analysis and human subjects research” (p. 312). Though the data produced on digital platforms is generally publicly available and easily accessible, this does not confirm that those producing the data are expecting it to be analysed or republished in an academic setting. However, if we are to treat the data as strictly the “products of human subjects” rather than “published works”, then we face an impossibility in seeking consent from all the subjects in the study (Rambukkana, 2019). This issue has been discussed extensively in the context of internet research (see Franzke et al. 2019). These considerations directly informed my research design, each in the selection of cases, methodology, analysis, and presentation of findings.

Specifically,

- (1) All data analysed was publicly available at the time of collection.

- (2) Analysis focused only on publicly facing platforms - Twitter, Mastodon, Reddit, public blogs, and news sites. Those platforms which posit a more ambiguous understanding of public versus private (e.g. Facebook) were not included in the study. No data was collected from locked or private accounts on these sites, and explicitly private data was not collected (e.g. private messages).
- (3) Only large-scale public outrage events were included were case studies. The research did not analyse any small, or hyper localised controversies. This helped in ensure that, as well as the data being public, the subject matter was also.
- (4) Data was collected through the official APIs in the case of Twitter and Mastodon. Reddit data was collected through the Pushshift API, which is commonly used for academic research. The project received approval under Twitters Academic Research Access, which allowed for full access to the Twitter API. Reddit and Twitter both saw significant access changes to their APIs introduced in early 2023, however all data had been collected prior to these limitations. Moreover, in both cases these changes were designed to monetise access, rather than restrict access on ethical grounds.
- (5) I have deliberately not included the usernames or real names of individuals when quoting content posted. The exception to this is when the analytical focus was on the amplifiers or key users (in the Spotify case study). In this case study, I opted to only name individuals who already had a substantial public following (i.e. by Twitter followers, or general public profile). Substantial public following here refers to users which had 10,000 or more followers at the time of collection.

This project received unconditional approval from the human ethics office at the Australian National University.

Chapter 5: The *Spread* of Outrage: A Case Study of the Joe Rogan/Spotify Firestorm

This chapter explores the spread of mediated outrage through a case study of the Spotify firestorm of early 2022. I explore the existing sociological link between online firestorms and moral panics, and challenge the current effort to conceptualise the online firestorm as a specific type of moral panic. Instead, I explore how we might see an online firestorm through adjacent literature on Morally Motivated Networked Harassment (MMNH) (Marwick, 2021). I argue that the firestorm is characterised by a (1) normative ambivalence, (2) a dynamic, cascading focus, that is amplified by key users and (3) a diversity of reaction and polarisation.

I employ this characterisation to guide my analysis of the Spotify firestorm. Specifically, I draw on the methodological sensibilities of issue mapping and controversy analysis to follow the firestorms movement over three key amplification events. First, I identify the key users (that is “amplifiers”) in the firestorm. Then, I move to explore the ways in which each amplifier provides distinctive framings of the outrage. What was particularly interesting about the Spotify boycott is that it provoked a counter-reaction (or *counter-firestorm*) which attacked those engaged in the firestorm. As such, I follow this counter-firestorm alongside the firestorm.

In doing so, I abstract the general dynamics found in the Spotify firestorm to make critical comment on the broader operations of contemporary online firestorms. Specifically, I identify the tendency for such counter-firestorms to personify firestorm mobs through key amplifiers, thus targeting these individuals for networked harassment. As the counter-firestorm operates in a similar way to the firestorm – that is, having a dynamic, cascading focus – these individuals face cascading attacks based on issues such as past moral transgressions, or “marked characteristics” (Brekhus, 1998). This has a profound impact on *who* can utilise outrage for change, as those with a greater capacity to be attacked may face a more vehement or indignant counter-firestorm.

5.1 What is an online firestorm?

In final days of 2021 American podcast host Joe Rogan released an episode of *the Joe Rogan Experience* (JRE) featuring controversial vaccine sceptic Robert Malone. The episode sparked an intense and widespread public reaction, with numerous artists leaving Spotify and a significant swathe of the platform's userbase cancelling their subscriptions. News outlets were fast to report on the events transpiring. Some referred to it as "Joe Rogan scandal", others the "Spotify controversy", or some the "Spotify backlash" (see, for example Pallotta, 2022; Shaw, 2022). Each represent quite common terms with a long pedigree both in public usage and academia. However, many outlets also utilised a slightly newer term – the *online firestorm* (see, for example Greenburg, 2022; Pettit, 2022). "Scandal", "controversy" and "backlash" each convey a sense of wrongdoing, public condemnation, or discord. The "online firestorm" on the other hand, implies a certain explosivity of reaction – a speed and intensity that is at least impart caused by its spread online.

Conceptually, the online firestorm has seen considerable development in the social sciences literature. There, online firestorms are generally defined as instances of online outrage which show an acute rise to prominence, followed by an immediate dissipation (Pfeffer et al., 2014). The targets of online firestorms are generally understood to be companies, brands, or public figures, as the term has particularly developed in marketing and public relations literature (Pfeffer et al., 2014). Here, focus is directed at the *speed* of diffusion and *intensity* of indignation, specifically in how these factors may be amplified by social media affordances (Pfeffer, 2014; Crockett, 2017; Johnen et al., 2018; Brady et al., 2020). In this sense, the spread is understood through a sort of explosivity - that is, rapid propagation as well as extreme sense of damage to the targets of moral indignation.

However, there is also a growing interest in sociological explanations for online firestorms, particularly through fostering links to moral panic theory (Wright, 2017; Johnen et al. 2018; Hier, 2019; Falkof, 2020, Walsh, 2020; Blitvich, 2022). Perhaps the most developed of these accounts comes from Johnen et al. (2018). The authors draw

from Goode and Yehuda's (1994) attributional model of moral panic, to argue that the online firestorm is best understood as a type of moral panic. The difference between a firestorm and traditional moral panic is that the former is characterised by a faster spread, more hostile communication, and greater consensus. They utilise the key attributes of moral panic (concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, volatility) to differentiate online firestorms from other forms of hostile communication. Specifically, they argue that firestorms display:

“a more specific topic of communication (i.e. a moral concern), comprise a greater and “condensed” level of hostility and aggressiveness, include a more disproportionate presentation of the discussed issue, show less diversity in opinions and polarisation (i.e. higher perception of consensus), and involve a sudden accumulation and rapid declines of user comments (i.e. higher volatility).” (p.3143)

This gives the online firestorm a useful sociological tether, however theorising the online firestorm in this way comes with several limitations. First, is the issue of conceptualising the firestorm as a type of moral panic. This is because literature often focuses on firestorms that target brands and public figures, and instances of outrage which do not neatly fit the moral panic mould. While this focus does align closely with the Spotify firestorm, the moral panic has a conceptual history of being used as a tool to shine light on media fuelled mass panic which serves to reinforce normative order at the expense of an (often) marginalised group or actor (Hier, 2019). In the case of the Spotify firestorm this results in conceptual confusion – the firestorm explicitly challenged a powerful platform's guise of political neutrality, and absence of responsibility. It's “folk-devil” was Joe Rogan - a hyperbolic figure known for spreading misinformation and platforming hate speech. If a firestorm is a *type of moral panic*, then can we really categorise this as a firestorm? Second, this definition of the firestorm requires a “more specific topic of communication”, which may render a firestorm as a static object. This assumes that the explosivity of the firestorm is found primarily in the speed and intensity of reaction. However, could we also see alongside this an explosivity in the issue space? That is, through this speed and intensity, as the firestorm is amplified across different social networks, the violations, actors and issues reshape, cascade or change? Finally, this

definition implies a “higher perception of consensus”. This risks positioning public reactions as monolithic, rather than diverse and multifaceted. Could we not also see the polarisation, diversity of reaction, and intense debates these cause as an essential cause and effect of the firestorms spread?

The following sections outline and build on these three critiques to provide a different conceptualisation of the online firestorm. I instead position the online firestorm as distinctive from a moral panic, by fostering new links to adjacent work in MMNH (Marwick, 2021).

5.1.1 Proportionality and normativity

First is that we should be careful when trying to explain the firestorm as a type of moral panic, given the established usage of moral panic analysis. Calling something a moral panic implies a negative judgement of the social reaction to a perceived threat. As Hier (2017) argues, moral panic studies generally aim to “show how people in positions of power construct packages of claims that amplify deviance in a manner that is disproportionate to actual threats...” thus leading moral panics to generally be considered “conservative social reactions that obstruct the ability of vulnerable groups to equally participate in social life”. This has two key implications for thinking about spread of public reaction: first, is that the public reaction has a movement away from reality (i.e. “disproportion”); and second is that if this is disproportionate reaction is socially regressive, or problematic in some way. One line of moral panic analysis is an empirical assessment of the actual or objective extent of a threat, and subsequent analysis of the public reaction to show that it is out of proportion to the reality of the threat and that this reaction has problematic outcomes (cf. Watney, 1987; Garland, 2008). In this way, in a moral panic a social reaction implies an *over-reaction* and a *problematic-reaction*. Thus, conventional moral panic analysis particularly surrounds issues of mass media fearmongering which scapegoat the youth or marginalised groups, generating and utilising mass anxiety.

The firestorm, on the other hand, is generally applied to explosive displays of outrage that result from a company's or individual's transgression. These are often more normatively ambiguous - analysing something as a firestorm does not necessarily convey judgement on the part of the researcher. When it does, this is generally from the perspective of mitigating the damage brand value (see for example Herhausen, et al., 2019). The analysis of disproportion is less central when compared to moral panic analysis.

Some authors, such as Hier (2019) even forward the point that “digital firestorms represent interesting sites to advance understandings of the prospect that a moral panic can be ‘good’”, noting that the term has been applied to public reactions which do not neatly fit the moral panic model. In this way, an *explosive* reaction in an online firestorm does not necessarily imply an *over-reaction* or a *problematic*-reaction. Rather, it more simply implies a volatile and intense public reaction of outrage towards a perceived moral violation. This reflects ongoing calls from within moral panic studies (Cohen, 2011/1972) or more broadly in the “sociology of public reaction” (Garland, 2008) to understand “good moral panics”.

However, I seek to develop the online firestorm as distinctive from the moral panic, as to retain the analytical utility of the moral panic in cases where we are concerned with disproportionality and normative judgement. Importantly, positioning the firestorm in this way does not abandon the normative orientation of the *analysis* – the analysis still assumes a political position on the part of the researcher, and is in essence the study of contestations over the moral order. Rather, it rejects the normative orientation of the *term* - we may have firestorms that are “good”, “bad” or “good and bad” (i.e. ambivalent).

5.1.2 Stable violations

The existing literature on online firestorms sometimes provides a somewhat rigid characterisation of the concept – they are focused on a central actor and triggered by a specific event. In terms of exploring explosivity, this often leads to studies focusing on the interaction between individual psychological characteristics and media platforms, or quantifications of the sentiment and tonality of messaging (Hancock et al., 2023). These

ways of exploring the spread of outrage provide strong indication of the general causes of firestorm speed and intensity, but do not say as much about the discursive complexity of firestorms. Just as we can imagine a firestorms spread in terms of a rapid pace and increasing hostilities, we too can imagine a firestorms spread in terms of its movement beyond the trigger - the issues it pulls in, the new actors it may target and the new violations it hones in on. Indeed, in firestorms moral judgments are not stable - judgements change as meanings change. The same violation may be perceived in entirely different ways depending on who committed the violation, to whom, and in what context (Luft, 2020). Moreover, each of these factors must be interpreted by individual actors who bring their own unique mix of social and cultural makeup into the perception and judgment of moral action. Thus, as firestorms spread through social networks, we will necessarily see that violations are reframed or change entirely, different moral judgements form, and new actors are brought into the scene.

Marwick (2021) work on morally motivated networked harassment provides a useful foundation for developing on these aspects. Though Marwick is focused on harassment, her work serves as a useful model for understanding *how* outrage is amplified more broadly (see Figure 3) Marwick argues that amplification, as a process, refers to the “signal-boosting” of an accusation or accusations of a targets deviance, which results in the rapid spread through a network. The amplifier refers to the actor who, because of their access to a large audience, can “signal-boost” an accusation or accusations. This networked audience often “share an ideological or moral framework”, and thus when accusations are “signal-boosted” the “ideological consensus of the accusing network is reinforced through a common enemy and the symbolic boundaries between contexts are reinforced” (p.5). The exact size of the networked audience required to delineate one as an “amplifier” is necessarily ambiguous, as it affords a case-by-base flexibility in analytical application.

morally-motivated networked harassment

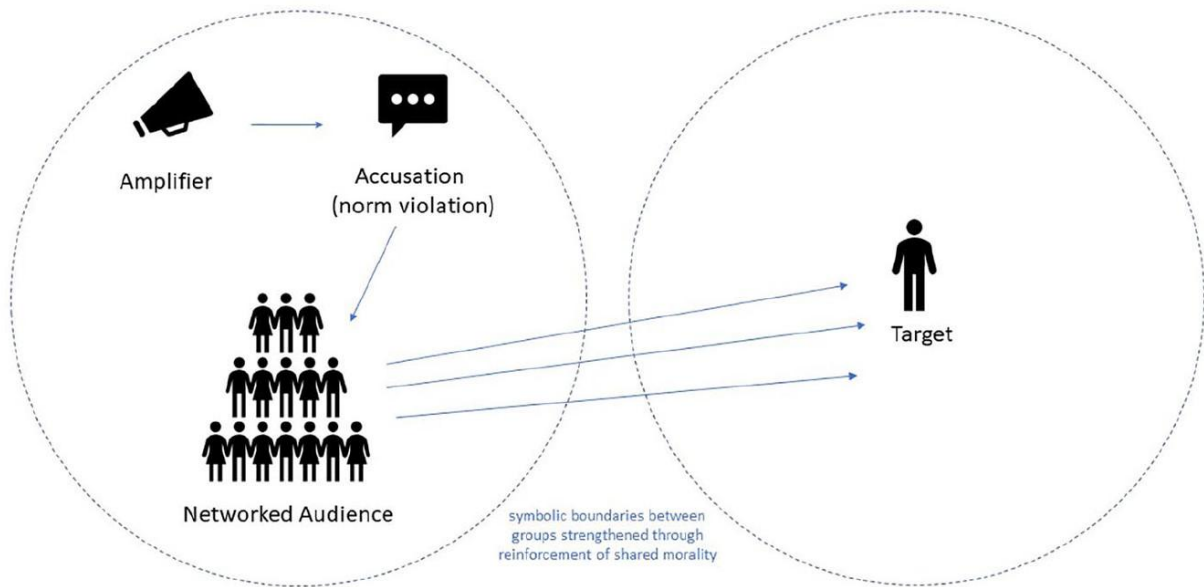


Figure 3 The process of MMNH (from Marwick, 2021)

Importantly, Marwick highlights that an accusation must do more than just reach an audience, it must also be framed in such a way that is resonant with the groups ideological or moral framework. This occurs through the selection and display of certain aspects of an event in its communication (Entman, 1993). In the selection, presentation, or exclusion, certain aspects of an event or situation are made more or less salient (Goffman, 1986). Writing on public denunciations, Haugh (2022) highlights that they require a process of “discursive framing” which selects a “particular offence or transgression from a public encounter involving multiple potential transgressions through a process of discursive recontextualization” (Haugh, 2022). Notably, he also describes the potential for the denunciation to cascade beyond the original transgression to these potential transgressions as the outrage spreads and is reframed.

Marwick describes this slightly differently, interrogating instead how the accused actor is symbolically represented through their “attack vectors”. These refer to marked identity characteristics that are viewed as points of vulnerability by the networked audience. Notably this term was developed through member checks during her interviews with victims of harassment and trust and safety workers, thereby reflecting language used by

those with direct experience of online harassment. Such attack vectors work to frame *how* a target is harassed, and generally reflect “structural systems of misogyny, racism, homophobia, and transphobia, which determine the primary standards and norms by which people speaking in public are judged” (p. 6). For example, Marwick notes that although many of her participants were male, very few were attacked for being male, whereas those who were woman or non-binary were attacked based on their gender identity. Often times these attack vectors had nothing to do with the violation at hand – rather, they served to frame *how* the individual was harassed.

Understanding the *spread* of outrage to this view, attunes our focus to first identifying *who* are the *amplifiers* or key actors in outrage and how do they *frame* an accusation of wrongdoing. Then, asks how does this outrage frame shift and change as new amplifiers and audiences are brought into the firestorm. This provides a slightly different way of thinking about the spread of firestorms that has a strong sociological tether.

5.1.3 Monolithic reactions

Finally, firestorms generally assume a relatively unified condemnation of the target of outrage. Matook et al. (2022, p.675) argue that existing literature often treats firestorms as if they are “monolithic and cohesive artifacts of a uniform nature”, when they instead are often “diverse and multi-faceted” and may display “instances of support towards the target”. This support may be characterised by cordiality towards the target, but also more overt acts of aggression in defence of the target. This tendency to position relatively monolithic audience reactions is especially relevant to the explosivity of the storm, as ideologically homogenous audiences are seen sometimes a driver of virality (Vasterman, 2018). For example, In the foundational piece on online firestorms, Pfeffer et al. (2014) argue draw from Eli Pariser's (2011) work on filter bubbles and related work on echo chambers to position the lack of diversity and clustered networks that are created by social media platforms as primary drivers of opinion dynamics. More recent work has criticised both the filter bubbles and echo chamber theses due for a lack of empirical evidence (Bruns, 2019). Rather, as Bruns argues, the problem exists with polarisation. This is not necessarily the result of fragmentation through “filter bubbles” and “echo

chambers” but rather longstanding social issues and inequalities which very much exist offline. In this way, social media may amplify such divides, but a not necessarily the primary cause.

Furthering this, as Marwick (2021) highlights, it is often the mutual visibility of opposing networks which leads to the instigation and spread of outrage. In other words, outrage does not arise from isolated, like-minded communities that never encounter opposing views; rather, it is the visibility of radically different perspectives that sparks anger when individuals strongly disagree with them.

This is not to say that such events however just reflect such divisions, but rather that they are sites by which such divisions are articulated and reshaped. Part of what is interesting about these dynamics is their generative capacity. By this, I mean the ability of outrage to bring new communities, actors, and issues into scene in different ways, and itself produce a target of outrage and associated moral violations. This follows Gharavi’s (2020) formulation of outrage as productive - it “produces a narrative that is constitutive of that which it appears to interpret; that is to say, outrage is constitutive of social reality”. This is true to both the ephemeral public that the outrage produces, as well as ways in which this public renders and moral values and targets of indignation. These dynamics stay true when we see outrage that targets outrage, or the *counter-firestorm* that targets the firestorm. The counter-firestorm renders the firestorm in a certain way, it makes those individuals participating in the firestorm a legible moral actor that is capable of being held to account, and defines ways in which they can be attacked.

Bringing this together then, we are encouraged to consider the oppositional movements of aggression or solidarity that emerge alongside an online firestorm as part of the *spread*. That is, part of what causes outrage to spread rapidly is the mutual visibility of opposing viewpoints, rather than opinion homogeneity. Outrage in turn can be a site whereby such opposing communities are defined and reformed. In the case of the Spotify firestorm, as will outline shortly, we see that this dynamic manifests through a *counter-firestorm* - that is, a reaction of outrage at the existence of a firestorm. Such events likely have a

bidirectional relationship to the spread, in that solidarity movements and oppositional firestorms are more likely to occur as the original firestorm becomes more visible, and through their propagation they increase the visibility of the original firestorm.

5.2 Studying online firestorms

I have so argued that the online firestorm is best characterised by a (1) normative ambivalence, (2) a dynamic, cascading focus, and (3) a diversity of reaction and polarisation. Understanding the firestorm in this way positions several key questions about the *spread* of outrage which inform our analysis. First, how is the firestorm is amplified (and by whom)? How do these amplifiers frame and reframe the key issues? What oppositional or reactive counter-firestorms form alongside?

This analytical focus aligns quite closely with the aims of controversy analysis and issue mapping. These are well established methodologies, which are closely informed by actor network theory (ANT). Though this is a distinctive theoretical focus from that presented in this thesis, the general sensibilities of controversy mapping as a methodology are directly relevant. Specifically, controversy analysis (Venturini, 2012) and issue mapping (Marres and Moats, 2015; Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández's, 2016) provide us with a set of approaches that employ digital methods to understand public controversies and issues. These generally seek to “reveal the multisidedness and intersectionality of social media controversies” by mapping the relations between actors and positions. Traditionally these approaches were applied to issues centred in science and technology (Venturini, 2010) but have also more recently been applied to “born digital” social issues (Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández's, 2016). These approaches display a degree of “methodological minimalism” (Venturini, 2010), allowing us a degree of adaptability to the situational context of each case study. Moreover, they also recognise the liminality of collective life and issue formation (Hagen and Stauff, 2022). As Venturini (2010) argues, mapping controversies is akin to “diving in magma” as “the social is unremittingly constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed” (p. 264).

This focus on the social as transformable aligns closely with the characterisation of firestorms, which are defined by both a dynamic issue space and the emergence of oppositional movements of outrage and solidarity. Each outrage event brings with it a unique mix of issues, actors, and communities which are reformed and reshaped in relation to each other. Controversy mapping as a methodology allows us to explore the generative capacity of these events.

Most relevant to the current project is Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández's (2016) discussion of mapping short lived, viral controversies which animate broader issue publics. These "acute controversies" are highly transient and exhibit amplified levels of engagement and activity, much like an online firestorm. Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández's (2016) breakdown the process of mapping acute controversies as stages of: (1) "Building the issue inventory"; (2) "Mapping the issue networks"; and (3) "Identifying the key mediators". Building the issue inventory involves identifying a platform and issue of interest, along with associated "media objects" which can be followed (e.g. Tweets). Then, these media objects are collected and analysed for spikes in activity, studying such points of interest to identify key participants, events, and additional media objects. After building this "issue inventory", the authors then visualise the controversy by "mapping the issue networks". This involves building network maps which show connections between media objects relevant to the controversy using Gephi. This allows them to identify thematic communities and frames through clusters of closely connected content (e.g. co-occurrent words, YouTube video networks, hashtag networks). Finally, "identifying the key mediators" involves identifying that content which plays a central role in the controversy through measures of betweenness centrality, then moving to closer qualitative analysis of this content.

I loosely followed this general approach presented by Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016), with some changes to fit my focus on online firestorms. The aim here, was to start from what appears on the surface to be relatively static – a shared reaction of outrage (i.e. a central target [i.e. Spotify], violation [i.e. platforming Rogan's vaccine misinformation], and amplifier [Neil Young]) – and reveal the varieties of issues and

actors which are pulled in to the firestorm, as well as the formation movements which aim to directly counter this (i.e. a counter-firestorm). This analysis was done with qualitative sensibilities - aiming to narrativize the outrage event in a way draws from digital methods but does not expect them to stand alone.

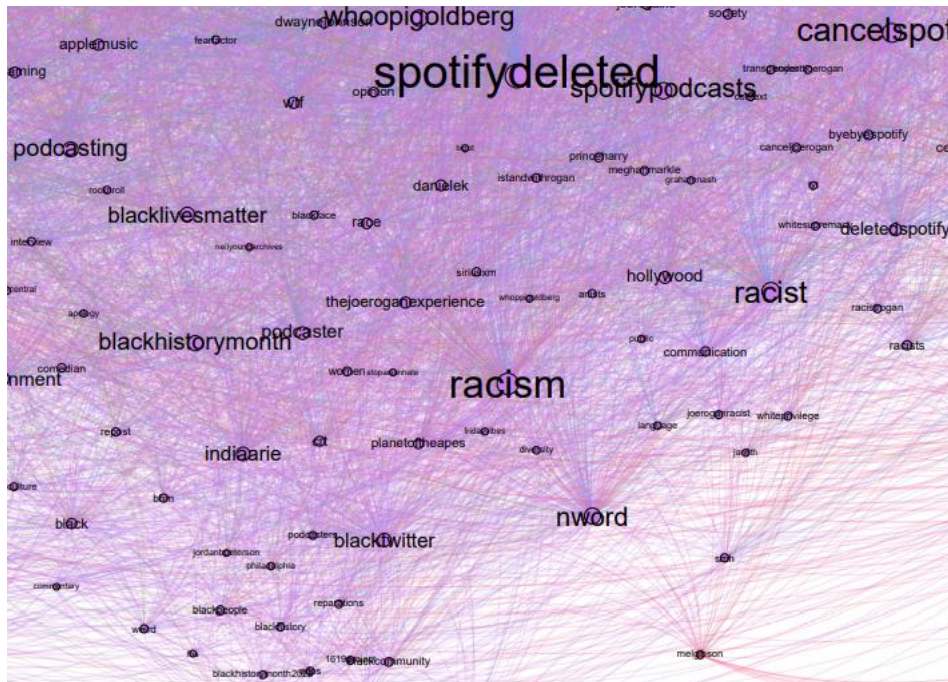
5.3 Mapping the firestorms

Rogan's podcast featuring Malone was released on the 31st of December 2021. By following media coverage during the period, I determined that the general firestorm appeared to have largely petered out by the end of February. As such I selected a broad window spanning from the 1st of January 2022 until the 1st of March 2022 to capture both the firestorm and counter-firestorm.

I used 4CAT (Peters and Hagen, 2021) to query the twitter API for all tweets containing "#JoeRogan" using this timeframe. The reason I queried just #JoeRogan, and did not query #Spotify, was that the latter appeared to contain a comparative abundance of noise unrelated to the firestorm – particularly so individuals sharing playlists – and would have resulted in a very large query. This first step simply aimed at understanding the general shape of the firestorm. As such, #JoeRogan served as a relatively good anchor for this stage of the mapping.

This query resulted in an initial sample of 195,205 tweets. Using these tweets, I developed a co-occurrence map of hashtags in Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009). A co-occurrence map is a network of hashtags which allows us to visualise which hashtags frequently appear together in tweets. Each node in the network represents an individual hashtag, with the size of the node representing the number of tweets that the hashtag appeared in. Edges between nodes represent a co-occurrence in a tweet, with edge weight representing the number of tweets that the tags co-occurred in. My aim here was to identify any key issues animating the firestorm, as well as any tags that appeared to organise the storm. As such I applied Gephi's built-in modularity algorithm to identify the community structure within a network (i.e. hashtag clusters) which I then used to colour distinct clusters. This algorithm works by finding a modularity score based on the division of the hashtag

[illegible]



Bridging these two clusters were several more general tags, such as “cancel culture” and “freedom of speech”. However, the topics were also bridged several tags which clearly articulated a stance and appeared to organise either the firestorm (see Figure 7) or counter-firestorm (see Figure 8).

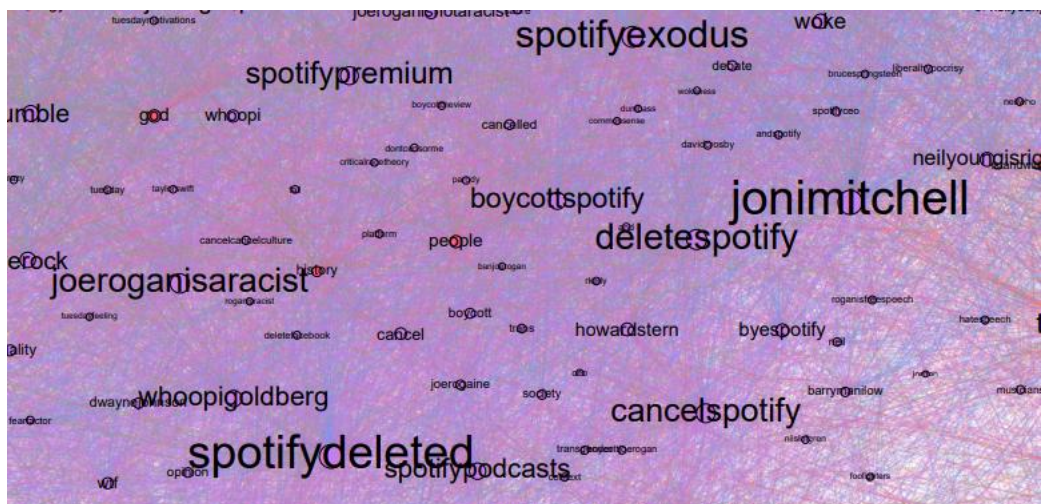


Figure 7 Cluster of “firestorm” tags (e.g. #cancelspotify, #spotifydeleted, #spotifyexodus)

	#istandwithjoerogan, #joeroganisnotaracist	
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Table 2 Tweet Counts of Firestorm and Counter-Firestorm tags

I then measured the daily volume of tweets over the period to identify periods of acute activity in both the firestorm and counter-firestorm. This showed three clear acute peaks in activity, each of which corresponded directly to an “amplification event” – that is, a peak of activity where new amplifiers reframed the firestorm (see Figure 9).

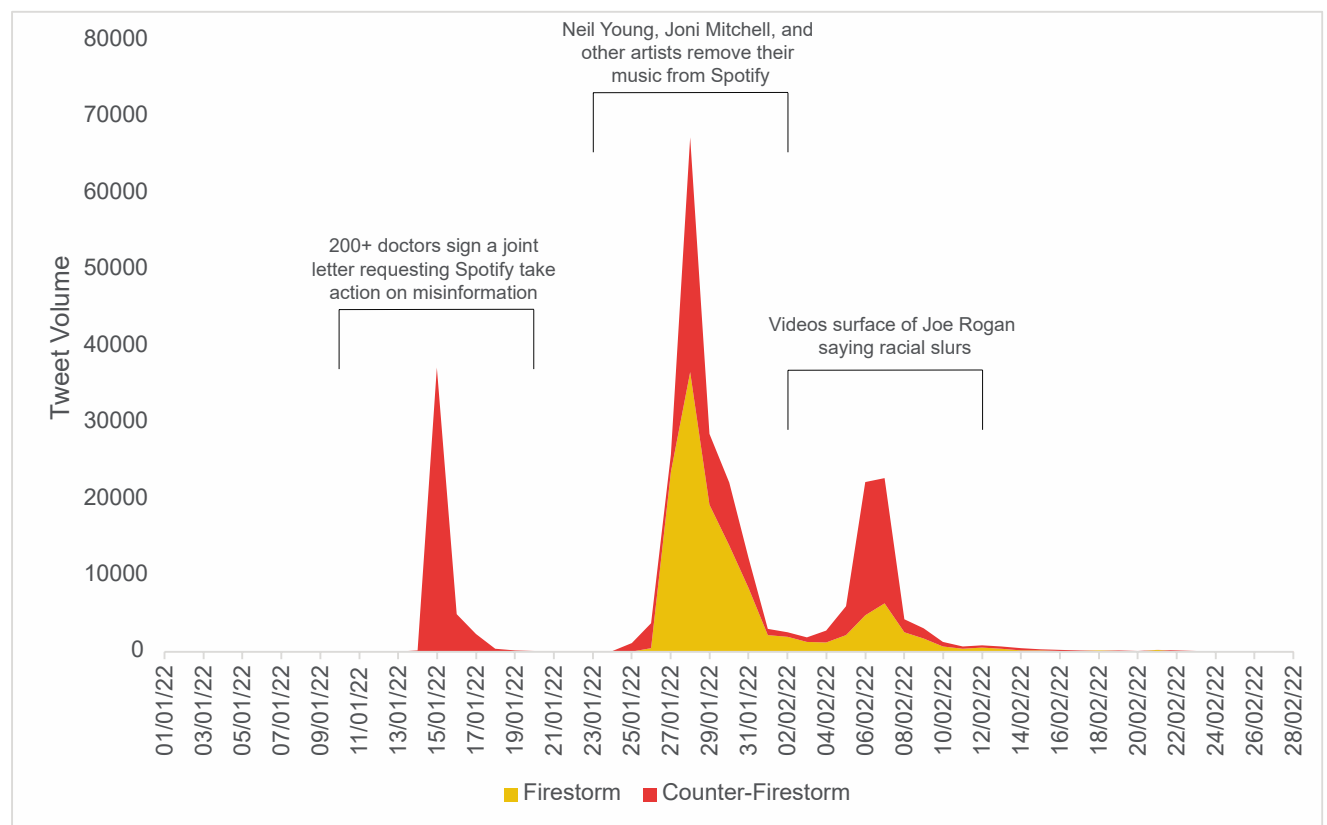


Figure 9 Daily tweet volume on the firestorm and counter-firestorm tags

It is important to note that the counter-firestorm appears to (counterintuitively) start before the firestorm. This is because the firestorm hashtags followed were not active during the first amplification event. Rather the firestorm at this time was contained on more general tags (such as #JoeRogan or #Spotify). These tags often displayed both a

mixture of outrage at Spotify and support for Rogan (i.e. firestorm and counter-firestorm activity) so I have not included them in this graph.

To identify the amplifiers in both the firestorm and counter-firestorm I utilised two complementary approaches. The first, was a tracking the user mention networks within each of the tags and using a measure of in-degree centrality to identify amplifiers. A Twitter mention network is a directed network graph that visualises connections between users. Nodes represent Twitter users and edges between nodes represent mentions between users. A mention occurs on Twitter whenever a user includes another user handle in their tweet, or when a user retweets another user. Edges are directed and represented as arrows between nodes, with the arrow pointing from the originator of the mention to its recipient. In this context, in-degree centrality measures the number of incoming mentions that a user has. In-degree centrality directly operationalises Marwick's (2021) notion of the amplifier, in that it identifies those users which act as "highly-connected nodes" in the network as well as the accounts that they mention as "targets". However, in the context of Spotify firestorm this approach omitted several key figures in the storm who did not disseminate their accusation via Twitter, and/or did not have a Twitter account (e.g. the group of doctors who originally accused Spotify of spreading misinformation). This suggested, as is likely the case with most firestorms, that was a form of cross-platform amplification. As such, I also collected the 10 most frequently shared external URLs in both the firestorm and counter-firestorm as a secondary method of identifying key amplifiers. I manually filtered these for spam and removed any broken links. These sources (news articles, YouTube videos, blog posts) were included in the analysis of amplification events.

The mention network also allows us to identify key actors in the firestorm and counter-firestorm who are not amplifiers, but are having attention directed to them. For example, neither @Spotify or @JoeRogan tweeted on either the firestorm or counter-firestorm tags, but they unsurprisingly had very large in-degree scores. As such, in the each of the mention networks, I coloured twitter amplifiers (i.e. accounts which tweeted on the tags) in red and targets (i.e. accounts which were mentioned but did not tweet on the tags) in

blue. Some accounts (e.g. @neilyoung and @jonimitchell) were amplifiers in the firestorm, but did so through external platforms (e.g. blogs). Other accounts tweeted outside the followed tags and were subsequently retweeted on the firestorm tags. I manually coded each of these accounts as amplifiers and coloured them in red also. In each case I calculated node in-degrees using the full mention network, but only visualised the network of the top 20 accounts (by in-degree). This allows us to focus directly in on the relationships between amplifiers and targets (i.e. which amplifiers are mentioning which targets). I also anonymised any accounts which did not have a substantial following (less than 10,000 followers). These accounts appear as “@twitter user” instead of their actual handle.

5.3.1 Amplifiers of the firestorm

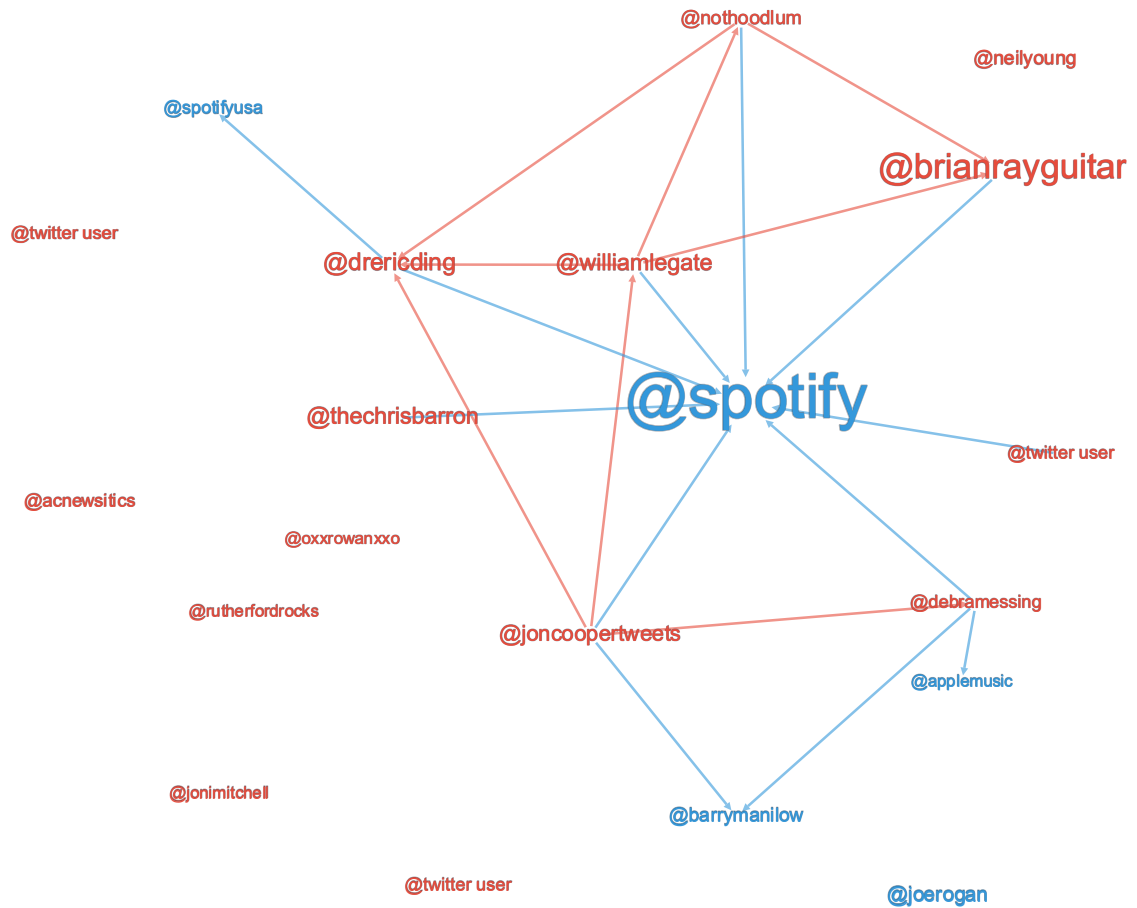


Figure 10 Directed mention network of top 20 accounts on the firestorm hashtags

Shares	Description	Platform
133	Bloomberg article covering the general controversy around Spotify	Bloomberg
126	USA Today guide on deleting Spotify accounts	USA Today
115	Official personal website of Joni Mitchell	Personal Website
69	Reuters discusses Pope Francis labeling Covid misinformation as a "human rights violation"	Reuters

53	Rolling Stone article discussing the joint letter	Rolling Stone
46	LA Times article on Neil Young and Joni Mitchel's removal of music from Spotify	LA Times
46	Business Insider guide on deleting Spotify accounts	Business Insider
42	Open letter condemning Spotify's handling of misinformation	WordPress
38	Fundraising campaign urging users to divert their Spotify subscriptions to support Covid victims	Act Blue
36	Media Traffic reports on Spotify losing \$4 billion in market value following the Neil Young controversy	Media Traffic

Table 3 Top 10 most shared outbound (non-twitter) URLs on the firestorm hashtags

The amplifier network (Figure 10) shows a central focus on Spotify, rather than Joe Rogan. No amplifiers appear overwhelmingly dominant; rather, we see several progressive influencers which variously mention each other. That said, Joni Mitchel and Neil Young are both frequently mentioned despite not tweeting, suggesting they played an especially important role in the firestorm. This is further evident in the outbound links (Table 3), which contain various articles discussing their removal of music from Spotify, as well as a direct link to Joni Mitchell's personal website. There is no direct link to Young's site, however the contents of his blog posts are discussed in several articles. We also see a direct link to the open letter here and a Rolling Stone article discussing it.

5.3.2 Amplifiers of the counter-firestorm

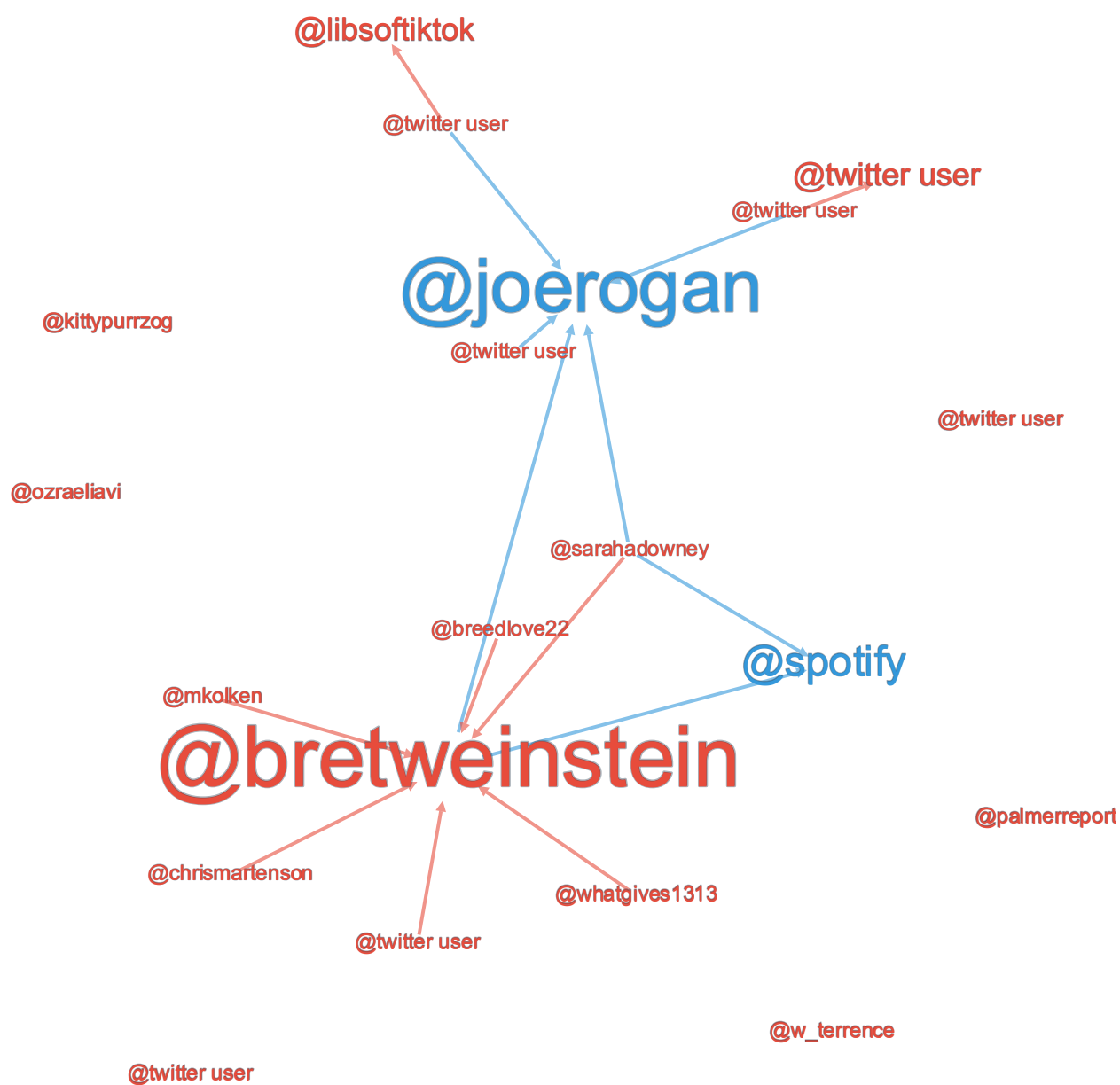


Figure 11 Directed mention network of top 20 accounts on the counter-firestorm hashtags

Shares	Description	Platform
65	Spotify link to JRE Episode #1757 featuring Dr. Robert Malone	Spotify

58	The Post Millennial covers the widespread reactions and support for Joe Rogan	The Post Millennial
28	Bret Weinstein's "Dark Horse" Podcast episode discussing the persistent gaps in the COVID narrative, titled "They can't plug the leak in the COVID narrative #ThankYouSpotify #ThanksJoeRogan"	YouTube
23	Bret Weinstein's "Dark Horse" Podcast episode celebrating Rogan's impact, titled "They were exactly the heroes we needed and not a moment too early #ThanksJoeRogan"	YouTube
20	Substack post attempting to reveal the identity behind the "@patriottakes" Twitter account	Substack
9	"Breaking Points" Podcast compilation debunking the portrayal of Joe Rogan as right-wing	YouTube
9	Saagar Enjeti on "Breaking Points" discussing the financial and political forces behind attempts to cancel Joe Rogan	YouTube
8	Episode of JRE #1439 with guest Michael Osterholm	YouTube
7	Website dedicated to tracking episodes of the JRE removed from Spotify	Personal website
6	YouTube video alleging political funding behind the attacks on Joe Rogan, claiming deeper connections than just Spotify issues	YouTube

Table 4 Top 10 most shared outbound (non-twitter) URLs on the counter- firestorm hashtags

In comparison to the firestorm, the counter-firestorm is more centrally amplified by a key user – namely, conservative commentator Bret Weinstein. Many of the smaller amplifiers

in the network (Figure 11) directly mentioned Weinstein, cementing his central role. We also see his prominence in the outbound links (Table 4) where his *Dark Horse* podcast is featured twice. There are notably no links to mainstream news outlets here, rather most are to YouTube clips of podcasts from various conservative commentators. Weinstein mentions both Spotify and Joe Rogan directly, however we see that overall Joe Rogan receives far more mentions than Spotify. This suggests a greater focus on defending Rogan, rather than defending Spotify. This contrasts directly with the firestorm, which appeared to target Spotify more centrally.

5.4 Following the amplification events

Having identified key hashtags mediating the firestorm and counter-firestorm, the key topical areas (misinformation and racism), and the key amplifiers, I then moved to a more fine-grained analysis of each spike in activity (i.e. amplification event). I specifically followed content posted by the amplifiers identified above, seeking to identify how they framed accusations of wrongdoing. I contextualised this with a broader qualitative analysis of high-engagement tweets in both the firestorm and counter-firestorm for each period.

5.4.1 The joint letter

On the 10th of January a group of 270 doctors and health professionals published an open letter on WordPress entitled “An Open Letter to Spotify: A call from the global scientific and medical communities to implement a misinformation policy”. The doctors labelled Rogan a “menace to public health” and urged Spotify to remove him from the platform and implement stricter misinformation policies. This appeared as the first major accusation targeting Spotify and corresponded directly with the first spike in activity. This activity initially appeared limited to the counter-firestorm tags, with very little activity on the firestorm tags. However, there was a strong anti-Rogan and anti-Spotify sentiment on the counter-firestorm tags, suggesting that at this stage the firestorm was not mediated by firestorm tags and may have been more fractured. Moreover, the letter was linked as

primary amplifier for the firestorm in the previous analysis, suggesting it remained salient in the subsequent amplification events.

The letter clearly situated Spotify appeared as the primary target, with Rogan and Malone as secondary perpetrators whose actions were enabled by Spotify. Rogan and Malone's extensive spread of misinformation was mobilised to generate outrage against Spotify, rather than Rogan and Malone themselves – the central violation was the *platforming* of misinformation, rather than the *articulation* of misinformation. Specific reference was made to the Malone episode, though the authors emphasised that the issue was “not the only transgression to occur”. The letter also explicitly placed the onus for action on Spotify, stating that “Spotify is responsible for allowing this activity to thrive on its platform” and that they must “immediately establish a clear and public policy to moderate misinformation”. The authors particularly referred to Twitter's recent suspension of Malone, as to invoke a precedent that was expected to be followed. Those impacted by Spotify's platforming of such misinformation were broadly constructed, with appeals to “public health”, “public trust”, or calling the Rogan's platforming “a sociological issue of devastating proportions”.

We see here that the accusations levelled at Spotify clearly set an outrage frame which would go on to guide subsequent performances of outrage – namely in situating (1) Spotify as a primary perpetrator, (2) the platforming of Rogan's misinformation as a primary violation, (3) public health, the youth, and society more broadly as those impacted. Importantly the authors also did not explicitly call for any public action, outrage, or protest, instead situating the onus of action specifically on Spotify to implement stricter misinformation policies.

The generation of a counter-firestorm was swift, with #ThankYouSpotify and #ThanksJoeRogan trending on the 15th of January, which was just five days after the letter was originally posted. This counter-firestorm initially appeared to be characterised by a movement of solidarity with Rogan and Spotify, and was largely championed by Bret Weinstein:

“We would be in very serious trouble right now without Joe Rogan and Spotify’s courage. Let’s make #ThanksJoeRogan and #ThankYouSpotify trend. Don’t cut and paste. And consider doing them in separate tweets. Let’s let’em know we appreciate them.”

This sentiment of solidarity remained, however as the movement grew it developed a strong sentiment of moral outrage over a perceived attempt to deplatform Joe Rogan. This was again initially framed by Weinstein who situated the “censorious mob” as the perpetrator of an effort to pressure Spotify to deplatform Joe Rogan and restrict the “free exchange of ideas”. This accusation, though constructed through the lens of solidarity was again amplified by Weinstein:

“We appreciate your commitment to the free exchange of ideas, @Spotify. Stay strong, and ignore the censorious mob. You’re in the right, and history will reflect it. #ThankYouSpotify”

This general violation of calling for deplatforming or cancelling framed other high-engagement tweets over the period, which transitioned to more overt attacks on this nebulous “mob”.

“#ThankYouSubstack and #ThankYouSpotify for standing up for free speech against the mob onslaught of faux expert pseudogovernance.”

Building on this were efforts to give a face to this nebulous mob, opening the mob up to more specific targets and associated attack vectors. This sometimes manifested through memes that attacked the medical professional as a whole, building from conspiratorial rhetoric:

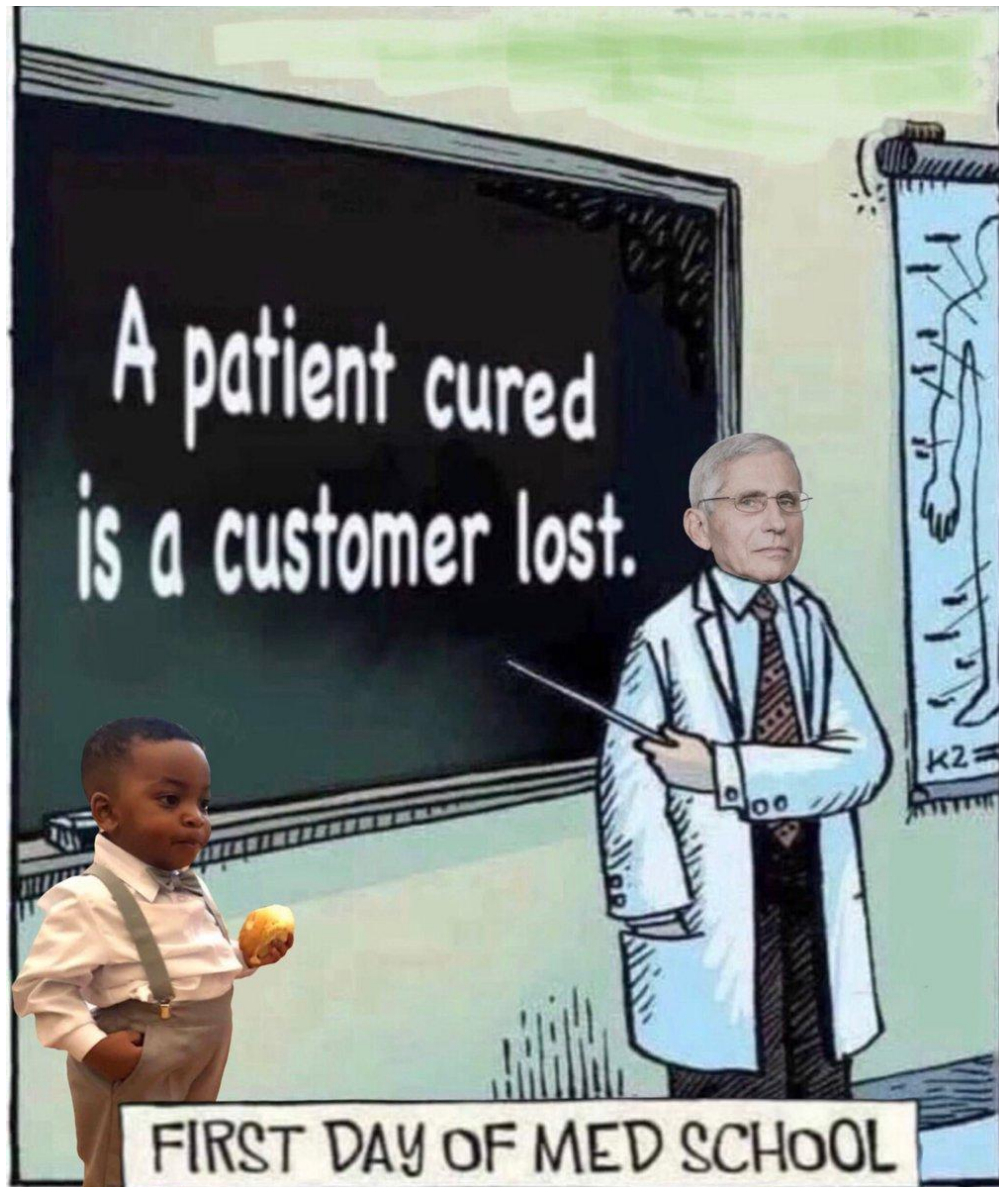


Figure 12 Meme illustrating a conspiratorial critique of the medical profession in the United States

However, more common were direct attacks on the letter's signatories. Users here generally did not position themselves against science or against medical experts, but instead opened the credibility of these experts as an attack vector. Those not perceived to be real doctors, such as dentists, social workers, or PhD students, were specifically targeted:

“The list of “medical experts” calling on Spotify to cancel @joerogan is a joke they literally have social workers on there... #JoeRogan IS OUT OF CONTROL, SEND IN THE SOCIAL WORKERS!” 🤪🤪🤪”

Others questioned why the doctors would not engage in open discussion on Rogan’s podcast, using this as evidence that the experts lacked a coherent case against Malone or Rogan.

“So if 270 doctors are saying that @joerogan is spreading false information, why haven't at least ONE of them asked to be on his show to explain their reasoning? Or debate Dr Malone? Or Dr McCullough?

They are cowards. That's why

#JoeRogan #istandwithjoerogan”

5.4.2 Neil Young

On the 24th of January 2022 Neil Young posted a letter to Spotify on his blog issuing an ultimatum to Spotify:

“I want you to let Spotify know immediately TODAY that I want all my music off their platform ... They can have Rogan or Young. Not both.”

The letter was deleted the following day (Cain, 2022) and replaced with a second post on the 26th which corresponded with the removal of his music from Spotify. In this this second post, Young drew directly from the joint letter posted on the 10th of January, stating:

“I [Neil Young] first learned of this problem by reading that 200 plus doctors had joined forces, taking on the dangerous life-threatening COVID falsehoods found in SPOTIFY programming”

As such, the basic structure of the outrage frame articulated in the join letter remains consistent in Young’s post. The core issue remained that of platforming Covid-19 misinformation and the primary perpetrator remained as Spotify, with Young stating that “SPOTIFY has become the home of life threatening COVID misinformation”. Importantly

though, Young extended the onus for action the responsibility to the artists who host their music on Spotify, arguing that it is the artists who host their music on Spotify are complicit in the spread of misinformation:

“All my music is available on SPOTIFY, being sold to these young people, people who believe what they are hearing because it is on SPOTIFY, and people like me are supporting SPOTIFY by presenting my music there.”

While the joint letter rendered Spotify as a singular entity, Young's portrayal of Spotify underscored the influence of its artists in shaping the platform. This perspective placed a degree of responsibility on the artists, suggesting that they were integral components what Spotify is. As such they could exercise a degree of influence over the platform by withdrawing their music. This highlighted the agency of artists to enact change in platform policies, but in doing so also placed ethical responsibility on those artists to remove music from Spotify to prevent the spread of misinformation.

“I sincerely hope that other artists and record companies will move off the SPOTIFY platform and stop supporting SPOTIFY's deadly misinformation about COVID.”

In addition, Young also pulled in new attack vectors to discredit Spotify more generally. Most prominent were issues of sound quality.

“many other platforms, Amazon, Apple, and Qobuz, to name a few, present my music today in all its High-Resolution glory - the way it is intended to be heard, while unfortunately SPOTIFY continues to peddle the lowest quality in music reproduction. So much for art. But now that is in the past for me. Soon my music will live on in a better place.”

Though this attack vector was quite clearly moralised, with Young later asserting that “If you support SPOTIFY, you are destroying an art form”, it did not sit as a primary moral violation – this remained as Spotify's platforming of misinformation. Rather, this served as an additional avenue to attack the platform and further encourage a platform boycott.

Several days after Young's post, on the 28th of January #DeleteSpotify, #BoycottSpotify and a number of other Spotify critical tags began trending. This appeared as the

beginnings of a more organised boycott of Spotify. Young's accusations were most prominently amplified by Joni Mitchell, who posted on her personal website a link to the joint letter and expressed her solidarity with Neil Young and the medical community. The firestorm also spread through several high-profile Twitter users. Some of these users were also musicians, such as Brian Ray and Chris Barron, who followed Young's lead in removing music from Spotify. Many of these tweets closely followed the central framing of the firestorm around issues of misinformation, but some artists also pulled in new issues including artist compensation:

“So @Spotify pays Joe Rogan \$100 million dollars!!?! And us Artists get paid crumbs of a penny for our music they stream!?! Fck that. I'm pulling my music from this service. I'm encouraging my fellow musicians to do the same. #spotifyexodus”

Here again we see a slightly different positioning of Spotify - it is not just that Spotify are hosting misinformation, they are in fact preferencing misinformation over artists. Spotify's 100-million-dollar buyout (which was later rumoured to be worth over 200-billion dollars) removed any imaginations of platform neutrality. It was utilised to place Rogan in direct connection with Spotify, suggesting the Spotify was more than simply a place to give voice to Rogan, but a place which was condoning and amplifying his voice.

This stage also saw emphasis placed on Spotify users as essential to the operations of the platform. Here, the focus was on how users were implicitly funding the spread of misinformation. This was particularly amplified by progressive Twitter influencers such as William Le Gate and Hoodlum. This mobilised individuals towards “political consumerism”, intensifying the firestorm by encouraging by encouraging a platform boycott (Boulianne, 2022).

The firestorm also cascaded to include artists who had not publicly commented on the issue. Because so many musicians were joining boycott, and many of these official announcements were not originally disseminated on Twitter, the platform became a source of rumour generation. Some artists were speculated to be leaving Spotify, despite having no intentions to do so. These rumours unwillingly pulled adjacent actors into the

firestorm, and intensified activity on the tag. Particularly prominent were rumours targeting Barry Manilow, who's Twitter account received 1626 mentions over the period, making it the 10th most mentioned account on the anti-Spotify/Rogan tags (see Figure 10). To add to the confusion these rumours were amplified by high profile accounts and celebrities, such as Debra Messing:

“Thank you @barrymanilow for taking a surefooted step to support science, and protest potentially lethal misinformation disseminated by @Spotify via #JoeRogan. Over 800,000 Americans have DIED in 2 years. LIVES must come before revenue. #Spotifydeleted”

These rumours lead to extensive discussion, further drawing attention to tags. When Manilow clarified on Twitter that he was in-fact not leaving the platform, he became an additional target of the firestorm.

“So you support misinformation? Got it.”

“What a disappointment. Thanks for not stepping up. Lost my respect.”

Manilow's Tweet appeared to merely debunk the rumour - he refrained from adopting a clear stance on the ensuing firestorm. However, given that Spotify's operations were already framed as being enabled by users and artists, this indifference constituted an implicit stance. His neutrality was perceived as tacit endorsement of Spotify and Rogan, which served pull him into the firestorm and oxygenate it's spread.

Much like the previous amplification event, this firestorm saw the rapid growth of the counter-firestorm in response. Again, this was amplified primarily by conservative commentator Bret Weinstein, and drew on much the same frame as the previous amplification event.

“Pressure on Spotify is mounting. It's the front line of the battle over free speech, which is the keystone of the democratic west. Every time we see Joe Rogan under attack, or muscle applied to Spotify, #ThanksJoeRogan and #ThankYouSpotify should trend. *Every Single Time* Pls RT”

However, this saw a less pronounced movement of solidarity with Spotify and Rogan, and a more focused attack on the firestorm itself. This firestorm was again rendered through more nebulous ideas of a woke mob, however more common were direct attacks on the amplifiers – most notably Neil Young and Joni Mitchell. Much like the doctors of the previous amplification event, Young and Mitchell’s central role in the firestorm allowed for a way of seeing the Spotify firestorm. Importantly, however, this way of seeing the firestorm opened the movement as a whole up to individual, personalised attack vectors.

Attacks generally focused on marked characteristics such as age, drug use, or gendered insults such as “Moaning Mitchell”.

“Look at these old millionaire hippies trying to squash free ideas. What being an old fart looks like. @jonimitchell @Neilyoung #ThankYouSpotify #ThanksJoeRogan”

#ThankYouSpotify for playing your part in free speech Very very old people like the oxymoron Neil Young and his flaky side kick Moaning Mitchell, need to get out of the way of the next generations Irrelevant dinosaurs, whose music was an acquired taste. Don’t do drugs kids”

NEIL YOUNG FANS TRYING TO DELETE SPOTIFY



Figure 13 A meme attacking Young and his supporters based on their age

The central violation here remained that of a firestorm to restrict speech, which was specifically rendered through its amplifiers in Young and Mitchell. These attack vectors, served as avenues for harassment which worked to discredit the movement more broadly. Such tactics, while of a similar general form to the firestorm’s attacks on Spotify’s poor music quality, represent an effort that is more malignant due to the attacks “punching down” at individual points of vulnerability over “punching up” at a multi-national streaming giant (c.f. O’Neil, 2022).

Moreover, just as the firestorm cascaded beyond the original violation to highlight new moral violations as it spread – we too see that the counter-firestorm cascaded in a similar way. Most notable were accusations of Youngs “Homophobia and AIDS-phobia”:



Figure 14 A tweet referencing a 2014 article discussing Youngs previous statements around homosexuality

These accusations were often presented in juxtaposition with Rogan's stance as we see here, usually a quote from Rogan that painted him as an ally of the LGBTQ+ community. Similar violations were pulled in targeting Joni Mitchell who was specifically targeted for her use of blackface:

Thank you @Spotify for taking a stand against the coward & hypocrite racist Joni Mitchell by supporting free speech.

#ThanksJoeRogan #ThankYouSpotify



When Joni Mitchell wore blackface for Halloween

bbc.com

Figure 15 A tweet referencing a BBC article about Joni Mitchell's blackface

These historical accusations do not serve to spark an entirely new firestorm, rather they appear to be invoked as evidence of hypocrisy. The primary violation remains the call to boycott of Spotify due to their platforming of Rogan; there is not an earnest call to remove

Mitchel or Young from Spotify or other platforms due to their past actions or positions. These accusations of homophobia and racism act more as secondary accusations for which to point out each actor's hypocrisy. In this way, they act much like attack vectors – as avenues for harassment.

5.4.3 Racism

On the 31st of January several videos surfaced of Rogan repeatedly saying the “n-word” and being overtly racist on his podcast. The clips were originally posted on Twitter by the account *Patriot Takes*. The first video posted was a super-edit of various times in which Rogan had said the “n-word” on his podcast, which was accompanied by a thread of videos depicting Rogan making racist jokes and statements.

This not only reignited the firestorm against Spotify, but it shifted the binding moral violation. Issues of platforming misinformation remained salient to the firestorm, but platforming racism took a more central place. This period saw #JoeRoganIsARacist begin trending alongside the existing firestorm tags (e.g. #CancelSpotify, #BoycottSpotify, etc.).

“#DeletedSpotify and just like that I cancelled my subscription to Spotify. I know my ancestors are proud that we are still continue the fight against white supremacy with our coins! #DeleteSpotify #JoeRoganIsARacist”

The firestorm reached such an intensity that it provoked a response from both Rogan and Spotify, with Rogan issuing an apology video on Instagram, and Spotify deleting JRE episodes that contained racially insensitive language or themes. This however did little more than highlight just how prevalent Rogan's racism was, and further point to Spotify's continued inability to remove the episodes featuring misinformation or entirely remove him from the platform.



PATRIOTTAKES

OFFICIAL STATEMENT IN RESPONSE TO JOE ROGAN APOLOGY

February 5, 2022

This past week, PatriotTakes re-published and brought to the national spotlight dozens of recorded instances where Joe Rogan used the N-word, referred to Black people as 'Planet of the Apes,' and applauded a Nazi salute, among other despicable racist conduct. The videos have now received millions of views. This is in addition to the COVID disinformation that Joe Rogan routinely spreads. Enough is enough. Joe Rogan's apology in response to our Twitter posts rings hollow. Spotify undoubtedly has a 'morals clause' in its contract with Joe Rogan, which would permit his termination "for cause." We call on Spotify to immediately terminate Joe Rogan if Spotify has any morals. By not terminating Joe Rogan, Spotify will make clear to the world that not only does it approve COVID disinformation, but that Spotify is an inherently racist company. We will continue our mission of publishing videos and exposing this and other conduct. This is only the tip of the iceberg.

- PT

Figure 16 Statement released by the Patriot Takes twitter account in response to the Rogan apology, calling for the full termination of Rogan's contract with Spotify

"SHOCKING! It took a viral video to force Spotify to remove over 110 episodes of Joe Rogan's podcast where he used the N-word or told a

racist story. Yes, I said 110! Who else has #DeletedSpotify? 🖐️ ” I
#DeletedSpotify”

Where this did have an impact, however, was in the counter-firestorm which virtually abandoned any support of Spotify because of their removal of episodes. #ThankYouSpotify during this period only saw 887 tweets compared to the 6689 tweets using #ThanksJoeRogan. While Weinstein again amplified the counter-firestorm, his notable omission of solidarity for Spotify exemplifies this point:

“We must realise that keeping Joe Rogan safe *and totally free* should be as important to us as controlling Rogan is to them. See the game for what it is, and realise that the force that is coming after Joe is exactly right about his significance. #ThanksJoeRogan

Moreover, a notable addition to the URL out-links during this period was a website dedicated to tracking Spotify’s deletion of JRE episodes. This was accompanied by a distinctive shift in the counter-firestorm towards attacking Spotify and replicating the platform boycott of the firestorm.

“One of the episodes #Spotify has deleted is about #JulianAssange
#ThanksJoeRogan Stop memory-holing Joe Rogan episodes @Spotify
Perhaps we should build our own platform and skip the fascist
middleman @Spotify”

Spotify was now in the middle of two diametrically opposed firestorms, a unified target of outrage but one that continued to provoke moral distinction. Spotify’s actions of removing Rogan’s episodes were seen by the counter-firestorm to be caving to the firestorm, yet they were simultaneously seen by the firestorm as a wholly inadequate measure that only reinforced the need for Rogan to be removed entirely, and raised questions as to their prior allegiance with him. This sentiment towards Spotify was captured during the period:

“Sensible People: ‘I’m cancelling Spotify because of Joe Rogan’s racism, sexism and Covid disinformation.’ Conservatives: ‘I’m cancelling

Spotify because they took down 110 episodes of Joe Rogan saying things I enjoy.’#DeleteSpotify #cancelspotify #ByeSpotify #racistrogan”

While much of the activity in the counter-firestorm appeared to attack Spotify and defend Rogan, there was once again a strong attack on the amplifiers of the firestorm. This harassment was particularly directed at the Patriot Takes account who published the original super-edit of Rogan saying the “n-word”, and the accompanying thread of racist comments.

One of the most shared links in the counter-firestorm was a Substack post entitled “This Is Who Is Behind The Joe Rogan Attack” in which the author called the firestorm a “professional political attack” and attempted to “doxx” the Patriot Takes account. By doxxing here I refer to the practice of finding and publishing the personal identit(ies)and/or other personal information about a private account, often in an effort to direct personalised harassment to that user (for a review see Eckert and Metzger-Riftkin, 2020). In this case, the author linked the anonymous Patriot Takes account to a democratic SuperPAC and accused three men involved with the SuperPAC of being behind the firestorm. Similar accusations were levelled in a YouTube video from *TheQuartering* entitled. “Bombshell Proof The ATTACK On Joe Rogan Is Politically Funded! This Is Deeper Than Spotify!” which was similarly in the 10 most shared external URLs of the firestorm. This was accompanied by more general attacks on the firestorm as being inorganic as a result, compared to an organic movement of solidarity with Rogan.

This sentiment spilled over into the counter-firestorm with numerous users attacking SuperPAC and individuals perceived to be behind the “PatriotTakes” account:

“these three brothers have nothing better to do w their time otjer (sic) than cancel people... seems like something someone whose mommy didn’t breast feed him would do... dontcha think? Smh #ThanksJoeRogan”

“Don’t be fooled by the professional and super PAC-funded smear campaign against Joe Rogan. The companies behind the smear, @patriottakes, and @MeidasTouch, are the real villains.”

5.5 Conclusion – *Who can perform outrage?*

This chapter has explored the spread of mediated outrage through a case study of the Spotify firestorm and counter-firestorm of 2022. I argue that the firestorm is characterised by a (1) normative ambivalence, (2) a dynamic, cascading focus, that is amplified by key users and (3) a diversity of reaction and polarisation. The latter two points (2,3) served to guide my exploratory focus.

Following Marwick's model of MMNH, I illustrated how outrage spreads through key amplifiers – each of which brings their own framing of events, and networked audiences. Rather than *just* seeing the spread of firestorms as characterised by explosive displays of increasingly hostile indignation, we see how firestorm spread is also characterised by a growth in the issue space. What began as a movement driven primarily by the concerns of medical professionals over Spotify's platforming of Covid-19 misinformation, cascaded to include issues of artist compensation, and most notably the platforming of racism. Adjacent issues, such as music quality, were also pulled in as attack vectors to discredit the platform more generally. These new moral violations and attack vectors emerged as the firestorm spread through different networks, being amplified by key individuals with distinctive framings of the firestorm. These framings also illustrated different ways of rendering Spotify's moral responsibility. The initial joint letter rendered Spotify through the lens of a traditional media company, implying a corporate responsibility over platformed misinformation. This rendering shifted when Young amplified the firestorm, with him emphasising the artist in the constitution of the platform, thus extending moral responsibility to those hosting their music on Spotify. On Twitter, this was again extended to include users, encouraging a platform boycott. In the context of the boycott, this reveals a profound potential of outrage to rapidly reveal the transgressions of digital platforms and stoke energy towards movements for change.

However, also important to how outrage spreads, is that it brings a diversity of competing reactions. This was best exemplified by the counter-firestorm - which erupted as a reaction of outrage to the initial firestorm. Importantly, this counter-firestorm places a distinct challenge on this potential of outrage to rapidly reveal the transgressions of

digital platforms. Specifically, we see that the counter-firestorm operates through similar dynamics to the firestorm – it cascades to include new moral violations, opens attack-vectors, and most importantly provides a distinctive rendering of the target of outrage. In each case, this rendering centralised responsibility on the amplifiers of the firestorm. This illustrates a more generic concern with how online firestorms play out in contemporary media environments. Specifically, as to *who* can perform outrage.

In each amplification event, the firestorm was embodied through its amplifiers. These amplifiers gave face to more nebulous constructions of an outraged mob. This is interesting as Marwick (2021) and Lewis et al. (2021) use the concept of the amplifier to criticise platform harassment policies for policing only individual instances of harassment, and missing the individual(s) who amplify the harassment and “incite the mob”. As Marwick (2021) argues

“moderation that examines individual content pieces to determine whether they violate community standards may miss the forest for the trees: that is, the amplifier effect of a major network node shaming an individual, resulting in networked harassment. The Terms of Service of most websites adhere to United States laws around harassment, which presume the dyadic model of one individual repeatedly harassing another.”

What we see here is that, while this may be true for platform responses, this is not the case when a firestorm is policed by a counter-firestorm. The counter-firestorm specifically renders the mob through its amplifiers so as to discredit the movement as a whole. The amplifiers provide a personification of the mob that opens it up to attack vectors which are based on personal characteristics (such as age and gender). This frames harassment towards a specific target. Moreover, we see that the counter-firestorm also cascades to include new moral violations which the amplifier has committed – such as usage of black face, or previous homophobic remarks. Each place an inherent risk to becoming an amplifier in a high-profile firestorm, as it opens the gates for harassment provoked by a counter-firestorm.

When the doctors and health professionals were the primary amplifiers, we saw attacks based on their credibility, expertise, professions, and broader attacks on the medical sphere. When Young and Mitchel took centre stage, we saw attacks based on their previous moral violations, such as using blackface or previous homophobic statements, as well as more generalised attacks on marked characteristics such as age and gender. Finally, when accusations of racism surfaced through the anonymous Patriot Takes account, we saw efforts to doxx the accounts owners, efforts to discredit the account due to associations with democratic superPACs, as well as personal attacks.

Of-course, this policing through harassment does not manifest equally – those characteristics which are perceived as vulnerabilities by the counter-firestorm work to frame the harassment. Though the letter included a range of public health professionals, it was those deemed to be in the soft medical professions who appeared to be most targeted most frequently. Similarly, in the case of Young and Mitchell, we saw attacks based on their age, and gendered attacks directed at Joni Mitchell. Moreover, because this chapter focused specifically on public facing twitter data, any harassment done through private means on Twitter (e.g. direct messages, private accounts) or harassment done through external means that were not cross linked to Twitter (e.g. phone calls, emails) were omitted from the study. This is likely to be substantial in such a high-profile incident, and potentially more damaging than the public facing harassment.

In each case, this places an inherent constraint on who can perform outrage (Spring et al., 2018). The Spotify firestorm provides a strong example of the potential for online firestorms to instigate, positive, pro-social change – specifically so in removing misinformation and hate from Spotify, donating money to Covid victims, and holding the platform to account. Following the suggestions of Spring et al. (2018) we see that “only certain groups are ‘allowed’ to express outrage”, the policing of the firestorm places “boundary conditions on who is permitted to experience outrage” (p.1068). This policing limits access to who is permitted to access the positive potential of online firestorms to instigate change, placing an inherent risk to those who display characteristics which could be interpreted as vulnerabilities in amplifying outrage.

Chapter 6: The *Social Functions* of Outrage: A Case Study of the GameStop Short Squeeze

This chapter explores the social functions of mediated outrage through a case study of the GameStop (GME) short squeeze and Robinhood firestorm of early 2021. I start by putting the short squeeze in context, drawing connection to the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protests of 2011 and exploring some common approaches to understanding the protests which have since been reapplied to the understand the short squeeze. I note a need to study the processes by which the subreddit became a collective during the squeeze, and how this formed through the emotional flows and intensities of the squeeze and firestorm. Specifically, I note a period of outrage at the financial system evident in the early part of the squeeze, which was characterised by sentiments of euphoria and ascendancy as the price of meme stocks rose dramatically. This transitioned to a more acute period of outrage at the trading platform, Robinhood, when they decided to restrict trading. This latter period is more aptly characterised as an online firestorm.

To understand this processes of becoming a collective on r/WallStreetBets, I look to Randall Collin's (2004) work on Interaction Ritual Chains (IRCs). I situate the short squeeze and firestorm as an interaction ritual and seek to understand how the ritual formed through Reddit, what types of symbols were produced, how boundaries were drawn, and what forms of solidarity emerged. To explore this, I utilise a mixed methods approach - moving between a distant reading and close reading of the subreddit's textual and image content during the period.

I show how community emerges through the shared focus on meme stocks, and the mutual entrainment of buying said and posting screenshots on the r/WallStreetBets. Emotional energy was stored in symbolic objects, such as the targets of the outrage (e.g. "Melvin Capital", "Shitron", "🌈🐻", or later "Robinhood"), or the markers of collective identity (e.g. "autists", "retards", "retail traders"). Examining how these symbolic objects form, and what role they play, I note an interaction ritual which was deeply centred in ambivalence. Zooming out this ambivalence is evident in the very forms of ritual

stratification – that is, playing with “status” in the movement between *inclusivity* and *exclusivity*, and playing with “power” in the tensions between *decentralised* collectivity and *centralised* leadership. Zooming in, an ability to navigate this ambivalence appears essential to how the community itself forms, stratifying ritual participants based on cultural knowledge.

6.1 From Occupy Wall Street to the GameStop short squeeze

Strong parallels have been drawn between the GameStop (GME) short squeeze and the OWS movement of 2011. Indeed, there are ostensibly many similarities - both are movements which clearly demarcate the boundaries between the “everyday person” and “the establishment”, problematising the extraordinary financial control and power located in large corporations and hedge funds. Some went as far as to call the surge “Occupy Wallstreet 2.0” (Evans, 2021). Though such parallels are certainly evident, they have rightly been challenged in recent literature surrounding the short squeeze. Vaughan et al. (2023) note the abundance of literature following OWS which praised “discursive and technological-openness” of the movement, so characterised by open-ended-imaginings of collectivity such as the “we are the 99%” which formed through “horizontal” communication structures on Twitter.

One influential approach to understanding OWS can be found in Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) “connective action” model. This has since gone on to inform much of the recent work on the short squeeze. Connective action situates a focus on the processes by which movement identities form through personalised engagement and self-organised networks, rather than through defined collective identities or rigid boundary demarcation. Vaughan et al. (2023) draw from this model in their analysis of the short squeeze, and argue that though it is consistent in some regards there are also quite distinctive challenges namely;

“Connective action is a model premised on discursive and technological openness, where personal action frames cascade across technological layers to both mobilise participation and shape public discourse. In the GameStop short squeeze, we observe a different

dynamic, where platforms establish boundaries as well as brokerage points.”

This was evident in the “disconnect” between platforms which emerged during the squeeze - in Reddit emerging as a platform for mobilisation characterised by exclusivity and cultural boundaries, and Twitter emerging as a more culturally “open” platform which more simply observing and politicising the events. They argue that we should instead consider such “disconnected action” which emerges through the tensions between “platformisation” and “connective action”.

Gregersen and Ørmen (2023) similarly draw from work on “connective action” in their analysis of the short squeeze. However rather than positioning the squeeze in contention with the work, they relate it to existing work on “collectivised individual action” to comment on the motivations of users. Specifically, they argue that it illustrates an episode of “*individual action performed primarily for apolitical and personal gains* which is only subsequently brought into a frame that charges these with explicit political collective meaning” (p.13, emphasis in original). This comments on the fact that individual actions (e.g. buying stocks) are ascribed collective moral significance after the fact, but are motivated by self-interest in the moment.

Both works provide an interesting perspective on the short squeeze, however there is also a sense that there was a certain process of becoming a collective (cf. Kavada, 2015). This process may be more closely aligned to “collective action” rather than “connective action”. That is the subreddit was engaged in processes of boundary work, symbolic production and collective identification. This in turn intersects with the shared actions (e.g. purchasing stocks), and entrainment of emotional performances (e.g. the elation of the movements success, or the outrage at Robinhood’s restrictions). That is, we see a need to ask questions of what symbolic materials (e.g. memes, collective identities, movement leaders) were prevalent during the squeeze, how these produced distinctive forms of solidarity and shaped collective financial protest.

Such questions are pertinent, as the movement was characterised not just by a dynamic of righteous mobilisation and euphoria as the “meme stocks” skyrocketed in value, but also a distinctive sense of injustice, indignation and resistance as challenges emerged and the socks values fell. While the entire squeeze could be viewed through a broader “injustice frame” which moralises the struggle of Reddit users against “big finance” (see Gregersen and Ørmen, 2023), there was also a more acute period of moral outrage provoked by a specific injustice. Much of the trading was done through a commission-free stock trading app called Robinhood. The app, taking its namesake from a saga about forced wealth distribution from the rich to the poor, appeared as a way of empowering retail investors – of putting them on the same playing field as “big finance”. However, on the 28th of January, at the height of GME’s price, Robinhood restricted trading on a range of “meme stocks” (Janda, 2021). This provoked a visceral reaction of outrage towards the trading platform – what was before a key tool in actualising financial protest was now seen to be in direct connection with big finance. The restrictions also instigated a sharp decline in the price of “meme stocks”, of which many Redditors now held significant investments in. Whereas the initial surge seemed to be characterised by a certain euphoria and ascendancy, Robinhood’s actions sparked an overlapping sentiment of indignation and resistance.

To understand this processes of becoming a collective on Reddit, and how such dynamics may intersect with emotional energies, I look to Randall Collin’s (2004) work on *Interaction Ritual Chains* (IRCs).

6.2 Interaction Ritual Chains

For Collin’s interaction rituals are moments of mutually shared emotion and attention, through which feelings of group membership, solidarity, symbols, and shared morality are produced (Collins, 2004; p. 42). These can involve anything from routine and strictly organised activities, such as going to a church service or a sporting event, to more spontaneous and ephemeral events such as protests. These can also occur on very small scale (such as a smoking rituals) to a very large scale (such as mass protests). As such, interaction rituals are key avenues by which small or large social groupings are

constructed and differentiated from one another. Rituals here quite simply refer to any event in which multiple individuals are co-present and display a shared focus of attention.

Importantly, these interaction rituals do not exist in isolation from one another - they instead exist in a chain whereby the outcomes of previous rituals go on to inform subsequent rituals. This means that the ingredients of rituals (such as “barriers to outsiders”) can themselves be shaped by or exist as previous outcomes (such as “group symbols”). Moreover, an interaction ritual does not assume a “cohesive” whole is produced – but rather is centred in stratification. This occurs both between those “inside” the ritual and “outside” the ritual (i.e. intergroup stratification), but also between those within the ritual (i.e. intragroup stratification). Within the ritual individuals are stratified according to access and power. Access refers to one’s possession of the cultural repertoires to “feel” the energy of the group – someone for example, with no prior interest in sports may still be caught up in the emotion of a team’s chant, but they feel something quite different to those individuals who have been lifelong members of the club. Power refers to one’s control over the ritual – some individuals may be afforded greater control over the focus or movement of a ritual, such as a leader or key figure. In each case the access to the ritual “outcomes” as well as control over the ritual “ingredients” have the potential for stratified distribution.

6.2.1 Interaction rituals and digital media

The short squeeze and associated reaction to Robinhood’s trading restrictions immediately seems to map on to these dynamics quite closely – we see a mutual focus of attention in the purchasing of meme stocks and subsequent indignation at Robinhood, a salience of emotion in the euphoria of the squeeze and outrage at the restrictions, and through these ingredients the production of “sacred” objects, whether that be the meme stocks themselves (e.g. GME, AMC, BB), the trading platform (e.g. Robinhood), or markers of collective identity (e.g. apes, redditors, retards). The notable omission, however, is the absence of physical copresence.

Physical copresence was essential to Collin's theory. He situated our ability to read another's physical expressions of emotion, and from this "understand" what they are feeling, as the primary mechanism by which our emotions can come in sync and display an intersubjective character. In recent writings, Collins (2020) argues that "mediated" interaction rituals, which occur on social media platforms, produce less emotional energy and feelings of subjectivity than in-person rituals. As such, the symbols, moralities, and feelings of belonging, which are produced during the ritual result in a lower degree of salience.

While I disagree with this assertion, my aim is not to "measure" the emotional intensity of the short squeeze, or the salience of sacred objects and make claims of their relative "strength" when compared to an in-person ritual. Rather, I aim to explore how platforms may shape how interaction rituals are performed, and what types of symbols and moralities are produced. This may seem like a stretch given the centrality of physical copresence, but as Johannessen (2023) highlights "all forms of interaction can be said to be 'technology-mediated' in the sense of being intertwined with mundane devices, artifacts, and objects" (p.10). Both earlier and contemporary studies of interaction rituals include direct discussion of "technologies of mediation", despite this not being a central theoretical focus. This includes, for example, the discussion of "barriers" to participation as the physical characteristics of a building, such as the walls of a stadium or the doors of a nightclub. Recent work has explored such features - how stadium designs influence the atmosphere of a football match (Hill et al., 2022), or the influence of theatrical environment on the emotions of a music festival (Xie and Li, 2023), (for a review, see Johannessen, 2023).

From this perspective, moving from "physical copresence" to "mediated copresence" in interaction rituals is quite simply a recognition of the centrality of technologies of mediation. In other words, it involves including an analytical focus on how platforms allow for certain types of emotional performance, shared focus, and emotional entrainment and how these may in turn shape and inform the outcomes of interaction rituals. Considerable work has already been done in this regard. For example, several

authors have explored interaction rituals on livestreaming sites such as Twitch TV and YouTube (see Jodén and Strandell, 2022; Osler, 2024). These sites appear mediate copresence quite closely, insofar as they show live events in which one can see the text or emoji-based reactions and responses of other participants in real time. Though as Vandenberg (2022) highlights they can suffer from issues of “context collapse, social convergence, and no rhythmic entrainment” (p. 425). Others have applied Collins work to less “real-time” platforms such as anorexia forums (Maloney, 2012), or the white-power forum Storm Front (Törnberg and Törnberg, 2022). Here we generally see ethnographic or text-based methods of analysis used to uncover the ways in which language is used to foster community formation, and a sense of belonging, over a longer period of time. In these cases we may understand copresence in terms of “perception” rather than “actuality” – that is, situations where there is a subjective sense of copresence, or a “belief” that one is in mutual entrainment with another actor (see also Campos-Castillo and Hitlin, 2013).

6.2.2 *Interaction rituals on r/WallStreetBets*

Reddit is a platform of communities, in which users can engage in various topical discussions. Individual communities are called “subreddits”, and generally have a distinctive topic of focus, as well as internal cultural norms, posting styles and community run moderation teams. A post may include text, images, videos, or links to external sites. The visibility of these posts is negotiated by the community - users may “up-vote” or “down-vote” another’s post, giving the post an overall score. This “score” is used to determine the visibility of the post. The short squeeze occurred primarily on the subreddit r/WallStreetBets. This subreddit, which describes itself as if “4chan found a Bloomberg Terminal”, is a community which discusses speculative, high-risk stock trading. This is often through a frame of “gambling” rather than “investing”.

Here we can see a screenshot of the r/WallStreetBets web interface during the firestorm (January 31st, 2021), retrieved using the WaybackMachine Internet Archive (web.archive.org):

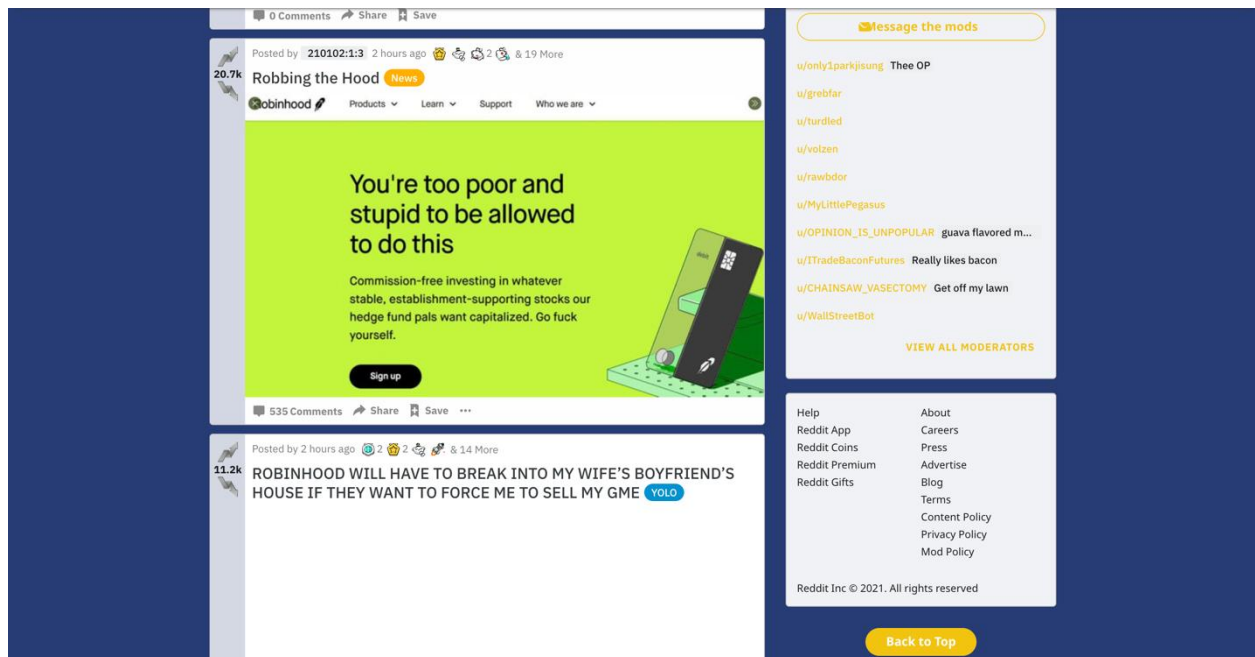


Figure 17 Snapshot of r/WallStreetBets during the firestorm

This gives us a snapshot of what how we might understand the short squeeze as an interaction ritual. We can see various elements of interest. Most prominent is the post content, which we can see here is an edited image of the Robinhood website. Though we only see image content here, post content may also appear in the form of links to other websites, videos, or text. Second, we see the posts title, which serves the purpose of complementing or contextualising the content of the post. Third, we see the post score or the or it's sum of up-votes minus down-votes. This score serves as an indication of how resonant and visible a post is within the community. There are several other objects which could be of interest, such as comments, moderators, post awards, or flairs, however I chose to focus specifically on the title, score, and content in this chapter. Operationalising the interaction ritual in this way assumed that participation involved “posting” on the subreddit, or “voting” on content. It also situated co-presence and mutual entrainment are things that users imagine. This co-presence is perceived but may not exclusively be tied to the “here and now” (i.e. I feel that others are experiencing the same emotion as me right now), but also the immediate past (i.e. I feel that whoever posted this, or whoever upvoted this, was feeling this way when they did so).

I collected a dataset using the Pushshift API (Baumgartner et al., 2020) containing all posts on r/WallStreetBets for one week prior to, and one week post Robinhood’s trading restrictions (20/01/2021 – 05/02/2021). This resulted in a total of 659,537 posts. This dataset only included post content (e.g. post title, post body text, post links), and post metadata (e.g. post score, comment counts, time posted).

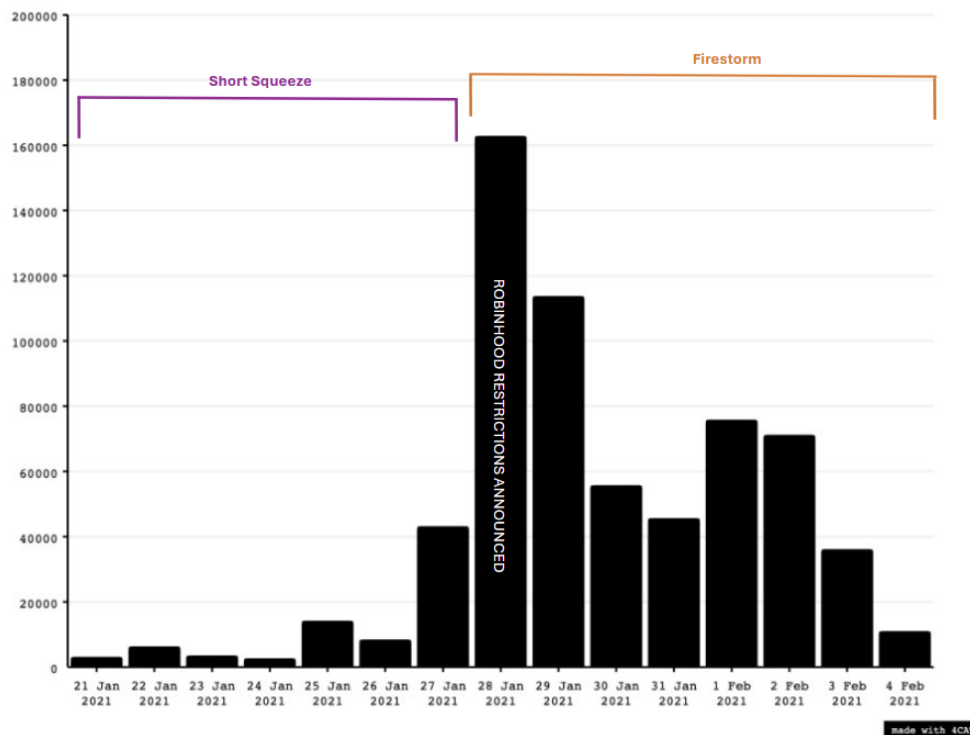


Figure 18 Post frequency on r/WallStreetBets during the firestorm and short squeeze

This histogram (Figure 18) shows the posting volume per day on the subreddit. There was a significant spike in posting volume on the 28th of January, which coincided directly with Robinhood’s announcement to restrict trading. We can see these periods as the “short squeeze” and “firestorm”, respectively. The “short squeeze” captures the period of euphoric ascendancy of the stocks, when r/WallStreetBets users were beating the hedge funds, while the “firestorm” captures the acute period of outrage directed at Robinhood for restricting trades and various efforts to “hold” the stocks.

Reddit allows for numerous types of content to be posted, and individual subreddits each come with community norms or rules as to what is allowed or expected. The

“r/WorldNews” subreddit, for example, only allows for external links to news sites to be posted, while the “r/AmltheAsshole” subreddit only allows for self (text) posts. We would therefore see quite different types of interaction rituals in each subreddit, despite them being on the same platform. To get a sense of posting on r/WallStreetBets, I collected the cumulative upvotes for each post type – this includes the domain of any external sites that were linked to.

URL	Total score
Reddit Image post	10999119
Reddit Video post	1460567
Reddit Self (text) post	589679
twitter.com	156366
www.unilad.co.uk	98158
www.reuters.com	77201
www.businessinsider.com	71502
news.gamestop.com	71310
www.cnbc.com	68832
i.imgur.com	66413
cdn.discordapp.com	56120
finance.yahoo.com	38270
www.youtube.com	33775
www.wsj.com	31182
www.forexlive.com	29927
deadline.com	26386

hellostake.com	25323
rick-axon.medium.com	25275
www.nasdaq.com	13148

Table 5 Cumulative score by post type, or post link

This shows that there is quite a variety of post types which gain relevance on the subreddit. News outlets feature quite prominently, along with links to other social platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Discord. Self (text) posts are especially salient, as well as image content. This is in self-hosted images (Reddit Image posts) and links to image hosting platforms (imgur.com). As such, I decided to focus on textual analysis of the post title and post “self” text (when applicable), as well as visual analysis of the post image. To ensure a manageable scope, I selected only images with ≥ 100 upvotes.

Collin’s work is particularly concerned with collective representations – that is the collective experience of emotion, and the collective production of symbolic meanings. While this can lend itself to a close reading of individual posts, we can also use methods which attempt to provide a “computational” representation of these collective phenomena. These computational methods do not substitute qualitative analysis, but instead serve as an exploratory step to guide and enhance a close reading of posts (Lindgren, 2020).

I utilised two similar approaches to achieve this – (1) visualising the word embeddings of a Word2Vec model trained on the post titles and body text using TensorFlow’s embedding projector, and (2) clustering visually similar images together and visualising this “meta-image” using PixPlot. Both methods essentially leverage computational approaches to identify similarities between individual items (whether that be words or images), and then give each item an “embedding” which places it in relation to other items in vector space (i.e. a space with lots of dimensions). These relations are then “flattened” using a layout algorithm to represent the relation between words or images in 2D or 3D space. One can then manually explore these maps of similar words or images. In each case, this can give

indication of the mutual entrainment of individual performances during the interaction ritual by identifying patterns of symbolic representation which occur in the dataset. These patterns can then be further explored using closer qualitative analysis.

Word2vec uses neural networks to learn word associations from a large corpus of text. Essentially, this involves analysing the context in which words appear, and identifying semantic similarities based on how words tend to co-occur during usage (Lindgren, 2020). This is premised on distributional semantics, which see language as having a “distributional structure”. That is, when someone uses language, they construct meaning through existing linguistic patterns that of words naturally occur together (Harris 1954; cited in Lindgren, 2020). This means that words which tend to occur in similar contexts also tend to have similar meanings. The Word2Vec model attempts to identifying these patterns by representing words as a series of numbers, or “vectors”. This allows us to understand semantic similarity between words, by examining their proximity in the model.

When applied to a corpus of reddit posts, we can begin to see how repeated usage of certain terms in similar contexts begins to form a distinctive pattern of meaning through relations with other words. Of particular interest are close associations which seem immediately unintuitive, or that deviate from a commonsense understanding. These instances may indicate points where words have formed different meanings through the interaction ritual. This is interesting in the case of r/WallStreetBets, as the subreddit is known for producing quite esoteric lingo and slang. To demonstrate this with a simple example, we can input a series of words into the Word2Vec model, and it will give us the odd one out – much like a test question in a basic reading comprehension exam. If we input the words “money”, “capital”, “cash”, and “tendies”, to our r/WallStreetBets Word2Vec model it, unintuitively, tells us that “capital” is the odd one out. This is likely because the word “tendies” had become synonymous with “money”, and “capital” may have had closer associations with key hedge funds such as “Melvin Capital”. These sorts of tests are often used to evaluate the accuracy of Word2Vec models; often against a backdrop of “commonsense” or “ground truth” understandings and associations (Arthus

and Alvero, 2020). In this context, however, we are specifically interested in such deviations from the “commonsense”, as they reveal the unique symbolic representations that emerge from community-specific interaction rituals.

While this example captures the formation of a term which is symbolic of, or synonymous with “money”, the semantic relationships captured by Word2Vec are far more varied. These relationships can, for example, include antonyms, or words that belong to a similar category. This means we cannot conclude that words in close proximity have the same meaning, but rather that there is a semantic relationship. In each case, these relationships are best explored through a “close reading”. To do this, I utilised WordTrees of these keywords of interest and individual readings of high engagement posts containing the keywords. WordTrees use a “keyword in context” (“KWIC”) technique which involves by identifying the most common words which precede and proceed a root “keyword” (Wattenberg and Viégas, 2008). As such, we more closely explore commonly repeated phrases which contain the root word, illuminating patterns of expression in the ritual. I further complemented this “close reading” with a qualitative analysis of individual posts which contained the keywords of interest. In this way Word2vec model was utilised for a “distant reading” of corpus, which I guided our “closer reading” of individual terms and posts (Lindgren, 2020).

To explore the images in the sample, I first downloaded all images in the dataset that had received more than 100 upvotes. This resulted in a sample of 2,973 images. I then ran these through PixPlot’s pipeline. This first utilises the pre-trained GoogleLeNet Inception model (Szegedy et al., 2015) to extract features from each image. Images are then given vector representations based on the features extracted. PixPlot then flattens this vectors space into a two-dimensional map of images. This is displayed using a web-based interface, which displays all the images together, clustering together those which are similar.

The general approach here was quite similar to the text analysis – moving between “distant reading” and “close reading”. PixPlot allows one to move between these types

of analysis quite easily – we can “zoom-in” on areas of interest and conduct a closer reading in the application. This is a technique known as “meta-picturing” in which the collection arranged in such a way that allows us to move between distant reading and close reading (Rogers, 2021). In this way, meta picturing allows us to move between visualisation and visual analysis – it arranges images in such a way that communicates ideas through distant reading, but also retains these images, allowing us to zoom in and conduct more classical visual analysis.

While I have separated the “distant reading” and “close reading” into two separate sections for clarity (i.e. “semantic mapping and image clustering” and “ritualised ambivalence”, respectively), in practice this involved iterating between each.

6.3 Semantic mapping and Image Clustering

6.3.1 Semantic mapping with Word2Vec



Figure 19 Full projection of the Word2Vec model using TensorFlow's embedding projector, UMAP algorithm with neighbours set to 15 (default)

Figure 19 shows a full projection of the Word2Vec model. Words which cluster together tend to display semantic similarity in the corpus. While this is useful for building a general picture of the ritual, what we are really concerned with is identifying specific words of interest which become charged with meaning during the ritual. This is difficult to achieve without a measure of terms significance or resonance in the community. To give a guide of prominence, and allow the embeddings can be meaningfully explored, I also developed a WordCloud based total word occurrences in either post titles or post body text.

(traders/investors). Each posit quite a different understanding of who the ritual participants are.



Figure 21 Closest terms to “retards” in the embedding projection. Only the 100 closest terms are visible. Colour indicates semantic proximity to “retards”

Nearest points in the original space:	
autists	0.118
degenerates	0.139
tards	0.160
idiots	0.229
apes	0.260
degens	0.305
warriors	0.334
monkeys	0.344
astronauts	0.349
morons	0.349
guys	0.365
folks	0.401
fucktards	0.406
bastards	0.406
bitches	0.414
motherfuckers	0.428
cunts	0.453
fuckers	0.455
comrades	0.456
americans	0.457
pussies	0.458

Figure 22 Closest words to “retards” in the model based on cosine similarities. Lower numbers indicate closer proximity and therefore suggest semantic similarity

Exploring “retards” on the embedding projector shows very close proximity to terms such as “autists”, “degenerates”, and “tards” suggesting that they may be used interchangeably (Figure 21, Figure 22). There is also a clear gendered component evident in many of the connections in Figure 21, with “guys”, “bois”, “lads”, “bros”, “fellas”, or “dudes”. While many close points appear to have viscerally negative connotations such as “motherfuckers”, “bastards” or “cunts”, there is also a more direct endearment and sense of comradery evident many of the terms, most directly in “comrades” but also “warriors”, “soldiers” or “kings”.

traders	0.363
investor	0.515
buyers	0.687
shareholders	0.765
users	0.774
people	0.776
individuals	0.781
trader	0.801
institutions	0.834
locations	0.845
longs	0.860
customers	0.861
mania	0.868
retailers	0.875
holders	0.881
whales	0.887
players	0.889
owners	0.892
redditors	0.900
boomers	0.909
folks	0.920
Asadine	0.920

**Figure 26 Closest words to
“Investors”**

amc	0.257
bb	0.342
nok	0.342
gmc	0.413
cashapp	0.423
gamestop	0.427
nakd	0.446
1k	0.486
shares	0.489
250	0.490
gmeamc	0.499
20k	0.502
10k	0.506
2k	0.515
5k	0.522
150	0.527
dip	0.527
koss	0.530
revolut	0.532
10000	0.533
rh	0.535

**Figure 24 Closest words to
“GME”**

d1	0.370
sac	0.387
shitron	0.442
point72	0.447
melvins	0.476
citadel	0.480
citron	0.486
gabe	0.488
hf	0.491
griffin	0.494
hedgies	0.554
plotkin	0.558
hedgefunds	0.560
ken	0.565
🌈🐼	0.573
mm	0.583
hedges	0.587
hfs	0.598
venture	0.603
shorts	0.606
steve	0.617

**Figure 25 Closest words to
“Melvin”**

dfv	0.173
udeepfuckingvalue	0.201
lord	0.329
king	0.393
himself	0.424
viking	0.437
savior	0.438
hero	0.441
legend	0.443
keith	0.451
chamath	0.463
uncle	0.476
elon	0.477
roaring	0.479
mr	0.484
burry	0.489
chen	0.494
papa	0.509
rwallstreetbets	0.510
kitty	0.512
trump	0.513

**Figure 23 Closest words to
“DeepFuckingValue”**

In contrast to the “retards” we see that the “investors” are more closely associated with more traditional financial language, and more open-ended imaginations - “traders”, “individuals”, “people” (Figure 26). There is a notable absence of the more exclusionary markers here, yet there is still a strong sense of the reddit community at play – in the reference to “redditors”, but also the more generic “users”. The contrast here seems to be between the “investors” and the “institutions”, “whales”, and “boomers”.

“Melvin” (Figure 25) shows us the key antagonists of the squeeze, notably hedge funds who held a substantial short position - “d1” (D1 Capital Partners), “citadel” (Citadel and their CEO Ken Griffith), “point72” (Point72 Asset Management) – as well the investment research firm “citron” (Citron Research). We can also begin to see the emergence of culturally specific language to represent these antagonists here, most clearly in “shitron” but also “hedgies” or the “” (Gay bears). The latter, “gay bears” was used to disparage those who were “bearish” (betting that the stocks would go down) during the squeeze.

“GME” (Figure 24) shows other stock tickers which were central in the squeeze such as “AMC”, “BB”, and “NOK”. Closely associated to these are figures such as “10k”, “5k”, “2k” which likely represented common investment amounts. This sheds light on the shared focus of the squeeze. Specifically, on common symbols (stock tickers) and common actions (investing specified amounts), which works to foster collectivity and feelings of unity amongst the participants.

“DeepFuckingValue” or “DFV” (Figure 23) was a user that arose to prominence during the short squeeze, as a sort of leader of the movement leader. He was one of the first users to post his GME investment on the subreddit, sharing a screenshot of his \$54,000 investment in GME a year before the eventual squeeze (Popper and Browning, 2021). We see here that his name closely associated with terms of almost hyperbolic subservience – “lord”, “savior”, “viking”, “hero”, “legend”. He is similarly close to other masculine hyper-capitalist figures, such as Elon Musk, Donald Trump, Chamath Palihapitiya (a

Canadian venture capitalist), and Michael Burry (an American hedge manager known for shorting the housing market before the Global Financial Crisis).

6.3.2 Image Clustering with PixPlot

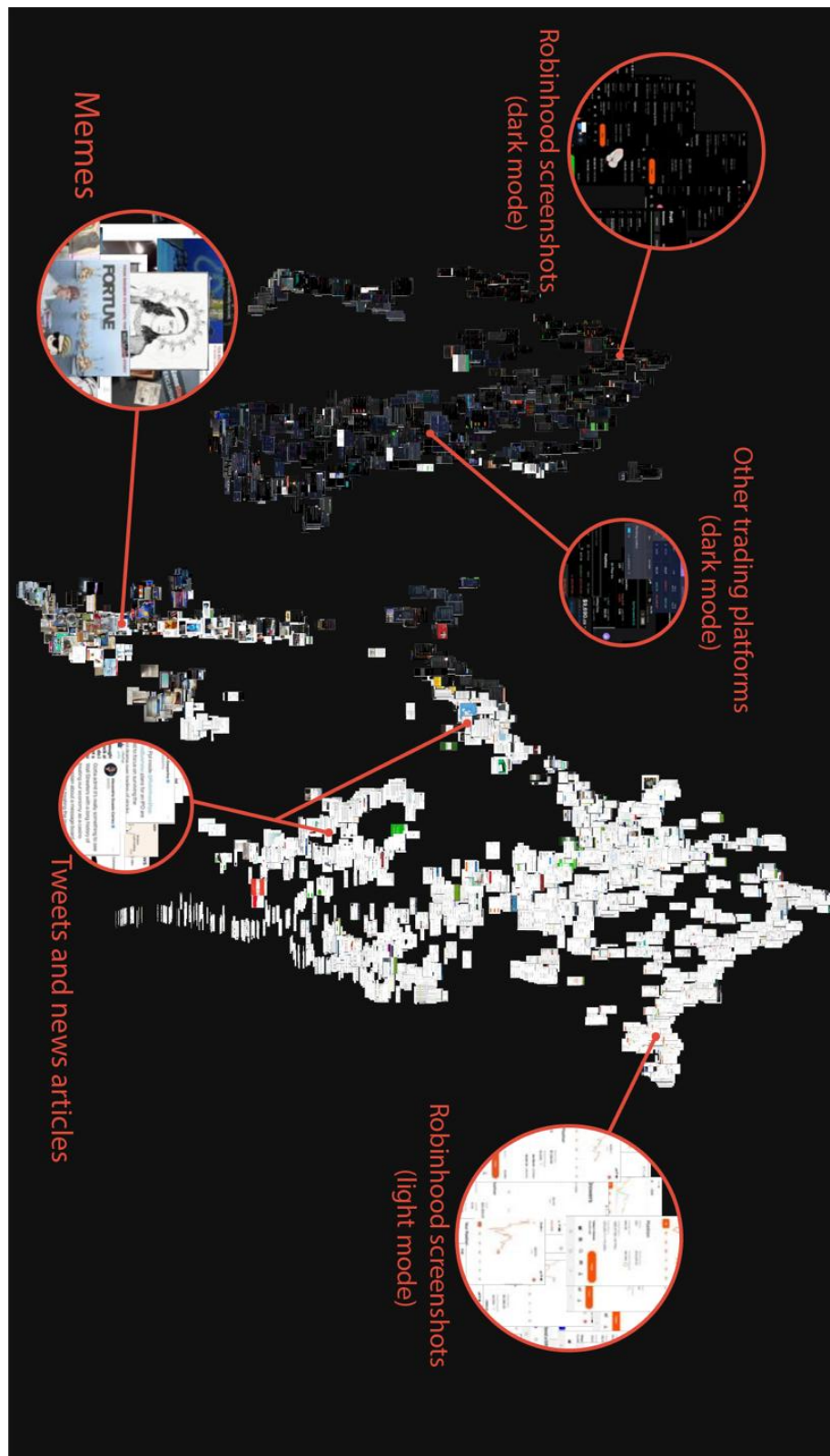


Figure 27 Annotated PixPlot of images posted on the subreddit. Only images with ≥ 100 upvotes included.

The most immediate pattern visible in the PixPlot is a stark contrast between dark and light clusters. This contrast between dark and light represents a difference between “dark mode” and “light mode” being used on user devices. What this shows more generally is an overwhelming prevalence of *platform screenshots* as a way of performing the ritual. Most prominent are screenshots of the Robinhood interface, however also evident are other trading apps. There is quite extensive overlap between these images – e.g. the Robinhood cluster also contains screenshots of other apps – but we can still see some general patterns emerge. The starkest contrast is between screenshots of mobile trading interface (which seem dominant) and other trading platforms, which are often visible as thin horizontal bands indicating they were screenshots of a desktop interface. In each case, we see that there is a clear mutual focus of action here – in purchasing stocks, and performing that purchase to the subreddit.

We also see an abundance of screenshots of external platforms. Most notable are Twitter screenshots - particularly of tweets from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), Elon Musk, Ted Cruz, and other key figures. Clustered with these tweets are various news articles, most of which appear to cover the short squeeze in some respect, and have often been manually highlighted or annotated by the poster.

The “meme cluster” in the PixPlot shows those images which are not direct screenshots of other interfaces. This of course is not to say that we would not consider platform screenshots to be “memes” – indeed the stocks themselves have since been called “meme stocks” - but rather that this cluster images appear to be largely user generated or of more “traditional” meme formats. Especially common here are various images of the user DFV. These often display him as a heroic god-like figure, or (in direct contrast) playfully poke fun at his mundanity. Also, images of key symbolic identities of the ritual such as the “apes”, or various memes which mention the “autists”, “retail traders” or “degenerates”.

6.3.3 Key takeaways

In this distant reading, we can begin to see the mutual entrainment of purchasing - of “performing the squeeze”. Clusters of trading app screenshots are visible from a distant reading – practically so in the stark contrast between “light-mode” and “dark-mode” images. The repetition and clustering of these screenshots begins to show the ritualistic aspect of purchasing – that is, it is not just about an individual’s purchase of the stock, but the sharing and synchronisation of this purchasing with others. Following Collins (2004, p. 82), we can see this purchasing then as a collective action, akin to “clapping, cheering, or booing” in a traditional interaction ritual. As such, it may provide a “momentary sense of solidarity” amongst participants, a feeling that the action they are partaking in binds them with some imagined group or other. In the text analysis we see the predominance of stock tickers (GME, AMC, BB), which appear both mutual objects of focus, and mutual points of action. Following Collins, these may serve as “a symbol that can prolong the sense of the experience”, as they become “charged” with the effervescence of the crowd. While the community emerges in moments of high intensity, what binds them together, and prolongs these feelings are shared symbols which they focus on. Melvin Capital, and the other key hedge funds emerge as functionally similar symbols, though ones which are imbued with a more direct antagonism. Here we see the emergence of more vernacular symbolic language used to capture such antagonisms, such as “shitron” or “ ”.

Most interesting, however, is that we see an abundance of self-referential symbols which seem to imagine, or give face, to the community itself. Whereas symbols such as “GME” or “AMC” may invoke feelings of group solidarity due to being a primary point of mutual focus, markers such as “autists” and “retail traders” serve as direct ways of imagining the community. In each case, these are charged with a certain solidarity but appear to imagine “who” this community is in vastly quite different ways. Most prominent are the more esoteric and exclusionary markers of “autists”, “retards”, and “degenerates” which show strong semantic similarity. However, also relevant are the more open-ended markers of “retail investors”, “retail traders”, or even “people”, which are more closely

associated with “commonsense” financial language, being juxtaposed with the “institutional” investor. These generally seem to be associated with a sense of amateur, or unsophisticated understanding. Here we see a certain ambivalence emerge between the exclusivity of the movement and inclusivity of the movement.

We also see terms such as “apes” showing very close proximity to the more vernacular, exclusive terms. However, it does not immediately appear to be imbued with the same toxicity. Rather, it seems to invoke a sense of radical decentralisation, absence of individual power, and collectivisation. This contrasts with mentions of the user DFV who emerged as a central leader in the movement, which users seem to follow with a hyperbolic subservience – associating him with “god”, “savior”, or “lord”. Here we see a certain ambivalence emerge between the centralisation and decentralisation of the movements leadership.

These contradictions which emerge – between exclusivity and inclusivity and between centralisation and decentralisation – follow closely with Phillips and Milner’s (2017) writing on the Ambivalent Internet. Many online cultures, they argue, are characterised by an ambivalence – they are “simultaneously antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed... 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” (p. 10). “Ambivalence” here does not mean simply mean an indifference or absence of stance, but rather the tensions that emerge in the multiplicity of meaning. That is, they enact both things at once, rather than neither at all.

This multiplicity of meaning seems difficult to figure when considering shared points of attention, and collective representations as an analytical focus. However, Collin’s positioning of the interaction ritual as a stratified process aligns closely with this multiplicity. Collin’s argues that interaction rituals are generally stratified in terms of two key dimensions: *power* – i.e. who has control in a ritual? - and *status* – i.e. who has access to the ritual? (p. 347-348). Reflecting on the ambivalences then, we see that it is precisely

these dimensions which seem to have multiple conflicting meanings in the ritual: Is the access strictly exclusive to those within the r/WallStreetBets vernacular, or is it inclusive of the “retail traders” in a fight against big finance? Is the control strictly decentralised in totalising imaginations of the “ape” or is it centralised in the subservience to DFV, and other idols of capital accumulation.

The following sections will explore the ambivalence of these identities more closely, first focusing on the movement between *exclusion* and *inclusion*, and then on those between *decentralisation* and *centralisation*. As we will see, ambivalence serve as a useful frame for understanding both these broader contradictions, as well as the more specific tensions which emerge in each individual marker of identity. That is, following Phillips and Milner we can follow ambivalence “all the way down” (p. 202).

6.4 Identities of exclusion vs identities of inclusion

6.4.1 Setting boundaries for mobilisation “autists”, “retards”, “degenerates”

Collective identity resides in the formation of a common “one-ness” or “we-ness” which allows for the identification of the self as part of a broader whole (Snow, 2001). The development of a shared affinity naturally develops through differentiation with an “other” or “others”, often building on an “us” versus “them” dynamic (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). A key component of Collin’s interaction ritual chain are the barriers to entry which demarcate those “inside” and “outside” the ritual. This sometimes takes the form of physical barriers, such as the gates of a sports stadium or the walls of a church, but can also take the form of cultural or symbolic barriers to entry. Collective identity, in this way, can serve as a useful resource to both facilitate feelings of belonging, but also provide necessary points of exclusion to demarcate the boundaries of the group participating in the ritual.

In the case of OWS, Kavada (2015) highlights that the opened-ended imaginations of collectivity enabled anyone to join the fight against the ‘1%’. This particularly came in the form of the slogan “we are the 99%”. This is imbued with an explicit inclusivity - it

encompasses anyone who is not part of the financial elite, regardless of their individual characteristics. She posits that this inclusivity was directly related to the organisational capacities of digital media, arguing “that social media tended to blur the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the movement in a way that suited its values of inclusiveness and direct participation” (p. 872). The “other” here, are the 1% - the financial elite who were seen as the primary benefactors and perpetrators of economic injustice.

The short squeeze similarly appeared to mobilise against this “1%”, in its targeting of hedge funds, “big finance”, and general anti-elite sentiment. Indeed, from a design perspective Reddit, displays similar organisational capacities which would allow for “inclusiveness” and “direct participation”. However, the usage of “autists”, “retards”, and “degenerates”, as markers of collectively seem to be antithetical to these ideals. Moreover, their close proximity to almost exclusively masculine markers suggests that this language reinforces a narrow, exclusionary form of group identity. However, examining how these terms are used we see a degree of complexity.

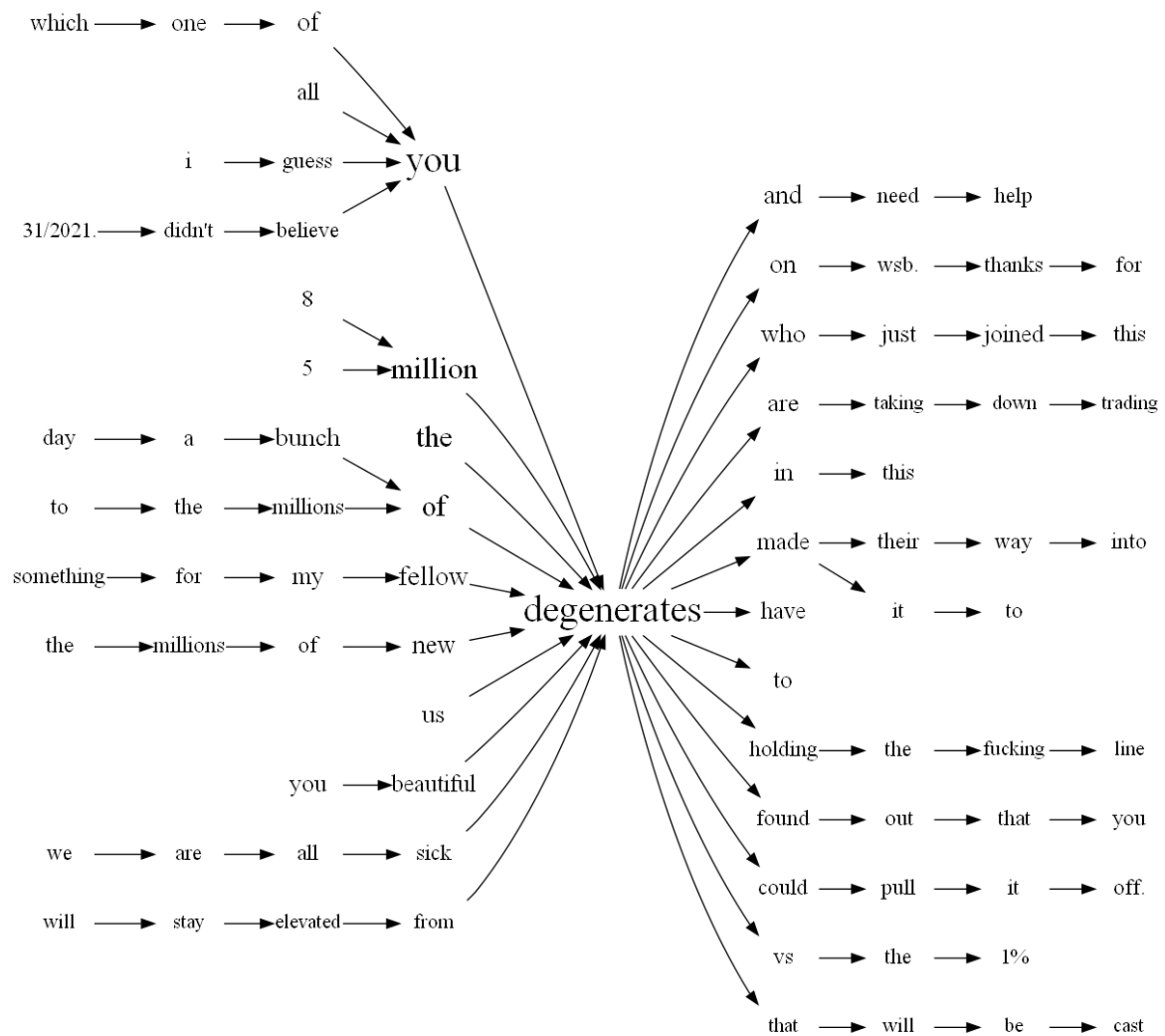


Figure 28 WordTree of “degenerates”

In this WordTree of the term “degenerates” (Figure 28) we see an endearment in the terms usage – “you beautiful degenerates”, “my fellow degenerates”. But also, a sense of elation and mobilisation against the financial elite – “degenerates could pull it off”, “degenerates vs the 1%”.

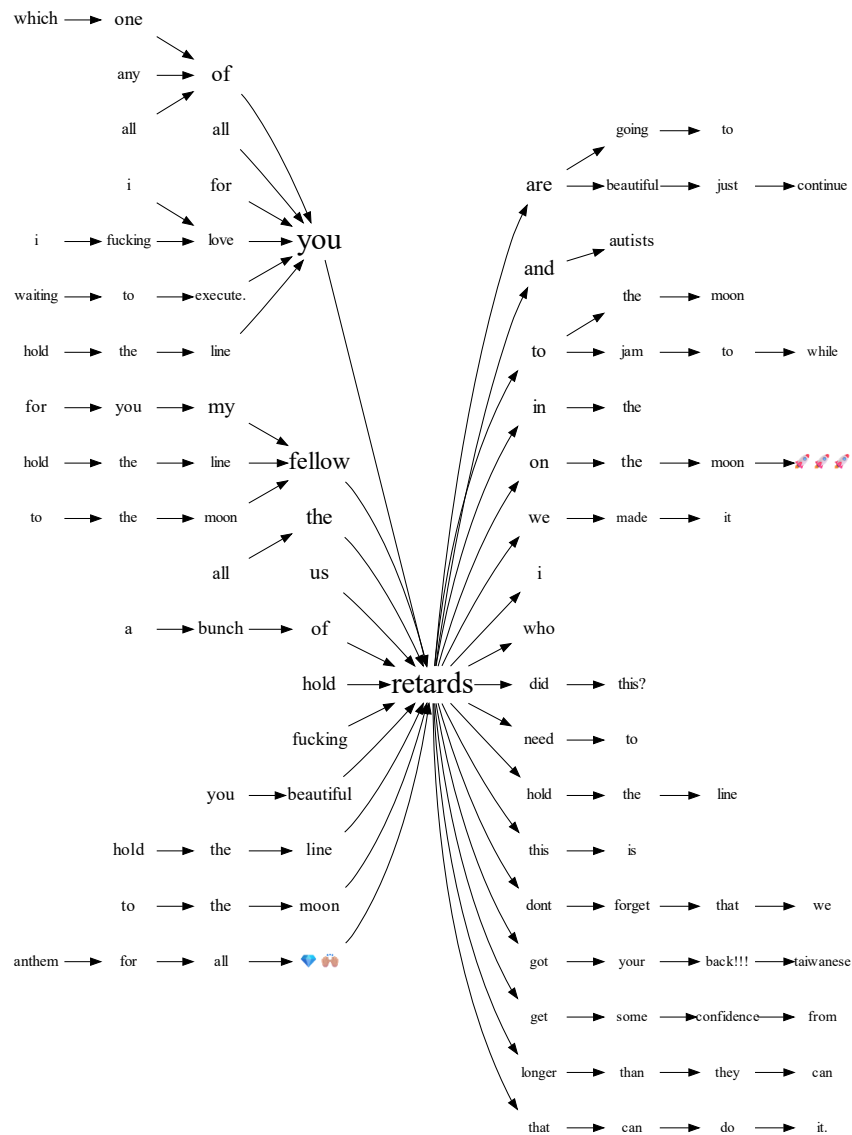


Figure 29 WordTree of “retards”

“Retards” follows a similar sentiment – “you beautiful retards”, “retards on the moon 🚀 🚀 🚀”. In the Word2vec analysis (Figure 5.5) we saw that “retards”, “degenerate” and “autist” – appeared to cluster together in the Word2Vec model, suggesting a degree of semantic similarity. With this closer reading of their usage in context, we see that the semantic relationship captured is synonymy. That is, the terms are used largely interchangeably to describe participants of the short squeeze. This self-reference is clearly evident in the phrases “us retards” or “fellow retards”.

The markers of identity capture both a sense of endearment but also toxicity, but also an absence of power and sense of power. By “flipping” the meaning of each from being explicitly ableist or toxic, to playful terms of endearment which represent the community, places a distinctive cultural barrier to entry on the ritual. Correct usage of the terms signals group membership and fosters solidarity among participants. This is of course not to say that the terms are stripped of toxicity, but rather that they require one to tolerate and understand this toxicity to be part of the movement. Moreover, these terms to invoke a sense of amateur understanding, and absence of individual power. That is, they seem to be used as almost endearing attacks on themselves. This contrast between the “retards”, “degenerates” and “autists” of the subreddit against the professionalism and power of the financial establishment, works in turn then to ridicule “1%” in the movements success. In this way, the terms convey a sense of collective power in their “underdog” status.

Importantly, these identity markers are not new to the subreddit – they do not emerge solely in the short squeeze. Such terms had been used extensively on the subreddit for years prior to the squeeze (Kawa, 2020). In this way, they operate as pre-existing symbolic identifiers which work to construct cultural boundaries for the movement. This illustrates the importance of understanding interaction rituals as chained – where the boundaries for ritual participation can be achieved through the outcomes of past rituals. These markers instil an element of exclusivity to the movement which is sustained by deliberately offensive practice. There is an “othering” both of the financial establishment, as well as those who are “outside of the vernacular”. Rather than fostering a sense of inclusivity, these markers deliberately place cultural and gendered boundaries on participation.

These boundaries define a sort of space for ritual participation. The need for such work is reinforced by the rapid growth of the subreddit during the squeeze - the subreddit increased its subscribers by 7 million in just two weeks, from 1.8 million on the 18th of January to 9 million on the 3rd of February (RedditCharts, 2024). This is not to mention the associated increases in non-subscribing participants, or general “lurkers” who view and

upvote content but do not post. These users are drawn to the subreddit both internally, due to the subreddit's posts featuring prominently on Reddit's "r/all" (which aggregates the top posts from subreddits), and externally, through media coverage of the events and discussion on other platforms. In this way, these cultural boundaries serve as a way of maintaining the exclusivity of the movement in spite of Reddit's "open-ended" affordances and increased visibility.

6.4.2 Identities of injustice "retail traders"

In their study of the short squeeze, Vaughan et al. (2023) make a similar argument with these more "exclusive" terms. They argue that such "insider language" of r/WallStreetBets worked to ensure the movement was "deliberately not inclusive for a wider public audience" (p.3). Comparing this with Twitter discussions of the events, they argue that Twitter fostered a more "inclusive" rendering of the events, but one which was focused primarily on spectating the actions of r/WallStreetBets rather than participating. These cross-platform dynamics, they argue represent a disconnect between platforms –

"the affordances of building strong group membership on Reddit by emphasising social boundaries, and the affordances of assembling transient weak-tie networks on Twitter, appeared to create disconnected zones of discourse, one focused on action-coordination separated from the other focused on interpretation and reaction... The contentious action itself takes place on one platform (Robinhood), action coordination happens on a second platform (Reddit) and political claim-making is reconstructed in a dissonant fashion by a periphery of other platformed spaces for discussion (such as Twitter and digital news)" (p.19, emphasis added).

The prevalence of Twitter screenshots in the meta image (Figure 27), adds a degree of complexity to this "disconnect" between platforms. This is not to contradict their argument, but rather suggest that the dynamics of "interpretation and reaction" were not one-way (Twitter observing Reddit), but bi-directional. This means that Reddit users too engaged in a form of "political claim-making" but one which was in part achieved through the selective amplification of Twitter messages.

Moreover, while “autists”, “degenerates” and “retards” appeared as especially common markers of identity throughout both the short squeeze and the outrage, we saw usage of the “retail investor/trader” surge in usage after Robinhood’s announcement (see Figure 30).

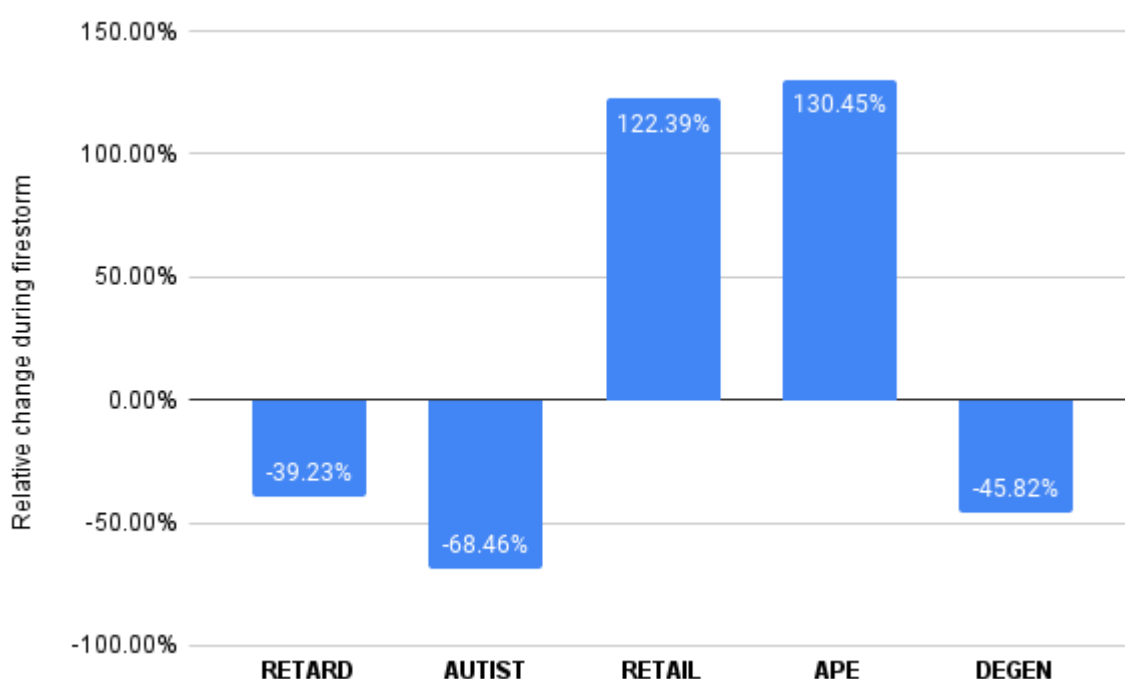


Figure 30 Relative change in term usage during the firestorm (compared to the short squeeze the week prior)

In comparison to the more vernacular markers of identity, the “retail investor/trader” appears as more deliberately inclusive. They still draw explicit boundaries – namely, between the everyday, individual investor, and the institutional investor – however they do not emerge from an exclusive cultural vernacular. Rather, in terms of inclusivity, they appear closer to OWS’s imaginations of the “99%”.

At the least, this suggests a dynamic interplay between exclusivity and inclusivity on the subreddit. However, as usage of the “retail trader/investor” saw such prevalence on Reddit, and that this usage saw surge with Robinhood’s restrictions on trading, we might see the emergence of the “retail investor/trader” as a way of framing the collective as a

The diagram is a word cloud with 'retail' at the center. Words are connected to the center by arrows, showing their relationship to the central theme. The words are organized into several clusters:

- Top Left Cluster:** 'the', 'power', 'of', 'to', 'for', 'all'.
- Top Right Cluster:** 'investors', 'are', 'from', 'to', 'and', 'can', 'will', 'demand', 'market', 'transparency!', 'targeted', 'the', 'company', 'when', 'the', 'facts'.
- Middle Left Cluster:** 'company:', 'broker', 'app', 'deals', 'will', 'act', 'to', 'sec', 'vows', 'battle', 'protect', 'believes', 'the', 'war', 'between', 'fund', 'billionaires', '&', 'punish', 'hedge', 'fund', 'vs', 'chad', 'it's', 'not', 'just', 'it', 'was', 'an', 'honor'.
- Middle Right Cluster:** 'traders', 'investor', 'investors', 'trading', 'brokers', 'class', 'action', 'information', 'investors,', 'trader', 'and', 'hedge', 'funds', '(2021', 'cannot', 'lose', 'if', 'you'.
- Bottom Cluster:** 'stock...', 'reddit', 'wallstreetbets', 'is'.

The central word 'retail' is the focal point, with arrows pointing towards it from all other words, indicating its central role in the network.

sense of a war between the retail investor and hedge funds – “SEC vows to protect retail investors/traders”, “retail investors demand market transparency”. Compared to usage of the exclusive markers we see less usage of terms such as “fellow” or “us”, and less terms of endearment such as “love” or “fucking beautiful”. There appears to be more emphasis on the “retail investor” as making up a larger bloc. This gives the sense that the term represents something larger than r/WallStreetBets. There is certainly a degree of playfulness, such as invoking the “chad retail investor”, however this playfulness is far less pronounced than that of the more vernacular terms.

While it is not apparent in the word tree, many posts mentioning the “retail investor” also make mention of AOC. In the tweet cluster of the meta image, we see a number of screenshots of AOC’s tweets. One such tweet, which is especially prominent, references this “retail investor” explicitly.



Figure 32 Screenshot of AOC's tweet in response to Robinhood's restriction of trading

AOC situates the “retail investor” as a victim of as a victim of coordinated actions of the financial elite. She clearly avoids adopting any of r/WallStreetBets more vernacular language in her framing, demonstrating her intent to perform to an audience outside of r/WallStreetBets. This resonates strongly with her political platform’s emphasis on “taxing the rich”, allowing her supporter base to feel and perform the outrage, even if this is their first-time hearing of Robinhood or r/WallStreetBets. This is consistent with Vaughan et al. (2023) positioning of Twitter as a more inclusive place of observing the squeeze and giving it political relevance. However, it is also important to highlight the salience of this messaging on r/WallStreetBets. Numerous tweets in the meta image invoke a similar sentiment.

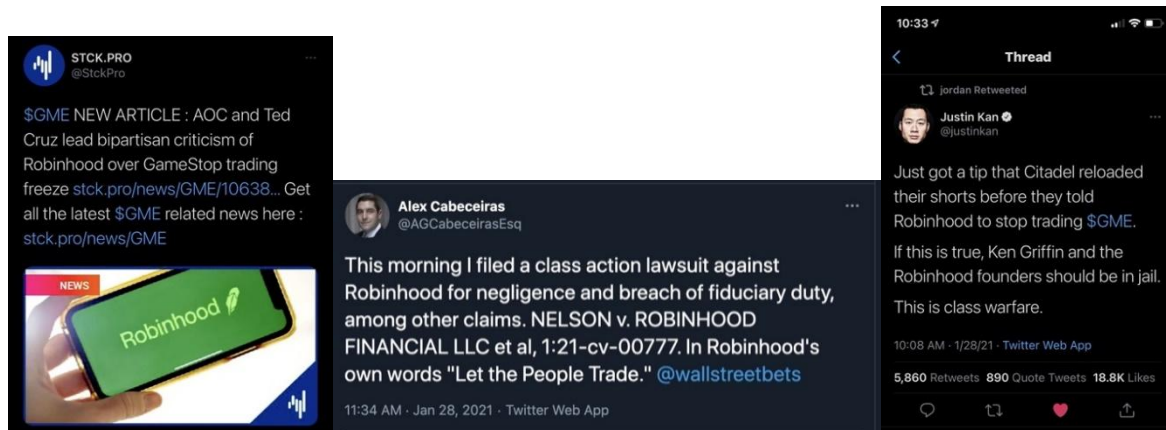


Figure 33 A series of Tweet screenshots posted on r/WallStreetBets that focus on the injustice of trading restrictions.

These screenshots of tweets (Figure 33) each focus specifically the injustice of the short squeeze, provoking outrage at Robinhood and the financial elite. These again draw from broad, inclusive, imaginations of the community with calls to “let the people trade”, or of “class warfare”, or focusing on the “bipartisan” nature of the criticisms. This sentiment is similarly evident in the discussions on r/WallStreetBets.

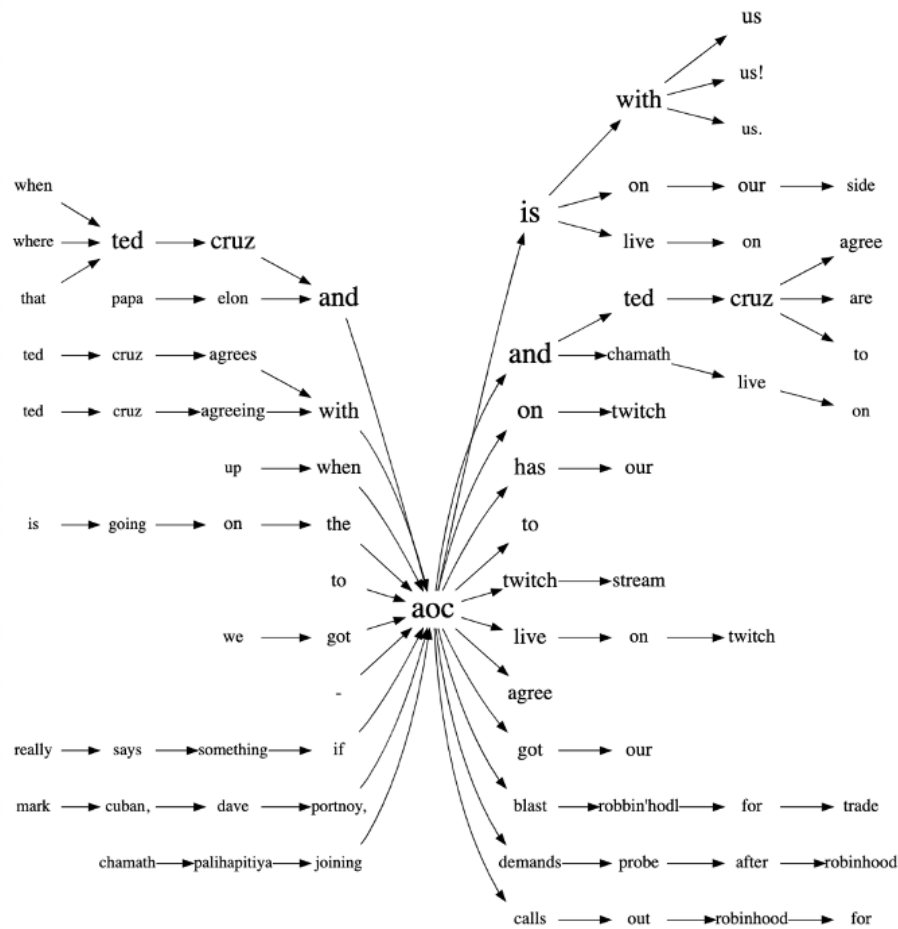


Figure 34 WordTree of “AOC”

Moreover, much of the discussions around AOC serve to highlight her unlikely “alliances” with other political or social figures – notably Ted Cruz, but also Elon Musk, Mark Cuban, Dave Portnoy, and Chamath Palihapitiya (see Figure 34). This unity is a particularly powerful symbolic resource in legitimising the outrage towards Robinhood given the underlying extremity of polarisation in the US political climate. The common performances of indignation towards Robinhood from AOC and Cruz, appeared to provide an ephemeral binding between two groups who seemed to have otherwise insurmountable boundaries.

In all, this suggests that, while there are more exclusive boundaries regarding who holds responsibility for the squeeze's *success*, there are comparatively fewer boundaries regarding who can feel the injustice of the trading restrictions and in turn the *failures* of

the movement. Put differently, the fruits of success are kept exclusive to those inside the community, but the moments of failure are opened to be felt more broadly. In each case, though the ritual binds individuals together and creates a common sense of “we”, however who this “we” refers to is quite different depending on the object of focus.

6.5 Decentralising the collective vs totalising the collective

6.5.1 *Decentralising the collective “Apes”*

Noticeably absent from the discussion of terms so far is “apes”. Usage of “apes” is similar to both the identities of injustice (i.e. “retail traders/investors”) as well as the identities of mobilisation (i.e. “retards”, “autists”, “degenerates”), however it does not neatly fit in to either category. Following usage trends, “apes” follows a very similar trajectory to the “retail investor”, with a major spike in usage after the restrictions are announced (see Figure 30). Unlike usage of the retail investor, it does not appear to emerge explicitly as a way of imagining the self as a victim.

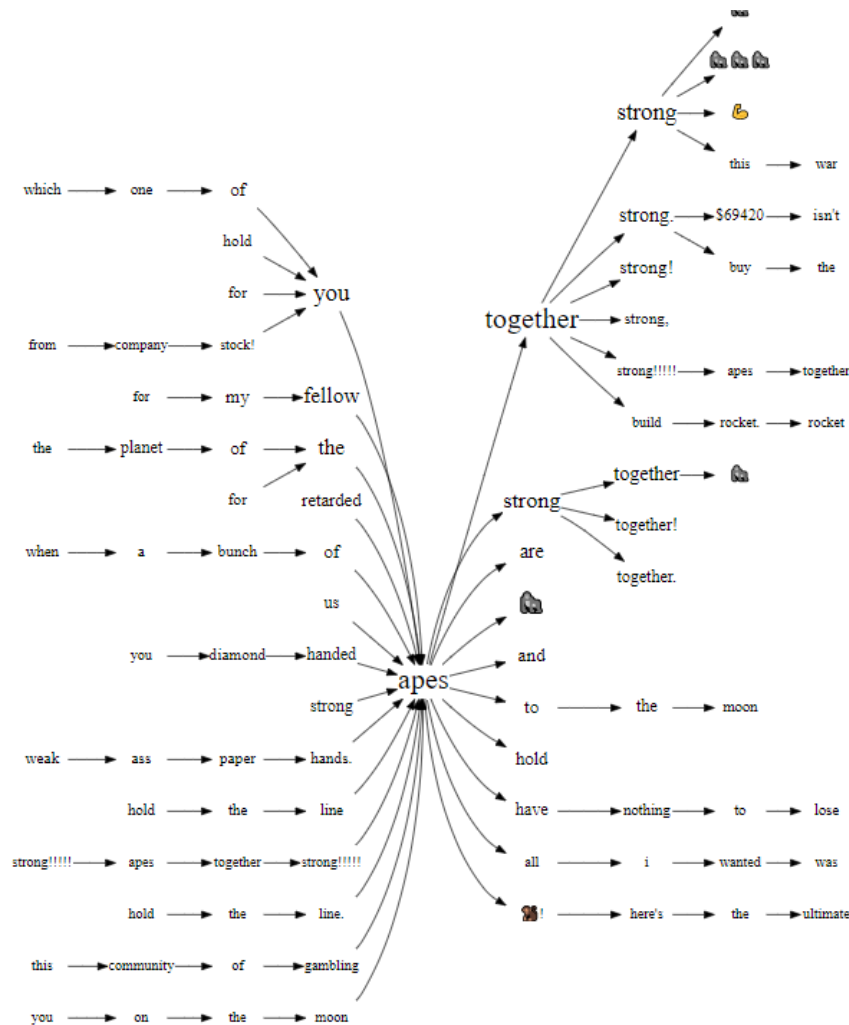


Figure 35 WordTree of “Apes”

We see here (Figure 35) that usage of the term is imbued with optimism, comradery, and strength. We see the most clearly in the variations of “apes together strong”, or “hold you apes”, but also in the sense of belonging in “fellow apes”. There is direct mention of some of the more toxic vernacular terms too such as “retarded apes”, and the Word2vec model showed strong semantic similarity between these terms. However, unlike the more exclusive terms of mobilisation, there is not a similar degree of explicit toxicity here – rather, the term is largely used in homage to the slogan “apes together strong” from the 2011 adaptation of the *Planet of the Apes* franchise. This lessen the cultural literacy required feel the energy and solidarity of the participants.



Figure 36 Meme requesting apes to "hold strong"

Whereas the “retail trader” emerges as a way to broadly feel the injustice of Robinhood’s trading restrictions, the “ape” emerges as a term to mobilise against this injustice. It emphasises the power of the collective, and the power in “holding” the shares. Similar to the more vernacular identities, this collective power is emphasised by minimising the power of the individual’s actions. In this way, it mirrors the ideals of horizontality that drove OWS and other networked social movements (Castells, 2012). The “ape” is quite clearly symbolic of decentralised power. This is achieved through an explicit element of self-deprecation. It juxtaposes the primal, high-risk approach to investing that characterises the subreddit, with the centralised, bureaucratic, approach of financial institutions.

This of course is also then reflective of the ways in which the subreddit organises communication. Users vote on content, they together decide what is visible on the subreddit. In reaction to Robinhood’s restrictions on trading, the ape gains salience as a way to imagine the collective as a power that can exist without Robinhood. Rather than provoke outrage at the platform, or feel the injustice of the “retail trader”, the ape emerges as a way of exercising this strength in injustice. Such calls to “hold” speak specifically to the one thing that Robinhood still lets them do to exercise this collective power – hold their investments.

6.5.2 Totalising the collective “DFV”

Amidst the invocations of the “ape” as an imagination of the decentralised power of the collective, we see a particular user emerge as a leader. DFV, also known on YouTube as *Roaring Kitty*, is a reddit user who we see emerge in a central position in the short squeeze. Zooming in on the between the meme cluster of the PixPlot (Figure 27, Figure 37, Figure 38) we see a number of images depicting him.

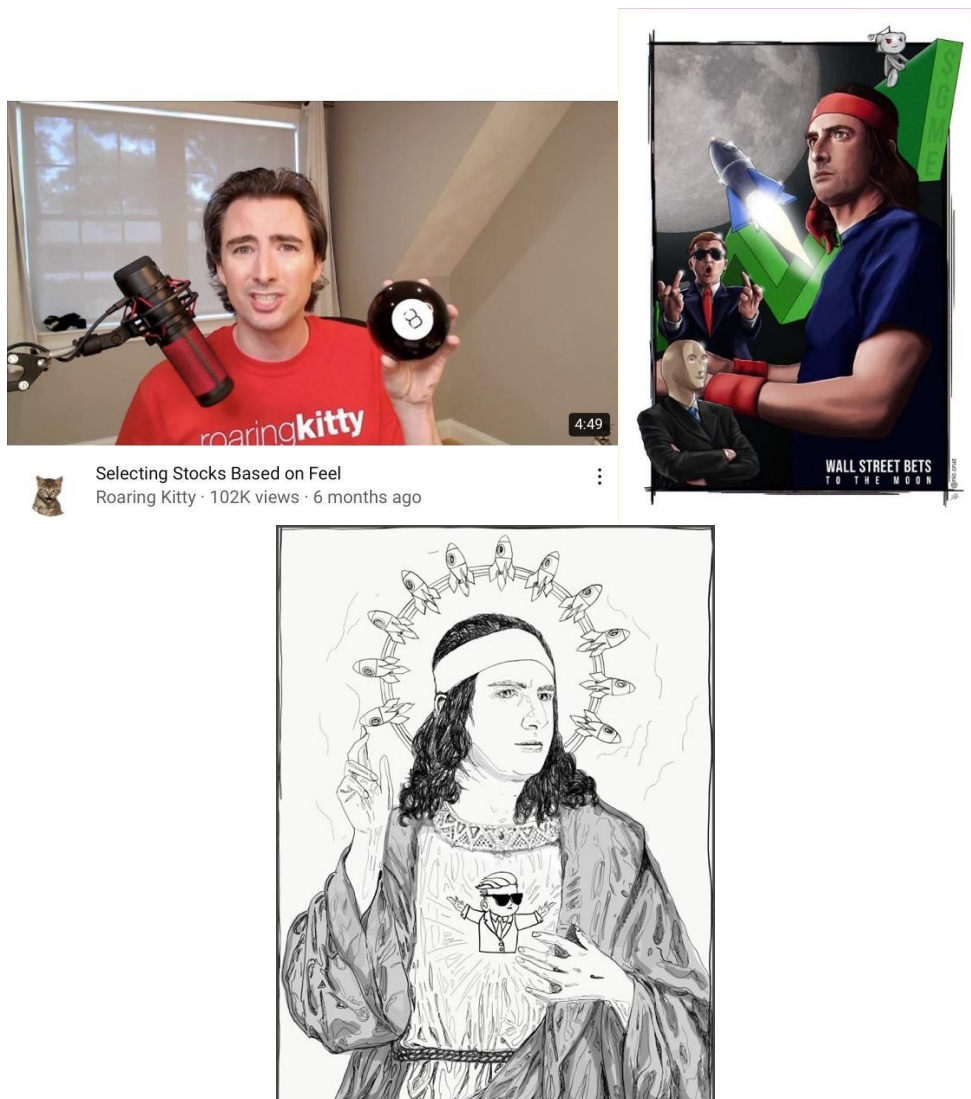


Figure 37 Various depictions of DFV from the PixPlot

As previously mentioned, DFV was one of the first users to invest in the GME, posting his \$53,000 “bet” in late 2020. He accordingly rose to a sort of pioneer of the movement, regularly posting updates on his short position and inspiring other users to join him. DFV emerges as a sort of totalising figure who represents the essence of the movement. He appears as a relatively ordinary young male, trading from the comfort of his own home, who serves as a symbolic representation of the collective. His power as a leader is not so much in his “control” over the movement, but in his ability to give “face to a faceless group” (Hagen, 2022). This is perhaps most apparent in the HOLD image, which depicts him as a sort of charismatic authority resonant of the famous Obama HOPE poster. This exists in stark contrast the rendition of this poster which circulated during OWS movement, which left the figure as masked to convey the dynamics of distributed movement. Here we can see how DFV “unmasks the collective” (Figure 38).



Figure 38 Variations on the Shepard Fairey’s HOPE poster for the Obama campaign. Only the “HOLD” image was derived from the sample – the OWS variation and original were sourced manually for context

Weber’s (1978/1922, p. 241) theory of charismatic leadership explored the ability of individuals which displayed “a certain quality of individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” to attract followers and lead causes. DFV clearly seems to be portrayed through such “divine” representations (Figure

37), yet he still seems to exemplify the mundane, or ordinary. There is a certain playfulness with his leadership, between this “charismatic” authority and “mundanity” – between his emergence as a leader through exceptional virtues, versus the ascription of his leadership by the collective will of the crowd. This serves to illuminate common criticisms of the notion of charismatic leadership, insofar as it “leads to the neglect of the social relationship between leader and followers, who are viewed as giving themselves up to a charismatic leader and therefore lacking agency” (Morris and Staggenborg, 2004, p.172). In an interaction ritual, we see charismatic authority not as the result of a leaders innate qualities or charismatic potential, but rather the ascription of these qualities by the crowd (Collins, 2004; Borch and Schiermer 2021). That is, a leader becomes a symbol which holds the emotional energy of the crowd, much like the stock tickers (GME, AMC) or the collective identities (apes, autists, retards). Though DFV initially appears to lack such “supernatural or superhuman” qualities, we see the deliberate hyperbolic ascription of these qualities in his representation as Jesus (Figure 37), the comparisons to Obama’s famous HOPE poster (Figure 38), or the frequent usage of terms such as “saviour”, or “lord” (Figure 39).

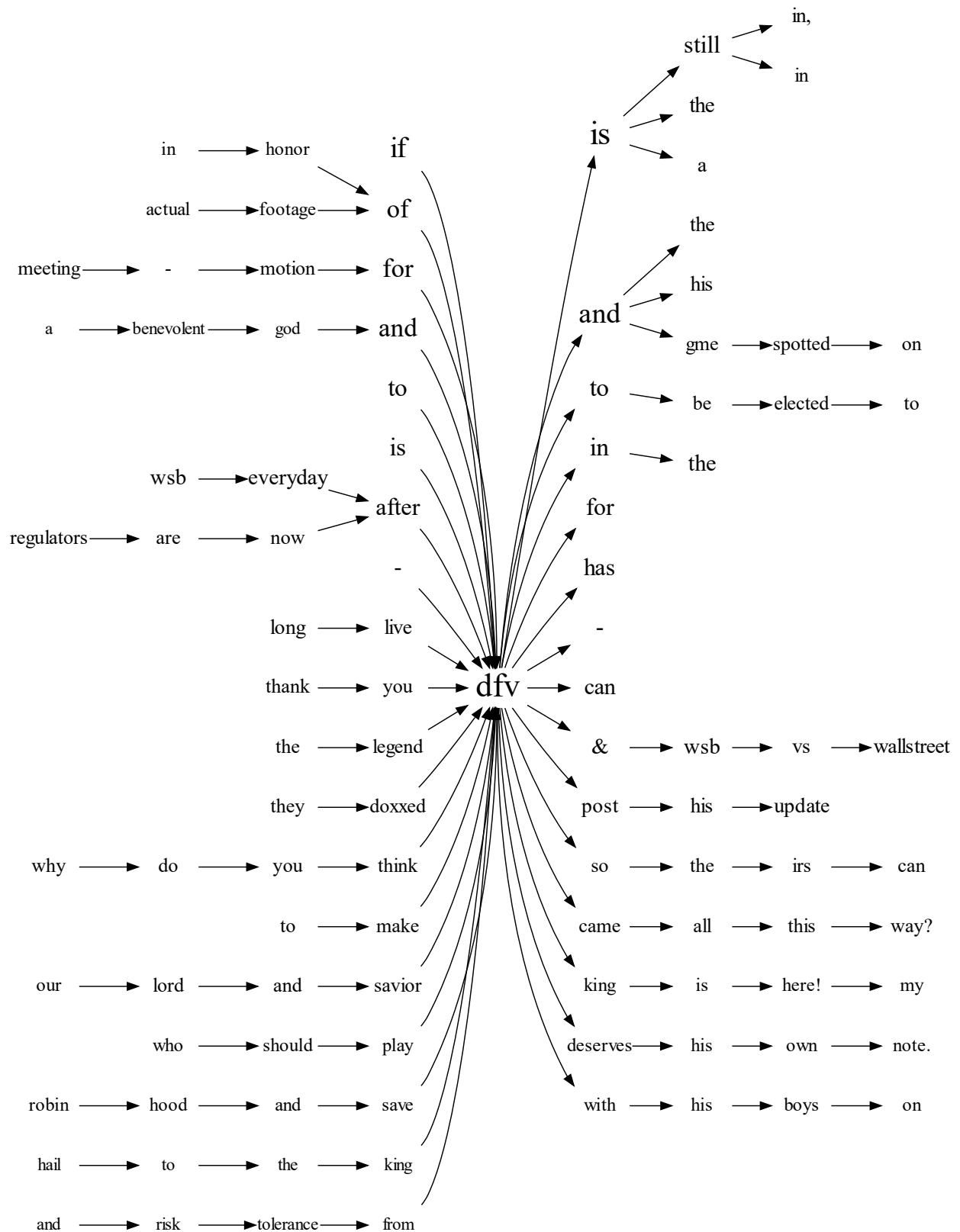


Figure 39 WordTree of "DFV"

There is a mix between genuine admiration and hyperbolic subservience. While not evident in the word tree, mentions of DFV were also frequently accompanied with requests for him to “be my dad”, “sleep with my wife”. These serve as a realisation of the agency of the collective in giving the leader power – they allow the individual to satirise the dynamics of subservience to a centralised leader, whilst retaining the leaders value as a symbolic unmasking of the collective.

This is further compounded by the distinct subservience to masculine “idols” of capital accumulation. In the distant reading, we saw that DFV had close associations to “idols” of capitalism - such as Elon Musk, Donald Trump, and Michael Burry. Examining mentions of “Elon”, for example we see a hyperbolic subservience that is similar to that displayed towards DFV.

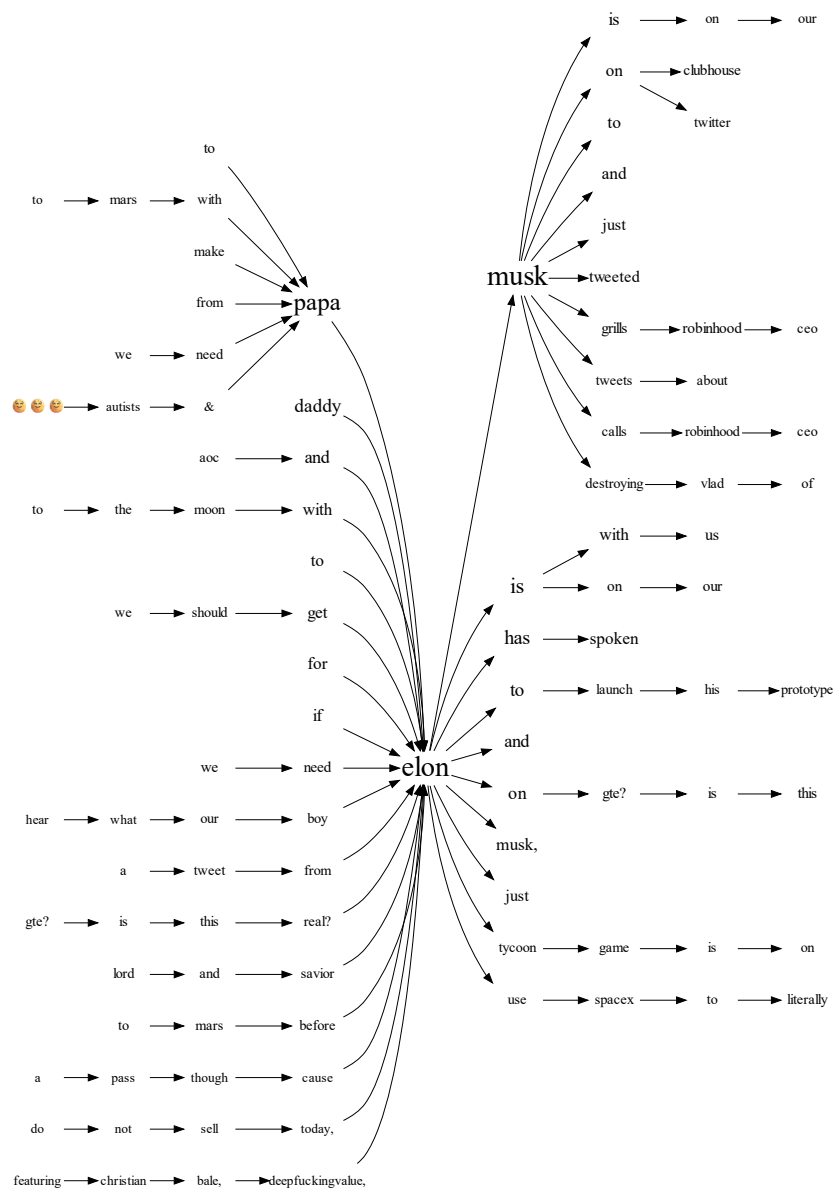


Figure 40 WordTree of "Elon"

We see he is commonly referred to in a sort of paternal tone – “daddy Elon”, or “papa Elon” – or through invocations of the “divine” – “our lord and saviour Elon”. While the hyperbolic subservience to DFV illustrates a tension between a “decentralised” and “centralised” leader, the subservience to Musk compounds tension further. Specifically, an additional tension is placed in the subservience to a billionaire in a movement which is ostensibly against big finance. One’s ability to navigate this tension – that is, to display hyperbolic subservience to Musk while decrying “big finance” again serves as a way of placing cultural boundaries on participation and ritual success. Those who can navigate

this tension can feel the energy of the ritual, while those who cannot are faced with cognitive dissonance.

6.6 Conclusion – Binding through exclusion

This chapter has explored the social functions of outrage in the context of the GME short squeeze. I have explored the process of becoming a collective through the lens of Collin's work on interaction ritual chains. Following Collins, we see community emerge through the shared focus on meme stocks, and the mutual entrainment of buying said and posting screenshots on the r/WallStreetBets. This produced a shared sense of elation when the stocks were rising, and a shared sense of righteous indignation following Robinhood's trading restrictions. Such energy was stored in shared symbolic objects, such as the targets of the outrage (e.g. "Melvin Capital", "Shitron", "🌈🐻", or later "Robinhood"), or the markers of collective identity (e.g. "autists", "retards", "retail traders").

Examining how these symbolic objects form, and what role they play, we see an interaction ritual which was deeply centred in ambivalence. "Zooming out" this ambivalence is evident in the very forms of ritual stratification – that is, playing with "status" in the movement between inclusivity and exclusivity and playing with "power" in the tensions between decentralised collectivity and totalised leadership. "Zooming in", an ability to navigate this ambivalence appears essential to how the community itself forms, stratifying ritual participants based on cultural knowledge.

Some of this stratification appears to coincide with the shift in emotional tone of the movement. That is, during the short squeeze (prior to the restrictions) markers of exclusivity were especially common to mobilise purchasing and bask in the movements success. During the firestorm (post Robinhood's restrictions) we see a significant increase in the more inclusive markers such as "retail-traders" and "retail investors". This coincided with numerous posts screenshots of Twitter users, such as AOC, whom make mention of Robinhood's attacks on such "retail traders" or liken the events to "class warfare". These findings corresponds closely to Vaughan et al. (2023) suggestion that Twitter primary acted as a site where the events were "witnessed" through a more

inclusive lens, and Reddit as site where more exclusive “mobilisation” took place. However, it suggests that such witnessing was bi-directional and that there were multiple imaginations of community on Reddit. Tying this back to temporal dynamics, there is a sense that the exclusive cultural knowledge required to “feel” the energy of the movement lessened as the movement shifted towards outrage at Robinhood. That is, the elation of mobilisation was tied to the “autists”, “degenerates” and “retards”, while the outrage at injustice was tied to the “retail traders” and “investors”.

Underscoring this ambivalence of “status” and belonging, is an ongoing play with “power”. We see that non-hierarchical, decentralised, imaginations as the “ape” as a emerge as a totalising figure. This runs in hand with imaginations of both the “retail traders”, and the “autists”, insofar as they minimise individual agency at the success of collective strength. This radical decentralisation and focus on direct participation is contrasted with a hyperbolic subservience to a single user – DFV – who was regularly constructed through divine terms, such as “lord” and “savior”. There is sense that DFV displays a real degree of power and control over the movement, yet such leadership dynamics are the point of satirical representation. This is further complicated by such hyperbolic subservience being given to the “idols” of capital accumulation, such as Musk, in a movement which is ostensibly against big-finance.

In each case, we see the potential of outrage to bind individuals together in common cause and create distinctive forms of solidarity. However, we see that this is always premised on various forms of exclusion. In this case, we see the ambivalence of the rituals creates fuzzy boundaries. That is, there is strong sense of collectivity, solidarity, and emotional energy however exactly what constitutes the “inside” and “outside” is nebulous and prone to change. On the surface outrage appears to create clear boundaries between an “in-group” and a “out-group” insofar as there is a clear “evil” cast in the financial institutions and later Robinhood. However, when we look to how this “in-group” forms we see more complicated intragroup differences emerge. The values which define this groups are not clear cut, but ambivalent – they posit a relationship between

inclusivity and exclusivity, as well as between direct participation and centralised leadership.

Chapter 7: The *Moral Actions* of Outrage: A Case Study of the #TwitterMigration

This chapter explores the moral actions of outrage through a case study of Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter in late 2022 and the subsequent mass user migration to Mastodon. I position Twitter and Mastodon as competing forms of moral enterprise (Becker, 1963) – the former utilising top-down enforcement through Musk's acquisition, and the latter distributing moral enterprise through an alternative platform. To understand these competing visions and their manifestations I explore the mass user migration from Twitter to Mastodon in the month following Musk's acquisition. I first develop a theoretical scaffold for understanding moral enterprise in line with social media studies, theorising mediated moral enterprise through three interrelated processes of idealisation, materialisation, and actualisation. These processes blend Becker's classic work with contemporary theories of materialised action (Schraube, 2009) and technological affordances (Davis, 2020). Using this, I explore Mastodon as a form of materialised action, specifically focusing on the mass user migration in the wake of Musk's acquisition. I follow this migration utilising a mixed methods approach, tracing the movement from Twitter to Mastodon, and investigating the extent to which decentralisation is actualised in the mass movement of users. In doing so, I illuminate pressures that arise in organising a movement away from Twitter, while using Twitter to do so. Finally, I explore how migrating users work with and against these pressures to actively resist Twitter's centralised control and actualise an alternative moral vision.

7.1 Twitter, Mastodon, and moral enterprise

Elon Musk completed his acquisition of Twitter on the 27th of October 2022, following several months of attempted withdrawals, holds, and indecisiveness over the deal (Milmo, 2022). The 44-billion-dollar purchase saw Musk take the reins of the company,

promising to radically reshape the company's platform in line with his own political vision. Musk had long accused Twitter of holding a "left-wing" bias and argued that its moderation policies violated the right to free expression (Serwer 2023). This position on Twitter's bias was shared by many conservatives in the United States. The years prior saw the development of several "free-speech" focused alternative platforms such as Parler, Gab, and Donald Trump's Truth Social (Yaffe-Bellany and Goldstein, 2024). Musk's acquisition of Twitter promised to bring the ideals of "free-speech absolutism" to Twitter itself. As such, the acquisition met with praise by many conservatives, who resonated with Musk's plan to ease moderation and unban controversial figures (Godwin et al., 2022). However, critics lamented Musk's takeover, discrediting him as a capable figure and warning that an ill-moderated Twitter would unleash vitriol, violence, and mis/disinformation. Because of these concerns, many Twitter users sought alternative platforms. One such platform was Mastodon, which saw an 800% growth in its userbase in the month following Musk's Twitter acquisition (Chan, 2022). Developed in 2016 by Eugen Rochko, Mastodon was originally built in response to a dissatisfaction with the "state and direction of Twitter" (joinmastodon.org, 2023). Rochko was specifically concerned with Twitter's centralised governance over global communications, especially in light of the company's commercial interests which eroded their capacity to handle hate speech and harassment on the platform (Knight, 2022a). Rochko's answer was Mastodon, a platform which operates through a system of federalism that distributes power rather than centralising control. This movement was largely organised on Twitter, but also targeted Musk's Twitter as the object of moral indignation – a situation whereby Twitter's affordances were central in shaping the exodus of its own users.

Musk's acquisition, and similarly the creation of and movement to Mastodon, share such a moral character. That is, they are in essence debates over what platforms "should do" and "should be". In this way, just as platforms invite a form of economic enterprise, of which has been studied heavily, they also invite a sort of moral enterprise. While it is difficult to disentangle moral and economic interests at the level of motivation, these are more discretely visible in the modes by which issues are framed. Moral entrepreneurs

work to define salient issues about to how platforms operate, or what they do, and then encourage methods of remedying the problem, such as through state regulation, developing new platforms, or purchasing existing platforms. Musk, for example, framed his acquisition in terms of a moral/political vision of a democratic collective:

“Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated.” (Musk, 2022)

While the purchase can be seen as a means to acquire personal capital and influence, Musk situates Twitter as the object of moral indignation promising to use his existing capital to “fix” the platform mediated problem.

Like Musk’s acquisition of Twitter, Mastodon’s formation was also the result of debates over what platforms should do and be. However, it took an entirely different substantive position on these questions. Rochko, and others involved in the founding, articulated a vision of Mastodon as a system of connected, federated entities through which global communications could be decentralised (joinmastodon, 2023). Like Musk, Rochko and his team framed Twitter as an object of indignation, but instead of fixing it, offered an alternative platform that operates through a model of participation through distributed governance and power. Both Musk and Rochko thus position their projects—Twitter and Mastodon—as moral enterprises, but with competing visions. Understanding these competing visions, along with their enactments and their reinforcement, motivate the research herein.

7.2 Rethinking moral enterprise

Becker’s (1963) “moral entrepreneur” is represented through two ideal types (1) the “rule creator” and (2) the “rule enforcer”. Rule creators are those who influence the content of rules - they are unsatisfied with the current normative order and seek to define new rules in line with their moral vision. Becker situates this type as a sort of “moral crusader”, who spearheads the development of rules by defining an absolute evil in society, demanding measures to mitigate said evil. On the other hand, rule enforcers are those who

administer said rules and ensure they are upheld. Becker sees rule enforcers as the result of a “successful crusade”. The crusade “becomes institutionalised” in the creation of new bodies to enforce rules, or adoption of rules by existing bodies of enforcement. This is generally a state-based process whereby rule administration and enforcement operate through a police force or government body (p.155).

In the case of the Twitter acquisition, Musk’s crusade was not state-based, departing from earlier moral entrepreneurship models. Rather Musk’s vision would be realised through his personal control over the platform. However, his subsequent escalations of this crusade to legally challenge organisations such as The Centre for Countering Digital Hate, while still “privately” driven, have echoed classic moral entrepreneurship more closely (Frenkel and Mac, 2023). That is, insofar as he has set about utilising the traditional state-based “rule enforcers” to rectify a supposed social problem.

The Mastodon project, on the other hand, does not neatly fit into the classic understanding of enforcement. Rochko first acts like a moral crusader in that he (1) defines a problem with how Twitter operates, framing this in terms of collective interests, and (2) articulates a moral vision which seeks to remedy the problem identified. Then, rather than relying on a process of top-down enforcement, Rochko moves to materialise this vision in a new platform - Mastodon. This moral vision requires the growth of a userbase, and for this userbase to act with the platform in such a way that this vision is realised. This ongoing process of realising a moral vision can more aptly be described as a process of actualisation rather than enforcement.

Such a process relies less on the totemic influence of a figure like Musk, and more so on the grassroots mobilisation that was commonly found in earlier studies of moral enterprise (e.g. Cohen, 2011/1972). Indeed, the vision posed in Mastodon is precisely against such forms of totemic, centralised leadership. However, whereas the concerns of the traditional moral entrepreneur rested in the extent to which they could utilise journalists and traditional media outlets to amplify their claims-making, the concerns of our contemporary moral entrepreneur rest in their ability to utilise platform affordances

to garner public attention (Walsh, 2020; Flores-Yeffal and Sparger, 2022). This requirement to work with the platform is relevant not just to the crusade, but also the enforcement. That is, Twitter was used to circulate claims of a moral problem (Musk's acquisition) and was used to organise a platform migration as a mechanism of enforcement (read: actualisation).

As such, to understand Mastodon through the lens of moral enterprise, we should first think through how moral enterprise might align with contemporary work in social media studies. To do so, I break down moral enterprise into a tripartite model of (1) idealisation (2) materialisation (3) actualisation. To distinguish this from traditional understandings of moral enterprise, I term this "mediated moral enterprise". This is not to suggest that mediation is new to moral enterprise – as previously mentioned, the role of journalists and the print media was essential to Cohen's work and to the subsequent studies that followed suit. Rather, the focus here is on moral enterprise which is both substantially performed on digital platforms, and in some way seeks to address an issue with digital platforms. That is, platforms are central in both the "crusade" and "enforcement". I first provide a brief grounding of this model by defining processes of idealisation, materialisation and actualisation, showing how each of these processes interrelate in forming a mediated moral enterprise. Then, I illustrate the utility of this model through an application to the Mastodon migration.

7.2.1 *Idealisation*

Idealisation refers to the process by which issue(s) with the existing state of a platform's operations are brought to public attention, and an ideal vision is put forward to alleviate the issue(s). This involves the active work of symbolically positioning platform(s) within moral narratives, generally involving claims about what a platform ought or ought not to do, or be (c.f. Alexander, 2020). Claims are often constructed in direct reference to the existing operations of a platform, thereby positioning said platform as the target of indignation. For example, when creating Mastodon, Rochko drew attention to the hate speech and harassment on Twitter, arguing that this was the result of the platform's centralisation and commercial interests (Knight, 2022b). He idealised Mastodon as an ad

free, decentralised, alternative to Twitter – symbolically positioning as a solution to Twitter’s ills. This process is akin to the moral crusade in Becker’s formulation, as it draws attention to an issue with the normative order and seeks to instigate change. Unlike the crusade, however, we should not view this as a stage whose success is determined by the creation and enforcement of new rules. Rather, we should view idealisation as an ongoing communicative process of giving the platform symbolic relevance. This continues to inform what ideals are materialised in the platform and how they are actualised.

7.2.2 *Materialisation*

Materialisation refers to the process by which ideals are actively coded into a platform’s interface and underlying infrastructure. This draws specifically from Schraube’s (2009) theory of technology as materialised action, whereby technological systems combine structural and cultural influences, active design choices, and agentic users, including collectives such as publics in the case of social media. In the context of platform studies, this puts the focus on values which shape the platform’s interface, both from human subjects who have access to the means of production (e.g. developers, designers, and business leaders) and from those who shape the platform through participation. Doing so recognises the platform’s design, how it affords, as the materialisation of social process and cultural values (Davis, 2020). Moreover, we do not see this materialisation as binary (it affords or does not afford), but rather in terms of the various mechanisms and conditions by which it may afford. An object’s mechanisms may “request, demand, allow, encourage, discourage, and refuse” certain actions, and do so under conditions of “perception, dexterity, and cultural and institutional legitimacy” (p. 10). For example, the ideals situated by Rochko of decentralisation and an absence of commercialism are encoded into the platform’s infrastructure – Mastodon enables users to create and control their own “instances” which are independently moderated. These instances can then communicate with other instances on the Mastodon network. Moreover, Mastodon’s underlying code is open-source and managed by a community of volunteers under a non-for-profit company (joinmastodon, 2023).

7.2.3 Actualisation

Actualisation refers to the process by which encoded ideals come into being through user-platform interactions. This is especially relevant to events, controversies and contestations. However, the ideals materialised in a platform do not simply come into being through the material force technical operations (e.g. design, algorithms, infrastructure) but must do so through interactions with users. As Davis (2020) argues

“Designers engrain their own agency into technologies, and users agentically employ those technologies. The force of technological objects can be immense, but that force is inextricable from the values, desires, and interests of human actors.” (p.57)

This means that moral values are not just statically materialised, but must be actualised through interactions between users and the platform. In the case of mediated moral enterprise, we would expect users to act with a certain political or moral intentionality. However, depending on the relationship between the mechanisms of affordance, and the conditions of the userbase, we may see differences in the extent to which the vision is (or is not) actualised, or different shapes of this vision emerge. For example, in 2019 the alt-right social network, Gab, migrated to Mastodon due to their existing platform being banned from the Google Play and Apple App Stores (Rochko, 2019). Gab is a sparsely moderated haven for white supremacy, hate speech, and the alt-right (Lima et al., 2018) existing in stark contradiction to Rochko’s stated ideals. Because Mastodon’s design just requests that users “federate” with other servers, and operate non-commercially, there is no guarantee that these ideals will be actualised. Moreover, because Mastodon uses an open-source license, it allows instance creators to edit Mastodons code to suit their ideals (Rochko, 2019). In this case, the intention of Gab founders and its user base was to actualise a platform which was entirely different to Mastodon’s ideals. That is, using the Mastodon code, Gab actively “defederated” from the Mastodon network and actualised as a centralised, for-profit, platform with a tacit acceptance of hate speech (Stamos and Shah, 2023).

7.3 Mastodon: Idealising and materialising the social platform

The Mastodon homepage lists four defining characteristics of the platform – (1) “Decentralised”, (2) “Open Source”, (3) “Not for Sale”, (4) “Interoperable”. These provide an indication of the ideals that guide Mastodon’s development, and remain core to how the platform is put into scene. Here we can see the ongoing process of idealisation – outlining problems with the existing communications environment, and situating Mastodon as a solution. Of specific interest is the ideal of decentralisation, as it underpins and subsumes the three others. This is illustrated in a 2018 blog post by Rochko:

“Decentralisation is biodiversity of the digital world, the hallmark of a healthy ecosystem. A decentralised network like the fediverse allows different user interfaces, different software, different forms of government to co-exist and cooperate... Decentralisation upends the social network business model by dramatically reducing operating costs. It absolves a single entity of having to shoulder all operating costs alone...decentralisation is about fixing power asymmetry. A centralised social media platform has a hierarchical structure where rules and their enforcement, as well as the development and direction of the platform, are decided by the CEO, with the users having close to no ways to disagree.” (Rochko, 2018)

This is reminiscent of the broader ethos of the web3 movement, which seeks to correct the failings of Big Tech by building “new structures for decentralised, self-governance”, generally taking the form of blockchain technologies (Nabben, 2023). However, Mastodon materialises this ethos through the simple re-arrangement of platform features, creating a network of self-governed servers rather than the algorithmic verification of trust that underpins blockchain. In this way, Mastodon is best understood as a platform of multiples, rather than the singular model that has defined platforms to date. The Mastodon network comprises multiple quasi-independent servers, known as instances that can interact with each other.

Put into practice, to access Twitter you would navigate twitter.com and can then interact with others who are also on Twitter. In contrast, to access Mastodon you would first

choose an instance which is running Mastodon (e.g. mastodon.social, aus.social, mastodon.world), and then you would be able to interact with others who are also on that instance, as well as others who are on another instance. Each instance may have its own rules, codes of conduct, leadership structure, or even design features. In turn, each instance also requires its own instance hardware, domain, moderation teams, and must bear the associated costs each may incur.

Inter-instance communication is facilitated through federation, whereby, instances become aware of each other, and users between instances begin communicating. Usually, instances give users an option between a local timeline, which contains posts from those on their home instance, and a federated timeline, containing posts from users on other instances which are being followed by a user on one's home instance. Just as instances may federate with each other, they may also defederate. Defederation refers to the process by which an instance disconnects or blocks another instance. This is instigated by the owner or administration team who are running the instance, giving them a degree of control over which instances, and what types of content, are accessible on their own instance. This is essential, as the moderation policies of instances generally vary significantly – some opt for a strict policing of content, while others prefer a “more liberal” approach (Zulli et al., 2020).

These key materialisations of Mastodon, relevant to the ideal of decentralisation, can be distilled into “(i) the decomposition of a global service into many independent instances; and (ii) the process of federation, whereby these instances collaborate and interact” (Raman et al., 2019, p. 227). Together, these innovations work to materialise a vision of a decentralised global communications environment. As mentioned, however, this vision is not actualised by these features in a deterministic way. Instead, they solicit user-publics to engage with the platform-multiple in ways that bring the moral vision to life.

Raman et al. (2019) explored both of these key innovations (instances and their federation) with regard to the Mastodon network, and found such efforts to “decentralise the web” faced several pressures towards centralisation. Namely, user-driven pressures

(users concentrating in a few central instances), infrastructure-driven pressures (concentration into a small set of hosting providers, and difficulty maintaining instance up-time and moderation in a decentralised network), and content-driven pressures (attention and engagement concentrating in only the largest instances). This highlights the complexities inherent to bringing a vision of "global decentralised communications" into practice and suggests key challenges for the #TwitterMigration. However, we do not know how these factors may figure into the rapid migration following Musk's Twitter acquisition. The migration posits a movement that is unique to the broader effort to "decentralise the web" in its immediacy, pace, and scale. This is further complicated by the fact that the migration is organised on a central platform (Twitter). This means we are not just concerned with the pressures towards centralisation in the Mastodon network, but also the pressures towards centralisation that may develop through a movement from Twitter. That is Twitter itself may shape the extent to which decentralisation can be actualised, as it acts as the organisational hub for the movement.

7.4 The #TwitterMigration as a process of actualisation

The Twitter migration appears to align with Mastodon's aims – it is a backlash against radical centralisation of power in Musk, and his vision for free speech absolutism. However, we cannot assume decentralisation will actualise through the migration. To test this, I put forth the following questions based on Mastodon's key innovations defined by Raman et al. (2019):

First, on "(i) the decomposition of a global service into many independent instances":

(1) Are users migrating to a large set of instances?

(2) If so, is the distribution of users to instances such that communication is decentralised?

If, for example, users move from Twitter to a single instance, or just a small number of instances, can we say that this is really “decentralising global communications” or is it just distributing Twitter’s centralised power to a small number of central nodes on a new platform?

Second, on the “(ii) process of federation, whereby these instances collaborate and interact”:

(1) Are instances mostly federated or are they largely isolated?

(2) Do any instances appear as central connections between others?

If instances are isolated from each other, such as through whitelisting (restricting instance connections based on a list of pre-approved domains), active defederation from other instances, or simply through lack of existing inter-instance interaction, then the migration may miss the global aspect of the federated vision, and instead create a number of siloed worlds. Moreover, if these siloed worlds are only connected through a central large instance (or instances), then this may go against the decentralised vision.

7.5 Following the Twitter migration

This chapter utilised a mixed methods approach to follow the Twitter-to-Mastodon migration through user handles and tweets. Our aim was first to explore the extent to which decentralisation was “technically” actualised. Here the focus was on (1) the distribution of users to instances, and (2) federation between instances. Second, I aimed to understand how the migration was shaped by the interoperations of Twitter’s affordances for movement organisation, and Mastodon affordances for decentralisation. Specifically, by mapping the pressures that may result from this overlap, and how users may actively work with or against these pressures. Here, interpretive qualitative analyses of user tweets during the migration period was conducted to draw out specific pressures involved in actualisation and the movement dynamics on Twitter. The dataset was sorted by “like-counts” (as a measure of engagement) and individually read tweets to identify

occurrences where users brought up any challenges, issues, or tensions with the migration to Mastodon. Once the three general pressures were identified, individual tweets were selected as illustrative examples.

Though #TwitterMigration is a useful seed, the migration took place through a range of tags, some of which are contextually specific (i.e., pointing to a specific issue or actor, rather than the general migration). To account for this, associative query snowballing was used (Rogers, 2019) to identify the most frequently used tags in the #TwitterMigration sample. Using 4CAT (Capture and Analysis Toolkit; Peeters and Hagen, 2022), an initial sample of tweets which contained “#TwitterMigration” for the one month following Musk’s acquisition (28th October to the 1st of December) was gathered. Using this I identified co-occurring tags which appeared relevant to the migration, and conducted a second search over the same time period.

With these tags (see Table 6), a sample of 1.4m tweets was gathered, using the same time frame.

Hashtag	Tweet Count
#RipTwitter	961741
#TwitterTakeover	168472
#TwitterDown	159144
#GoodbyeTwitter	89290
#TwitterOff	44988
#TwitterShutdown	43042

#TwitterMigration	28743
#ElonIsDestroyingTwitter	26281
#TwitterIsDead	9171
#MastodonMigration	4672
#Twexit	2610
#LeavingTwitter	1131
#TwitterIsOverParty	378
#TwitterExodus	219

Table 6 Total tweet counts for migration related tags

I then performed a regular expression search of strings to identify the Mastodon handles present in the sample. As Mastodon usernames usually follow a standard format of “@user@instancename.tld”, this approach allowed us to identify handles that were shared using common conventions, however it did neglect any users who had shared their profile/instance using a URL or had shared their handle through a non-standard format. All tweets were searched for any occurrence of this basic string format appearing in a user’s Twitter biography, display name, or body text of a tweet. This search matched 27587 tweets, identifying a total of 14325 unique Mastodon handles and 1275 unique Mastodon instances.

To understand the federation between networks, I utilised the Mastodon API. The API does not provide a direct method of obtaining a list of federated servers for privacy reasons, however it does provide a list of “connected domains” through the

“/api/v1/instance/peers” endpoint. This provides a list of all other instances that an instance is “aware of”. Though this is not a direct measure of federation, I employed the list to sketch the general structure of the network of Mastodon instances present in the migration, in a way that is consistent with the API’s privacy settings.

Each of the instances was queried using the peers endpoint, and then a network of connected domains was developed in Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009). 958 Instances returned a list of peers, however a total of 1080 instances are included as nodes in the network. This is because some instances blocked, or were unavailable for the API request, but had still connected to one of the available instances in the past and thus were listed as a peer. Of the remaining 195 instances which were not listed as a peer, and did not respond to the API request, most appeared to be spelling errors or email domains.

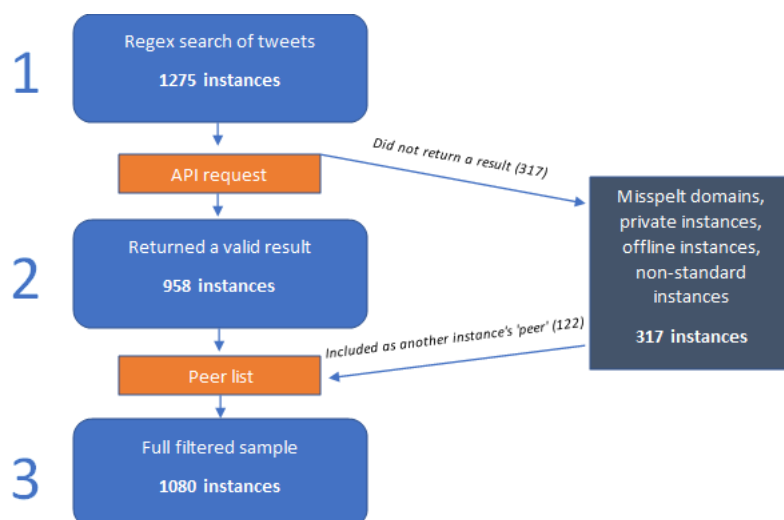


Figure 41 Sampling protocol for Mastodon instances

7.6 Examining the extent of decentralisation

The instance distribution shows that there are a large number of servers present in the migration, but that users are mostly concentrated in a small number of large instances. The bubble plot below shows the distribution of users to instances. Each circle represent an individual instance, with circle size representative of the number of unique handles

from an instance in the dataset. The top 30 servers have been labelled with both the instance name, and number of unique handles present.

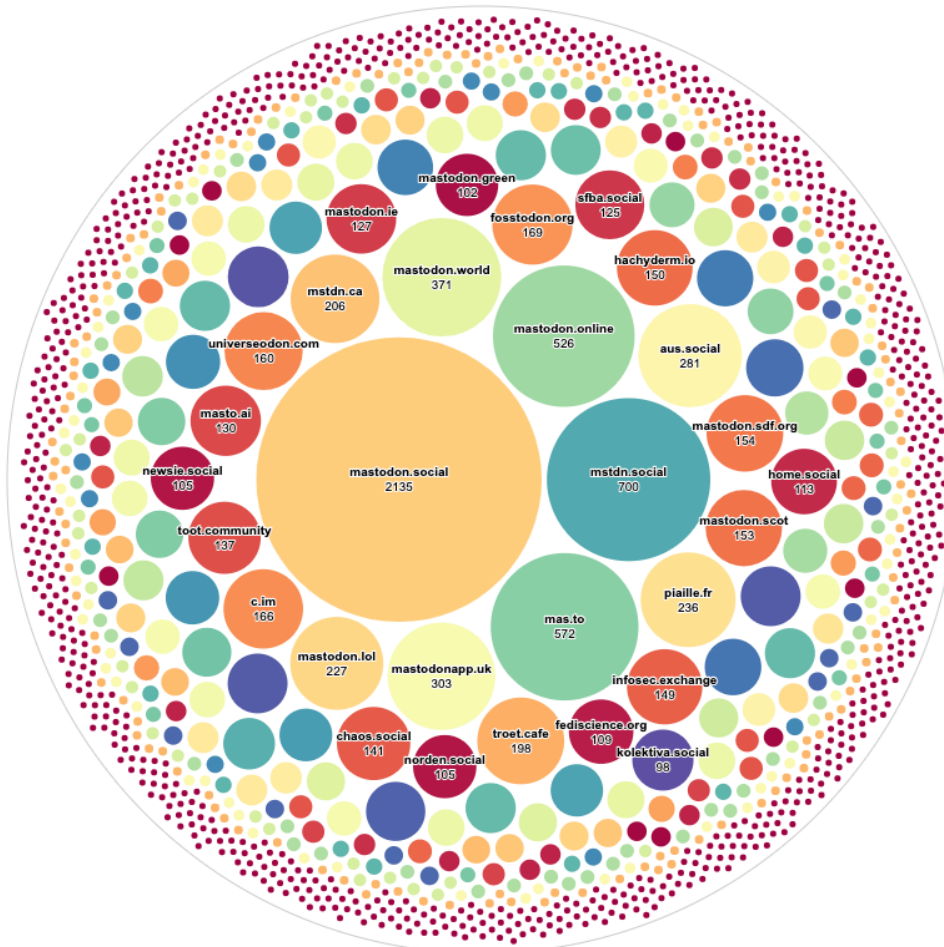


Figure 42 Bubble plot of instances by unique user counts during the migration from Twitter. Top 30 servers have been labelled

The most popular instance in the migration, and also largest instance in the Mastodon network, mastodon.social, accounted for 14.90% of the user's migration. The next highest was mstdn.social at 4.89%, followed by mast.to at 3.99%, and mastodon.online at 3.67%. Together, these four instances accounted for over one-quarter (27.46%) of the total migration.

To better understand the instance distribution, I plotted a Lorenz curve. The Lorenz curve is traditionally used to visualise income inequality, plotting the cumulative share of

income against the cumulative proportion of the population. However, it has also been used to visualise attention inequality on social media (see Castaldo, 2022). We can similarly use the curve to visualise inequality of movement in the migration by plotting the cumulative share of users (i.e., income) against the cumulative proportion of instances (i.e., the population). This was plotted using a filtered version of the original sample of 14325 unique users - only including handles which referenced an instance in the filtered sample of 1080 instances (see Figure 41). This resulted in a total of 14035 unique users across 1080 unique instances.

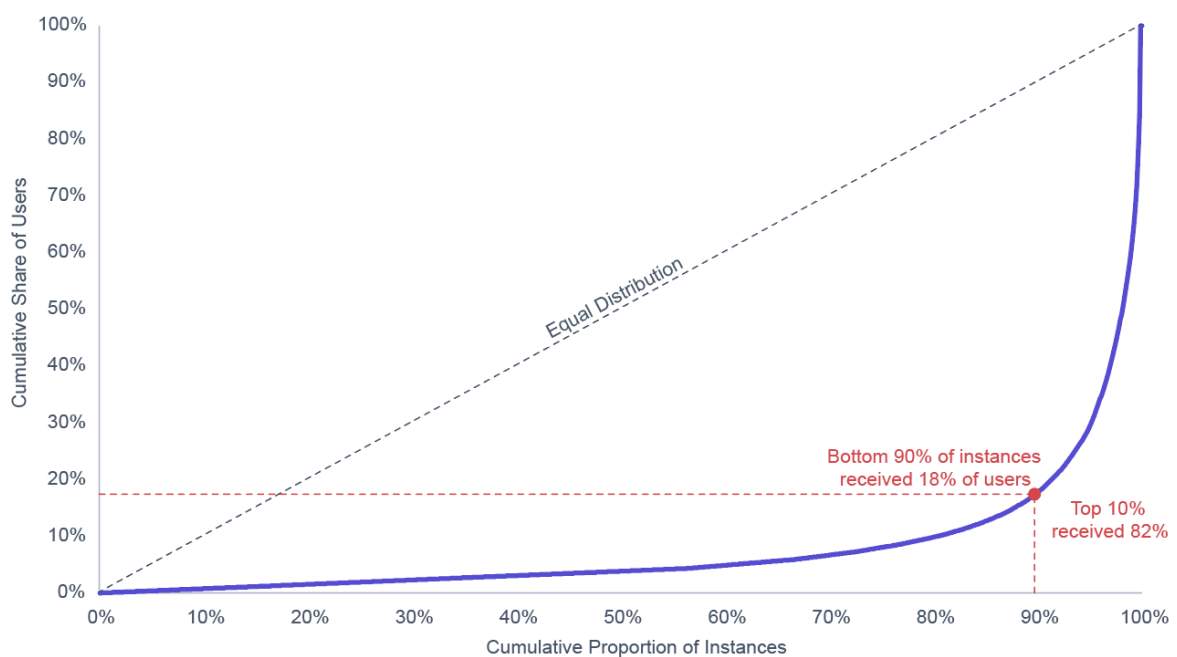


Figure 43 Lorenz curve of the Mastodon Migration

While we would not expect a perfectly even distribution of users, we can see that much of the migration is concentrated in the largest instances. 10% of Mastodon instances (108 instances) host 82% of the migrants (11508 users), leaving the remaining 90% of instances (972 instances) with just 18% of users (2527 users). This shows a relatively top-heavy distribution of users, and thus a somewhat limited actualisation of the decentralised vision. Although there are many instances, most are sparsely referenced, suggesting difficulty in smaller instances gaining traction. These findings are consistent

with recent research on the migration which found that 96% of users moved to just 25% of servers; indicating “a clear trend towards centralisation” (Bin Zia et al., 2023 p.5).

On communication between instances, the peer-to-peer instance network has a graph density is 0.733. Graph density is a measure of the number of actual connections compared to the maximum connections which could exist. If all possible connections exist then the graph will have a density of 1, while if no connections exist the graph will have a density of 0. Put in the context of Mastodon, if the graph has a density of 1 then all instances have mutual knowledge of each other’s existence, while if the graph has a density of 0 then no servers know about each other. A graph density of 0.733 suggests that there are strong networks of knowledge between instances, and that no one instance displays overwhelming power as a central hub. There are certainly some instances which are especially well connected, and some outliers which display very low connectivity, but overall, most instances display a high degree of connectivity. In terms of Mastodon’s vision to decentralise global communication, we can say that the servers involved in the migration are connected in a way that appears to actualise this vision. There is extensive connectivity between servers, and no one server appears to bridge communication. The instances involved in the migration appear to actualise the global aspect of the federated vision, at least in terms of mutual visibility.

7.7 Pressures on actualisation

Overall, this analysis suggests the migration event is a limited actualisation of the moral vision materialised in Mastodon. We see an abundance of instances in the migration, and the instance network suggests that servers are very well connected. While no one instance appears central in the peer-to-peer network, the movement of users is concentrated to several large instances. If we understand the size of user base as a factor that gives an instance power in the Mastodon network, then we can see that the migration may be concentrating this power in a relatively small number of large instances.

Gehl and Zulli (2022) explicitly warn against describing Mastodon as “decentralised”, rather they draw from covenantal federalism to describe “non-centralisation”, in which

there is no “preexisting centre from which power devolved—and back to which power could be recentralised...” (p.4). This distinction between “decentralisation” and “non-centralisation” highlights the primary pressure which inhibits Mastodon’s fully actualised moral vision. Decentralisation – implying a process by which central power stems from a preexisting centre – is precisely the process we see in the Twitter migration. Whereas we might previously describe the existing Mastodon network, or at the very least the vision behind it as non-centralised, the mass-migration from a central platform to such a network necessitates a process of decentralisation. This is because Twitter is a preexisting power centre. Users are not just moving from this centre, but they are also organising their movement on this centre. As such Twitter itself shapes the extent to which decentralisation can be actualised. Achieving decentralisation through visibility between servers operates through design pressures of the Mastodon network, however the distribution of users in the migration is undoubtedly influenced by Twitter as an organisational hub.

We can see this through three primary pressures: (1) the naturalisation of user’s perception and dexterity in line with Twitter’s primary mechanisms of affordance; (2) Twitter’s tendency to distribute attention in such a way that preferences centralisation; and (3) Twitter setting the pace of migration, and the infrastructural limitations of Mastodon. Each of these either encourages user-based centralisation, or discourages movement to Mastodon. However, as we will see, each is also actively countered and repurposed in the process of mediated moral entrepreneurship - which seeks to steer the migration towards decentralisation despite existing pressures.

7.7.1 *Naturalisation*

How an object affords is in part shaped by a user’s perception of an object’s functions and their dexterity to utilise said functions (Davis, 2020). For global decentralised communication to be actualised, users must be aware that Mastodon is a network of federated instances, and have the appropriate skillset to engage in inter-instance communication. However, because users are moving from Twitter, their perception of

what a platform does, and their dexterity to employ a platform's features, are naturalised in line with how Twitter works—which is explicitly not how Mastodon works.

We can see direct evidence of these pressures in user Tweets during the transition period. Numerous users describe Mastodon as “clunky” and “confusing”. Many express confusions as to what exactly the fediverse is, how communication occurs across instances, and highlight the challenges of finding relevant and accessible instances.

“So far, it's a lot sweeter there, but also more confusing & chaotic. Learning new things keeps your brain sharp, right? #mastodonmigration”

“Still figuring it out, it's like the early days of twitter, took me ages to figure how to use this site! Sorry to see it go down though, it's been, mostly, a space where I found my people #TwitterMigration”

As we see in these user comments, awareness of challenges does not imply that there is an underlying pessimism to the movement. When users describe their gripes with Mastodon being “slow”, or “confusing”, these are usually layered with a spark of optimism. Moreover, these are not problems with Mastodon per se, but rather challenges which emerge in the mass migration of a user-base whose perception and dexterity are naturalised in a way that inhibits the utilisation of a new platform's core functionality. This is amplified by the challenges of importing one's existing social network from Twitter. While Mastodon allows one to join specific communities, Twitter users are conditioned to expect a large generalist platform. This may encourage centralisation, as users will be accustomed to generalist servers which already contain networked connections, rather than finding smaller niche communities then utilising the federated architecture to reconnect with networks.

7.7.2 Attention

Also relevant is how Twitter organises attention. Especially during high-intensity events, Twitter's design grants a small number of actors central prominence, rather than evenly distributing attention (Lin et al., 2014). This centralisation of attention generally gives

preference to those highly connected accounts with large preexisting audiences (Lin et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2018). In a study of acute media events on Twitter, Lin et al. (2014) found that such events are associated with “(1) substantial declines in interpersonal communication, (2) more highly concentrated attention by replying to and retweeting particular users, and (3) elite users predominantly benefiting from this attention”. In social movements, these users are variously called “opinion leaders” (Dubois and Gaffney, 2014) or “key mobilisers” (LeFebvre and Armstrong, 2018) and often display disproportionate power over shaping the movement narrative. In the user sample, if we consider Tweet likes as a proxy for attention – we see a top-heavy distribution, much like the distribution of users to instances we see in the migration.

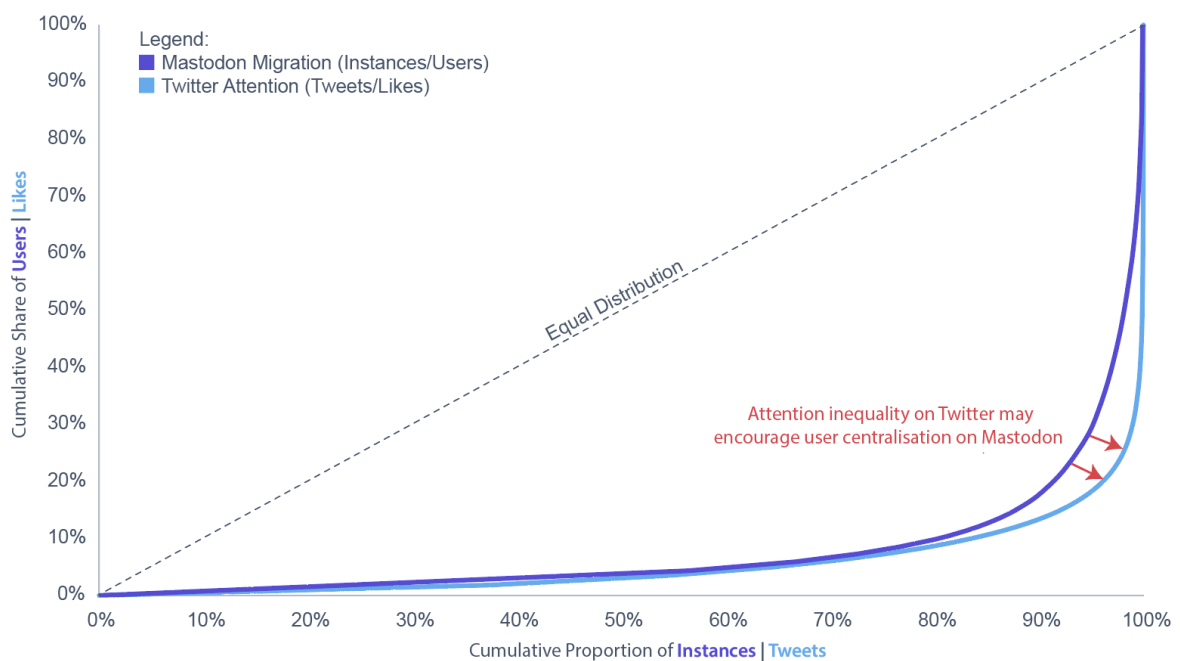


Figure 44 Lorenz curves of Tweets/Likes and Instances/Users during the migration. Only including Tweets with likes ≥ 1

As users are organising a move to Mastodon on a platform that encourages attention centralisation, this may subsequently request movement centralisation. If attention is

centralised in a relatively small number of users or tweets, and these users are sharing their Mastodon handles, it follows that disproportionate attention will be given to select instances. As such, certain instances will receive greater visibility during the migration, and potentially attract a larger number of users. This is especially relevant for instances which are used by those with large existing Twitter networks, as these users can most easily achieve high tweet engagement. Further, these attention-based pressures towards centralisation are amplified by the pressures from naturalisation, especially if users lack an understanding of how federation works or are not aware of the existence of alternative instances.

7.7.3 *Pace and infrastructure*

Twitter requests and encourages rapid dissemination of information during news events and controversies. This is especially relevant for moral-emotional content, which spreads rapidly and broadly on Twitter (Brady et al., 2017). Twitter is well equipped to handle such scale and pace, however the Mastodon network – which is largely run by volunteers and community donations – lacks such capabilities. This presented a unique challenge for the migration. Twitter, as a means of organising the migration, allows for rapid movement growth, which can be followed by a similarly rapid exodus to Mastodon. However, because of the pace and scale of the movement, many Mastodon servers became overloaded during the period. Some larger instances such as mastodon.social, and mstdn.to, were forced to restrict sign-ups in the weeks following the acquisition due to stress on their instance infrastructure (Hoover, 2022). Similarly, many instances saw challenges surrounding administration, and server slowdowns. This is evident in the sample, with some users lamenting that their instance was inaccessible or slow. Again, this was not usually framed in an especially negative light. Rather, users pointed to challenges as signs of the movement’s success, promoting patience and support:

If you are joining #Mastodon or similar under threat of #TwitterShutdown please remember that what’s going on = huge numbers of people moving

across + servers & admins under great strain. Be patient! Seeing a lot of posts over there from non-billionaire admins doing their best.

7.8 Resisting platform pressures

These three pressures - naturalisation, attention, and pace - emerge through the organisation of a migration to Mastodon, on Twitter. In this way, Twitter's affordances for movement organisation are integral to shaping the mass exodus of its users. Each pressure works to discourage disconnection from the Twitter platform or encourage centralisation among those who join and participate on Mastodon. However, as with any pressures imposed by platforms, these pressures are non-deterministic. Rather, naturalisation, attention, and pace interact with agentic user publics. Indeed, much as the traditional moral entrepreneur strategically crafted messages to resonate with mass media infrastructures, in mediated moral enterprise we see a process whereby moral entrepreneurs strategically craft messages in line with the pressures imposed by platform affordances. In this case, moral entrepreneurs steer the migration towards decentralisation by repurposing or directly countering pressures of naturalisation, attention, and pace. We can see this as an ongoing process of idealisation – whereby users work to both frame Mastodon as a solution to the Musk acquisition, and put the platform into scene in such a way that resists or challenges the pressures that emerge in the migration. Indeed, each of the tweets identified above does not simply highlight a challenge, but layers this with a sense of optimism for the movement, cultivating its growth and continuation. This illustrates our earlier positioning of idealisation as an ongoing communicative process of giving the platform symbolic relevance, which continues to inform processes of materialisation and actualisation, rather than being a strictly defined “stage” of moral enterprise.

Especially prevalent among high-engagement tweets over the period are threads, blog posts, or news articles that explain what the fediverse is, how federation works, and how to find and join relevant instances. Many of these “how-tos” are authored by well-networked users – such as academics, journalists, or community leaders – but others appear to gain prominence during the migration.

“I'm enjoying following people who have made the jump off Twitter. Adding to this growing thread on Mastodon #TwitterExodus - this article is a pretty good explainer (but I'm not folding my Twitter presence first).”
[links to article titled ‘Twitter Quitter? Here's How to Get Started on Mastodon’]

These actors utilised the attention centralisation of Twitter to mitigate the challenges associated with migrating to an unfamiliar platform. They assisted in building collective perception of Mastodon’s core functionality, and dexterity to utilise that functionality – each essential in the actualisation of the decentralised vision. Indeed, much of the evidence for pressures surrounding naturalisation comes not from user complaints, but rather from active community members that provide guidance and practical tips.

Similarly, numerous third-party tools were developed by the community to ease migration. For example, “Movetodon” allowed users to log in with their existing Twitter account and find the corresponding Mastodon accounts of each of their followers, or those they were following. These tools supported network maintenance and continuity encouraging movement between platforms.

“Extremely useful #TwitterMigration tool that quickly locates and allows you to follow en masse all your Twitter contacts who are also on Mastodon [link to movetodon.org]”

Community members also made instance threads to guide people away from the popular overcrowded Mastodon servers, towards smaller ones. These often focused on pushing users towards servers which catered to a specific niche, or community – a core strength of a decentralised platform ecosystem.

“I'm making this thread to track specialized Mastodon Servers as they emerge, for my own use to track them for making recommendations to friends, and also happily sharing in the hopes it might be helpful to some of you, too. #TwitterMigration #MastodonMigration”

This sentiment was echoed in a tweet from the official Mastodon Twitter account immediately following Musk’s acquisition:

“Some Mastodon servers are under very heavy load during the past few days due to the extreme spike in user numbers. Remember, no matter which server you sign-up on, you get access to the same decentralized network. You don't have to choose the popular ones!”

In this way, though there is significant attention inequality on Twitter, we see that key users utilise such attention to push for decentralisation on the new platform. They make clear the existence of alternatives, providing those migrating with options beyond the largest communities. More technically savvy users created their own instances in response, mobilising their dexterity across platforms to advertise these instances on the tags.

“Looking for a new, fast #Mastodon server to move to? I've just launched [link to Mastodon instance] check it out! I've been an instance admin since 2019, but this brand new one is open to the public to help spread the load around :) #mastodonmigration”

Further, because the pressures surrounding pace and infrastructure particularly impact the larger Mastodon servers, such efforts also worked with these pressures to encourage decentralisation. The rapid closing of large servers that resulted from the movement's pace shifted from refusing access to Mastodon in the short-term, to allowing access while demanding decentralisation.

In each case, though the analysis showed a somewhat limited actualisation of decentralisation, by examining Twitter activity over the period, we see that community members worked actively to steer the movement towards the Mastodon vision. This is despite pressures towards centralisation that emerge through organisation on Twitter. Musk's purchase of Twitter exposed the fragility of a structure of ownership which enabled one to purchase extensive control over a platform and the discourses hosted therein. The solution to such a problem, however, remained open, and required ongoing idealisation for an alternative to be put into scene. Moral entrepreneurs utilised the crisis to problematise the acquisition and situate Mastodon as an alternative site– both in the sense it provides a Musk-free environment, and that its decentralised design prevents a Musk-esque acquisition in the future.

7.9 Conclusion – Fuelling and shaping moral action

This chapter has explored moral actions of mediated outrage by following the mass user migration to Mastodon. In tracing an empirical case, this chapter developed a theoretical scaffold for understanding contemporary forms of moral enterprise in relation to digital platforms, modelling three related processes of idealisation, materialisation, and actualisation. These processes build on Becker's existing formulation to construct a theory of mediated moral enterprise that augments contemporary work on materialised action and affordance. This illustrates the utility of approaching platforms in terms of moralisation and supports future work exploring the relation between digital platforms and moral enterprise.

Using this theoretical work, I positioned the migration as a form of moral enterprise, and examined the extent to which the vision of decentralisation was actualised during the #TwitterMigration in late 2022. The mass migration resulted in somewhat limited actualisation of the decentralised vision. While the Mastodon network encouraged open communication between instances, resulting in no one server displaying overwhelming network centrality, the movement of users still concentrated in several large instances. This is in part due to the pressures resulting from user and network embeddedness in a legacy platform, where centralisation is a core feature. Pressures of naturalisation, attention, and pace work either to encourage centralisation, or discourage the migration. Despite these pressures, an ongoing process of idealisation through mediated moral enterprise worked to steer the movement in line with the Mastodon vision.

Abstracting these dynamics, these pressures represent a more general tension between moving from what is idealised to what is actualised through a platform's materialisations. That is, although users idealised a decentralised alternative to Twitter, and Mastodon materialised these ideals, the mass migration as a process of actualisation was constrained by Twitter's materialised features for centralised communication. This illustrates a distinctive challenge with outrage driven action which is both targeted at and shaped by digital platforms. This of course is particularly salient in this case because we have two "competing" platforms which utilise different mechanisms of moral enterprise.

This is both in the sense that Musk's Twitter and Mastodon posit entirely different "ideals" for what a platform should do and should be (i.e. Twitter as a centralised platform on which free speech absolutism is imposed, and Mastodon as a decentralised alternative absent of a single "leader"), as well as entirely different ways of actualising these ideals (i.e. Musk through top-down control, and Mastodon through grassroots development and mass migration). We see that because the outrage was performed on Twitter, and the migration was similarly organised through this, the platform bends the way that prefers the Twitter's existing ideals. This poses a distinctive constraint of the capabilities of mediated outrage to hold platforms accountable, and actualise alternative ideals which stray far from the existing status quo.

Chapter 8: Cross-Case Analysis

I have so far conducted three case studies of mediated moral outrage. In each study, I brought together one or more sensitising concepts to understand the relevant component of outrage - the *spread* of outrage, the *social functions* of outrage, and the *moral actions* of outrage. In each case, I have also identified a general tension that emerged in the mediation of moral outrage. These three tensions serve as general critiques of the ability of individuals to challenge platforms through outrage, when that outrage is mediated by platforms. Returning to the cyclical nature of this thesis problem, they illustrate distinct points of tension that emerge in the relationship between the platform as a mediator of outrage and as a target of outrage. While each of these tensions serve as useful illustrations in their own right, there is still the question of generality – that is, to what extent are these the unique manifestations of specific platform mediations and outrage events, versus more general tensions which may occur across contexts. To examine this, this chapter will conduct six micro case studies applying the concepts identified to each other case (see Table 7).

Component and core concept	Original Case Study	Micro Case Studies (this chapter)
Component: <i>Spread</i> Core concept: Online Firestorms	Spotify boycott (Chapter 5)	1. Robinhood short squeeze: Galvanising the collective through platform antagonisms 2. Twitter Migration: Musk as an amplifier of harassment
Component: <i>Social Functions</i> Core concept: Interaction Rituals	Robinhood short squeeze (Chapter 6)	1. Twitter Migration: The Mastodon handle as a symbol of resistance 2. Spotify boycott: Performing the boycott through platform screenshots
Component: <i>Moral Action</i> Core concept: Mediated Moral Enterprise	Twitter migration (Chapter 7)	1. Robinhood short squeeze: Disrupting big finance through big finance

		2. Spotify boycott: Constraining the platform boycott
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Table 7 Breakdown of components and case studies

My goal here is two-fold. First, I aim to illustrate the applicability of each component across cases. I have tried to think through how each component is best explored in each case study, given the situational mix of events, platforms and methods. This means I have not rigidly applied the methods originally set out in each case study. The aim here is not to show that these are universal aspects of outrage that are rigidly generalisable, but rather to help identify any aspects which are generic across contexts. Second, I aim to explore each of the tensions I have identified. My goal here is to again think with an eye to generalise and to distil what may be core to each of these tensions beyond each empirical case. This should give a slightly different perspective on each case study, as well as provide an important empirical elaboration on the tensions of mediated outrage.

8.1 The spread of outrage: online firestorms

In Chapter 5 I conceptualised the online firestorm as way of understanding the spread of outrage. I argued that as outrage spreads throughout networks, it tends to cascade – revealing new issues and violations. This often occurs through the amplifiers of the firestorm who situate an accusation which they amplify throughout their network. As the firestorm continues to spread, new actors are drawn in - each bringing their own ideological framework, social network, and understanding of the controversy. This model draws heavily from Alice Marwick's work on MMNH. In line with this, the tension here is that just as a firestorm cascades, so too does the counter-firestorm or reaction to the firestorm. In the Spotify case we saw the generation of a distinctive counter-firestorm which cascaded based on various attacks on the amplifiers of the original firestorm. This cascading was not neutral, primarily targeting those characteristics which are “marked”, much like how Marwick situates “attack vectors” in MMNH. In turn, this places a

conditional on who can be an amplifier of an online firestorm, as such harassment is not likely to be faced equally.

Exploring the spread of the Robinhood short squeeze and the Twitter migration through this lens adds some depth to these general findings. Firstly, in both cases we see the potential for firestorms to reveal elements of platforms which would otherwise be taken for granted. The outrage places such considerations into the spotlight for public scrutiny, and situates ways of thinking about platform responsibility. Secondly, in the Twitter migration we see that Musk instigates a counter-firestorm in response to the migration, leveling targeted attacks on the amplifiers. Again, these generally revolve around marked characteristics – limiting who can act as an amplifier. Finally, in the Robinhood case we see a contrary dynamic whereby attacks on the participants actually work to valorise and energise the movement. Reddit users employ mainstream media attacks as a badge of honour. In both cases, this bolsters the argument that counter-firestorms largely work to reinforce existing politics of speech – in one case the counter-firestorm being a force for *silencing* the firestorm and in another a force for *galvanising* the firestorm, with this being determined largely by *who* involved in the firestorm.

8.1.1 Robinhood: Galvanising the collective through platform antagonisms

Amplification works slightly differently on Reddit. Whereas it makes sense to follow users as amplifiers on Twitter, Reddit generally discourages such pedestalling of individual users. r/WallStreetBets does often provide exceptions to this rule, as individual users who have made particularly high-risk trades are often valorised. In the context of the short squeeze, for example, we saw one particular user – DFV - emerge as a sort of symbolic leader, or amplifier, of the squeeze. We also saw several politicians, such as AOC and Ted Cruz, as well as several idols of capitalism, such as Elon Musk and Chamath Palihapitiya, emerge as prominent figures. These figures often used external platforms, such as Twitter, to make their claims. These claims were then reamplified by the community on the subreddit. This shows cross-platform amplification similar to what we

saw in the Spotify firestorm, where Young's initial claims were posted on his personal website and then circulated on Twitter and in the news media.

In line with this, to identify and follow the amplifiers in the short squeeze, I looked to identify the entities mentioned in the post titles. By entities I mean established individuals, groups, or institutions. My aim here was first to identify key amplifiers on the subreddit, then to identify any other actors which had been pulled into the firestorm, and finally to make sense of the relationship between them. To identify entities, SpACy's named entity recognition (NER) was applied to the dataset of post titles. I also included unconventional identifiers that were identified in Chapter 6 (such as "retards" and "apes"). I pooled together a list of identifiers for each entity, which I then searched against the post titles to get a frequency and entity co-occurrence. Using these entities, a co-occurrence network was built using Gephi (Figure 45).

The key actors identified in Figure 45 closely reflect the dynamics of “symbolic leadership” discussed in Chapter 6. For example, we see that both “AOC” and “Ted Cruz” are mentioned frequently, and that they display a close proximity. This is consistent with argument that they regularly appeared together in titles to legitimise outrage through evidence of unlikely political unity. Moreover, we see similarly see figures such as “Elon Musk”, “DFV”, and “Mark Cuban” feature prominently.

We also see how the firestorm cascades to new actors and violations. First are the individuals who are pulled in. For example, it is not just Robinhood, but also their CEO “Vlad Tenev” who features prominently. Tenev serves as a way of rendering the platform for targeted attacks, opening the door for targeted harassment rather than just platform criticisms. More interesting though, is the prevalence of the “Play Store”, “App Store”, “Google”, and “Apple”. Examining mentions of “Google” we see that the firestorm cascades to target them due to their removal of negative Robinhood reviews on the Google Play store.

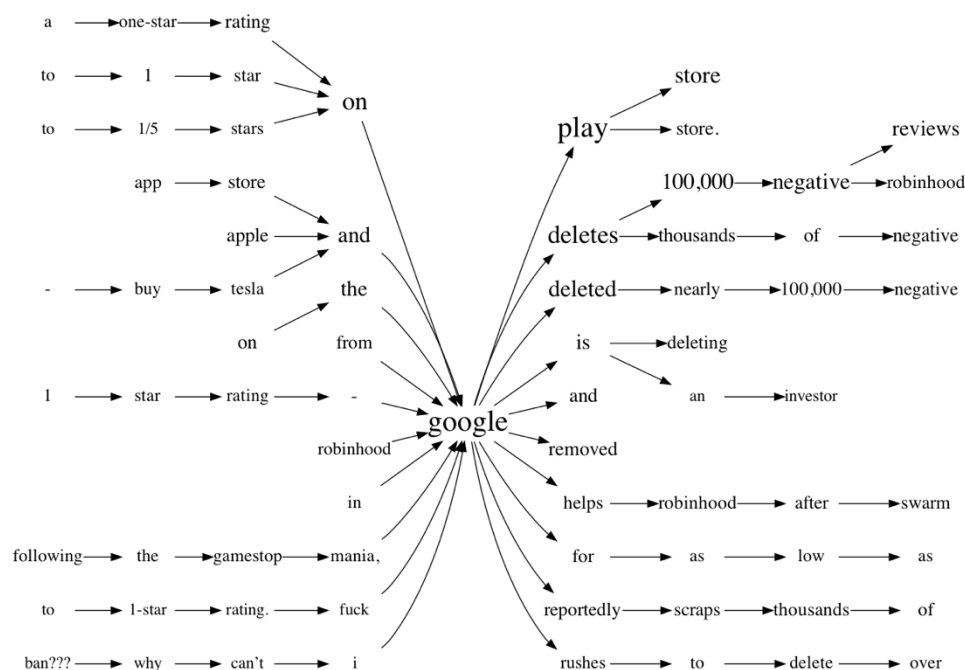


Figure 46 WordTree of “Google”

Looking at a WordTree of “Google” (Figure 46), we see this how this responsibility plays out. First, are calls to bring Robinhood to a one-star rating on the Play Store. These appear in the sentences preceding Google, suggesting ways that users can act through Google to express their problems with Robinhood. In this way, users coordinate attention to Google as a platform *through* which to express their outrage. In turn, Google (and similarly Apple with their “App Store”) are too imagined through a political lens and ascribed an associated responsibility. In this case, we see this as an assumption that these platforms should take a hands-off approach to moderation, and the reviews of listed apps should accurately reflect the sentiment of the users. In the sentences preceding Google, we see a failure of this responsibility. We see accusations that Google has “deleted thousands of negative reviews”, or that it has “helped Robinhood”. Here we see the outrage cascade, now amplifying attention to Google as a target in the outrage.

In this way, the cascade begins to reveal the layered platform ecosystem in which Robinhood exists. It shifts attention to the infrastructural core of the ecosystem, here so to Google and Apple, placing these platforms under public scrutiny. Such corporations act as “*online gatekeepers* through which data flows are managed, processed, stored, and channelled” (p. 13, emphasis added) and are often taken for granted, or seen as natural and inevitable. We see an acute responsibility placed on both Apple and Google to act as neutral conduits through which apps can be downloaded and reviewed by users, rather than the gatekeepers of protest legitimacy.

Also relevant in the entity map are mentions of mainstream news outlets. Indeed, screenshots of news articles appeared prominent in the PixPlot in Chapter 6 (Figure 27). Examining this news coverage on Reddit, we see that many of these news screenshots shared on r/WallStreetBets are explicitly antagonistic of the subreddit.

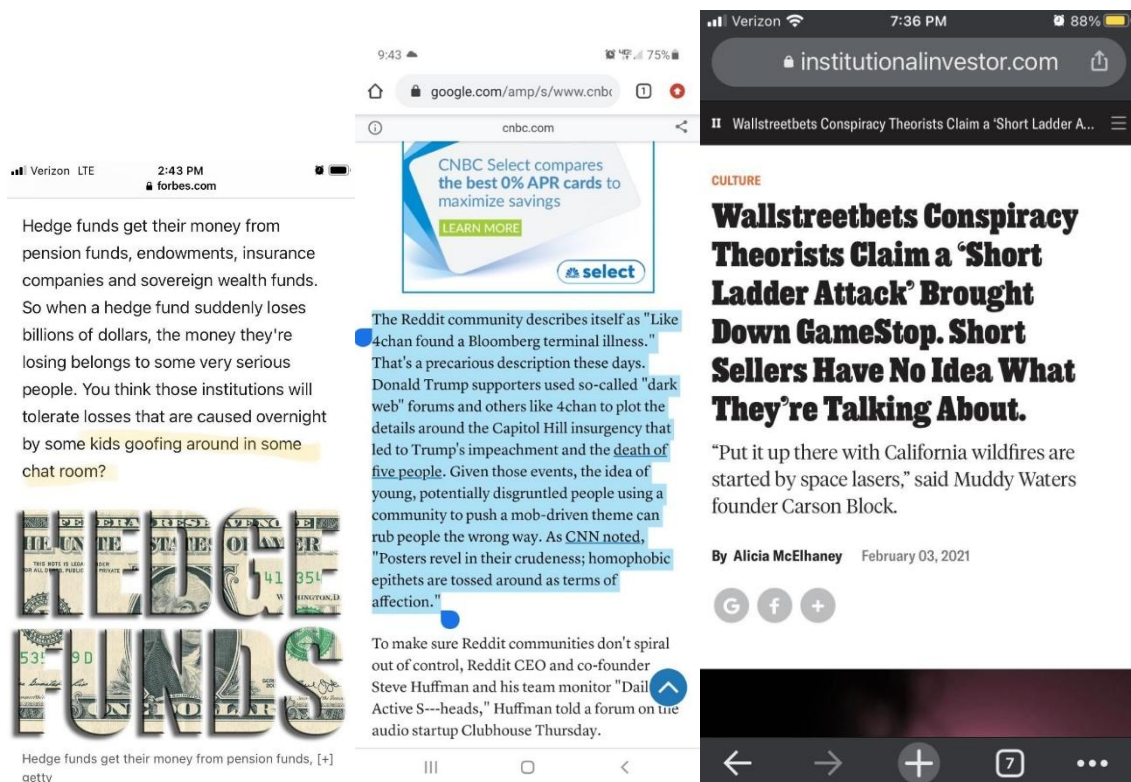


Figure 47 News article screenshots posted on r/WallStreetBets

Here (Figure 47), we see mainstream outlets situate r/WallStreetBets as a chaotic, childish and irrational community. This is perhaps not equivalent to the counter-firestorm that we saw in the Spotify case, or will see in the Musk case. However, the general dynamics of the counter-firestorm, whereby the “mob-driven” outrage becomes the target of attack appear salient here. We see here that it is both Reddit and its userbase which become the target of ridicule, with articles focusing on the platforms incapacity to host legitimate financial discussions, and its tendency to encourage crude mob-driven attacks on public order.

What is interesting, is that these attacks from the “mainstream media” seems to be used to build a sense of in-group solidarity within r/WallStreetBets. Each of these posts are accompanied by titles which valorise the community. Even when individual users are targeted by the media, this serves as a marker of success rather than instigating targeted harassment. For example, the when the user “u/Thicc_Ladies_PM_Me” (who was

presumably targeted because of their crude username) was mentioned in a Wall Street Journal article they proceeded to gloat to the WallStreetBets community:

Look ma, I'm famous! WSJ called me out for no reason in an article defending Robinhood. I don't even margin trade! 🤪 Boomer Wall St is scared and clueless 🤪

News

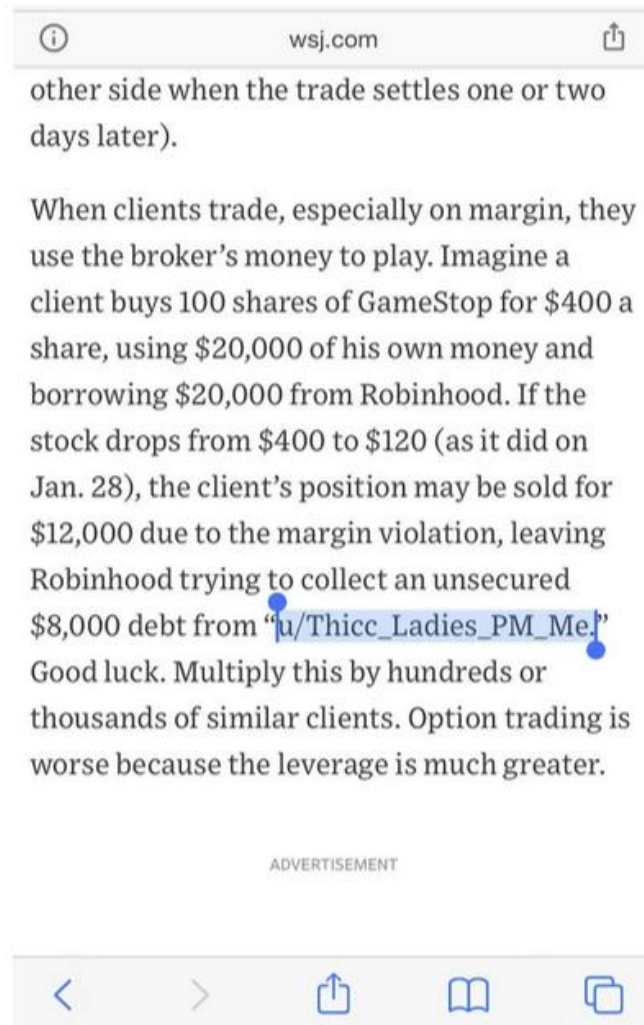


Figure 48 - A r/WallStreetBets user expresses glee at their name being mentioned in a WSJ article

Their post was accompanied by comments expressing a sense of enthusiasm and humour – e.g. “it says here on your resume that you were published in the Wall Street Journal?” - as well as others highlighting that the media was “painting the picture that we’re a bunch of gambling, immature degenerates”.

By constructing an attack on ones means for organisation, one’s position as a Redditor becomes a particularly salient marker of identity. In this way, the platform shapes outrage both through its mechanisms and conditions of affordance, but also in what these affordances symbolise to participants. We can see this as a sort of *recursive public* – or “a public that is constituted by a shared concern for maintaining the means of association through which they come together as a public” (Kelty, 2013, p. 1). This necessity for such a public becomes salient through platform antagonisms of the news media. In this sense, the role of mainstream coverage on Reddit served as a mechanism for platform-based boundary-work – it worked to juxtapose Reddit’s communicative democratisation with the mainstream media’s perpetuation of institutional power. Just as Robinhood was initially constructed as a symbol of financial disruption, Reddit achieved symbolic association with communicative transformation.

The fact that this explicitly antagonistic media coverage is used to generate movement solidarity is interesting when we contrast it to the counter-firestorm in the Spotify case. There, we saw that the firestorm cascade includes marked attacks on age, gender, educational status, or political associations. These are very real, personalised attacks on individuals, which I argued could have a chilling effect on who can amplify firestorms. In the case of the Robinhood firestorm we see users are more often mocked as a collective, and these attacks appear to contribute to movement solidarity. When users are targeted as individuals they are generally protected by the veil of pseudonymity. Indeed, sharing such attacks from the mainstream media on r/WallStreetBets appears as common practice. This suggests that counter-movements which delegitimise or attack a firestorm can have either a silencing or galvanising effect – with this determined in part by *how* the firestorm is amplified, as well as *who* is doing the amplifying.

8.1.2 Twitter Migration: Musk as an amplifier of harassment

Whereas the Robinhood firestorm and the Spotify firestorm both were relatively acute events – that is, they rose to prominence and then largely dissipated over the course of several months – Musk’s acquisition of Twitter has had its grasp on public attention for well over a year, and as of writing in May 2024 shows no signs of slowing down. Indeed, entirely new controversies have continued to spark public outrage and reignite the firestorm. These have ranged from the legal battles with Australia’s ESafety commission (Grattan, 2024), to the banning of left-leaning journalists (Tenbarge, 2024), or even to Musk tweeting support for J.K Rowling’s transphobia but asking her to “also [post] about other positive and interesting matters” (Musk, 2024). Each event has seen waves of outrage directed at Musk, and often resulted in counter-firestorms targeting those which have opposed his actions (see for example, Bolza, 2024).

In this way, the events have followed the firestorm model quite closely, albeit over a long period of time. Indeed, once again the language of online firestorms was used regularly by both journalists and academics to describe the reaction to the acquisition and subsequent events (see for example Shapero, 2023). While I could have applied a similar methodology to that used in Chapter 5, this approach would have too large a scope for the goals of this chapter. This is true even if I restricted my analysis to 1.7m tweets collected in Chapter 7. As such, I instead homed in my focus to Musk’s tweets specifically, and then used these to branch out further. I also extended my timeline to include March 2023 as this included staggered release of the *Twitter Files*. My intention here was to home in on the generalised tension which I had identified – for counter-firestorms to police firestorms based on existing politics of speech. That to ask – did Musk amplify counter-firestorm(s) which had this effect?

Musk’s initial acquisition marked a period of chaos on the platform. As discussed in Chapter 7 this resulted in a mass migration of users away from the platform to alternatives such as Mastodon. More problematically for Musk, however, this also resulted in a mass exodus of advertisers due to concerns that their content would appear next to hate speech, or over more general concerns over the state and direction of the

platform. Musk initially took a relatively conciliatory approach to the advertisers, promising them that Twitter would not become a platform for hate speech. In the days following the acquisition, he tweeted a plea to advertisers to stay on the platform:

“Fundamentally, Twitter aspires to be the most respected advertising platform in the world that strengthens your brand and grows your enterprise. To everyone who has partnered with us, I thank you. Let us build something extraordinary together.” (Musk, 2022 as cited in Spangler, 2022)

His tweets towards the users leaving the platform were less conciliatory, however. Musk frequently constructed these users disparagingly as “woke mobs” or “activist groups”. One tweet, for example accused those opposing him of being non-player-characters (NPCs):

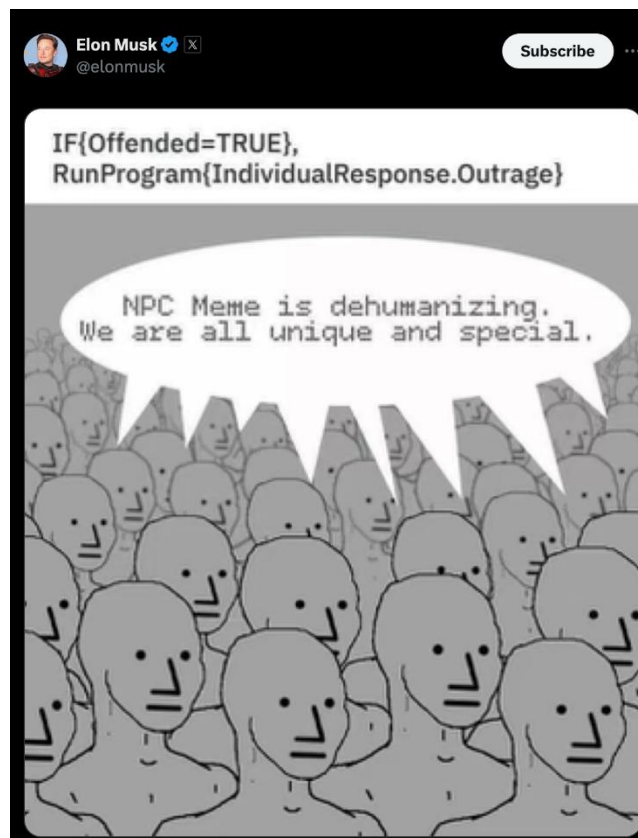


Figure 49 Musk Tweet of a meme attacking those accusing those outraged at his acquisition of being NPCs

The NPC is a term for a video game character which has scripted interactions with the human player, such as a quest giver or a trader. The meme is widely used in right-wing circles as “shorthand for individuals apparently incapable of thinking for themselves” (Gallagher and Topinka 2023). Musk in this way, is delegitimising the expression of outrage against him to be an inorganic and irrational response that he as the “real human player” can overcome, rather than a genuine and organic reaction to his actions. Despite situating them as NPCs, Musk did regularly note the damage that such “activist groups” were causing to his platform.

“Twitter has had a massive drop in revenue, due to activist groups pressuring advertisers, even though nothing has changed with content moderation and we did everything we could to appease the activists. Extremely messed up! They’re trying to destroy free speech in America.”

For much of the early firestorm and platform migration, this general approach of attacking users and appeasing advertisers was common. Musk even went on to thank advertisers in December 2022 for coming back to Twitter, despite the pressure from such activists. However, this relatively conciliatory attitude towards advertisers did not last, with Musk later telling Disney, Apple, Comcast and others for who had withdrawn advertising to “go fuck [themselves] yourself ” (Clayton, 2023).

However, perhaps most prominent was Musk’s attacks on the *amplifiers* of the controversy. Musk did not just render the firestorm through nebulous constructions of outraged mobs, or by punching laterally at advertisers. Rather, much like the Spotify boycott, attention was drawn to those *individuals* who ended up situating a central accusation against Musk – instigating a counter-firestorm of harassment against these individuals. This particularly included journalists and ex-employees who spoke out against the state of Twitter.

Hali Thorleifsson, for example, was an employee of Twitter who accused Musk of wrongful termination, drawing attention to Twitter’s massive post-takeover layoffs and inadequacy of reasonable process. Following his accusation, Musk singled out Thorleifsson, drawing attention to his disability and accusing him of laziness:

“The reality is that this guy (who is independently wealthy) did no actual work, claimed as his excuse that he had a disability that prevented him from typing, yet was simultaneously tweeting up a storm. Can’t say I have a lot of respect for that.”

Musk’s counter-accusations against Thorleifsson, including suggestions of faking a disability, led to significant harassment towards Thorleifsson, largely reflecting Musk’s framing of the situation. Musk’s followers echoed his sentiment, calling Musk “based” for firing “lazy” employees or accusing Thorleifsson of “sabotaging” Twitter. However, this did also fuel significant backlash against Musk. Thorleifsson’s later responses to Musk’s demands of “proof of disability” generated a massive wave of support for Thorleifsson, leading to Musk later issuing a public apology.

Another, (now ex-) employee, Yoel Roth, faced similar attacks. Roth was previously the head of trust and safety at Twitter, but resigned on the 10th of November 2022 due to concerns over maintaining adequate content moderation at Twitter under Musk’s leadership. He particularly highlighted the internal challenges posed by Musk’s constant calls for free speech absolutism. Roth posted his concerns publicly, circulating them through the New York Times opinion section (Roth, 2022). Just a days after these accusations, Musk’s *Twitter Files* released an expose on the inadequacies of Twitter’s trust and safety department under Roth’s leadership, accusing them of a “liberal bias”. This was accompanied by Musk tweeting a direct attack on Roth, accusing him of holding paedophilic sympathies.

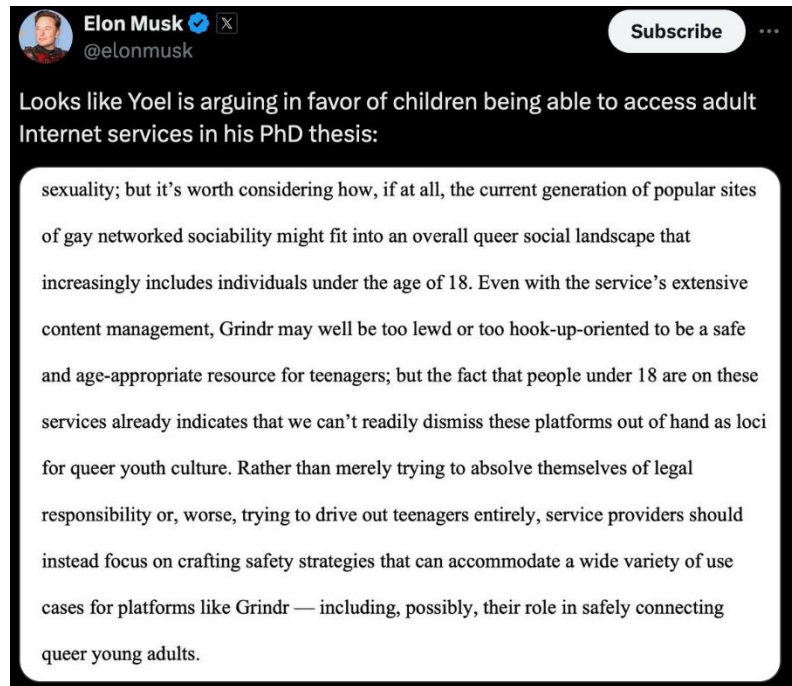


Figure 50 Musk Tweet of a section of Yoel Roth’s PhD thesis in which he discussed the use of Grindr by individuals under 18 years of age

As Yoel described, this again led to a torrent of harassment -

“... ‘You need to swing from an old oak tree for the treason you have committed. Live in fear every day,’ said one of thousands of threatening tweets and emails... That post, and hundreds of others like it, were violations of the very policies I’d worked to develop and enforce. Under new management, Twitter turned a blind eye, and the posts remain on the site today. Inundated with threats, and with no real options to push back or protect ourselves, my husband and I had to sell our home and move.”. (Roth, 2023)

Again, we see that Musk’s generation of a counter-firestorm largely fuelled by a rhetoric that reinforces existing social inequalities. That is, he accuses Roth, who is a gay male, of paedophilia echoing a longstanding derogatory stereotype of the LGBTIQ+ community.

These waves of harassment directed by Musk were not limited just to his employees, but also journalists. For example, after releasing an investigation into Twitter’s failure to

protect users from hateful content, BBC journalist Mariana Spring had her story retweeted by Musk. He commented sarcastically

“Sorry for turning Twitter from nurturing paradise into a place that has... trolls”

“Trolls are kinda fun”

Spring then describes how she “found [herself] myself wading through more hateful messages... Mr Musk's tweets triggered a huge volume of hate, some sent from accounts which had previously been suspended... Many combined misogynistic slurs with abusive and sexualised language. I was repeatedly called a bitch and much nastier insults” (Spring, 2023).

In each case we see that Musk generates a counter-firestorm that renders the mob by focusing on its amplifiers, discrediting the movement by personifying it through these individuals. This personification opens the door to traditional forms of attack, leading to new accusations against the amplifiers. In turn, we see that these attacks generally reflect existing points of vulnerability, and reinforce existing social inequalities.

8.2 The social functions of outrage: interaction rituals

In Chapter 6 I utilised Collins’s (2004) work on IRCs to explore the social functions of outrage. Specifically, I looked at the ability for outrage to create transient collectives through shared emotions and the mutual entrainment of actions. I explored how these sentiments became stored in symbolic objects, particularly so the markers of collective identity that were prevalent during the squeeze – the “autists”, “retards” and “retail traders”, but also key users such as “DFV” or objects of indignation such as “Melvin Capital” or “Robinhood”.

I highlighted the power of outrage to bind individuals together and create a distinctive sense of solidarity. However, I noted that this cohesion was always formed through exclusion. This tension manifest not just in intuitive forms of exclusion – i.e. the exclusion

of the object(s) of outrage – but also within the ritual itself. That is, the boundaries drawn were not just between “us” and “them” but between various forms of “us” and between various forms of “them”. Drawing from Collins, there was an ambivalence at both the level of ritual “status” (who can participate) as well as ritual “power” (who has control over the movement). Access to the success of the short squeeze was restricted to those inside the r/WallStreetBets vernacular, but the access to failures and subsequent outrage was allowed to be felt more broadly. This in turn came with a certain playfulness in moving between a largely centralised movement which was led by DfV, and a strictly decentralised movement where power resided in the totalising imagination of the apes.

Both the Twitter migration and the Spotify boycott posit a slightly different type of ritual dynamic, insofar as they occur primarily on Twitter and do not appear to display the same degree of collectivisation through markers of identity. This being said, each also aligns closely with the general tension identified – they both demonstrate the power of outrage to unify and bind individuals, but do so through various forms of exclusion. In the Twitter migration we see this binding be achieved through the general form of the usernames, acting as a performance of one’s resistance to the Musk acquisition. Here, the exclusion comes in resistance to Musk, and by association his supporters, but also more generally in the placement of oneself as separate from the general Twitter userbase. In the Spotify firestorm and counter-firestorm we see how these dynamics of unification through exclusion can result in distinctive challenges for platforms. Spotify’s failure to take a side during the controversy resulted in them becoming the object of indignation for two diametrically opposed firestorms – at the one attacked for not taking enough action, and at the other attacked for taking any action at all. In this way Spotify managed to act as a unified object of indignation, without strictly fostering unity between collectives.

8.2.1 Twitter Migration: The Mastodon handle as a symbol of resistance

There is a clear overlap in the considerations posited by mediated moral enterprise and interaction rituals. Both sensitise our attention to a shared focus in attention, and mechanism of collective action. However, whereas I utilised mediated moral enterprise to explore the tensions which emerge in this collective action, between what is idealised,

materialised and actualised, the interaction ritual concerns the symbolic productions of shared actions. That is, the community that the mutual action produces, as well as the symbolic objects which store the emotional energy of the movement. To follow this process during the Mastodon Migration, I conducted qualitative content analysis of the top 500 tweets in the smaller dataset of 27587 tweets gathered in Chapter 7. This data set included only those tweets which had a Mastodon tag in either the user description, tweet text, or user profile name. My focus was identifying first the emotional valences of the movement – as directed at and stored in Mastodon, Twitter and Musk, respectively – and then identifying the performative dimensions of sharing Mastodon usernames.

Starting with the emotional valences of the movement, in Chapter 7 I highlighted the strong sense of hope and excitement in the movement to Mastodon that was mixed with a distinctive confusion with using the new service. Following Collins, such mixed emotions become stored in the platform itself – imbuing Mastodon with a sense of either hope or confusion, depending on the participants experience. Looking at how Twitter emerged as an object of focus among those who migrated, there is also a complicated emotional mix. I originally simplified this to be a reaction of indignation towards “Musk’s Twitter”, however the reaction was more complicated.

First was the strong sense of loss, and mourning at Twitter’s demise. This was especially prevalent on “#RIPTwitter” and “#GoodByeTwitter”. Much of this was directed to the communities and social networks users had developed on the platform, which were going to be lost in the move between platforms:

“This is sad. I'll miss you, you magnificent sons-a-bitches. #RIPTwitter”

Others spoke more directly about the opportunities afforded to them by Twitter itself:

“Twitter was a rare opportunity for me to pursue my childhood dream of writing jokes for a huge ass audience. Some of my comedy, media, and film idols actually followed and paid attention. It was a wild fun ride. I will miss it. #GoodByeTwitter [Mastodon username]”

“I have to deal with the fact that I have loved this platform and the connections it has allowed, but it is now being run by a person with *NO* respect for truth, and who is ruling with lies. I do not want to support this private company that is profiting an asshole. #Twexit”

In each case there was a sense that the “old Twitter” had provided something special that had been lost as a result of Musk’s acquisition, or that was going to be lost in the movement to Mastodon. This usually implied a separation between Twitter and Musk, where Musk emerged as the object of indignation and Twitter as the object of pity and loss. Intersecting with this were users expressing general dissatisfaction with the “new Twitter”:

“My timeline doesn’t behave like it used to. I am getting so much irrelevant crap it is getting boring. I had it so well curated until Musk barged in. Is this happening to anyone else? #TwitterTakeover”

“I’m noticing more and more people are locking their accounts. The level of harassment is over the top since the muskrat took over. #TwitterIsDead”

Though these usually implied separation between pre-musk Twitter and post-musk Twitter, others were keen to highlight the existing issues with platform.

“Come over to Mastodon! It’s filling up fast with academics as we escape the increasingly hate-filled blue bird platform, has better anti-harassment policies, is decentralised, & no algorithms that thrive on pile-ups! @joinmastodon #mastodon #opensource #decentralisesocialmedia

These more directly situated Twitter as the object of indignation, not just Musk’s Twitter. Indeed, as outlined in Chapter 7, Mastodon was not created in response to the Musk acquisition, but rather due to existing issues with the platform’s amplification of hate-speech, commercialisation and centralised control that existed years prior to the acquisition.

In each case, Twitter emerged as a somewhat open repository for user's emotions - in some cases it was imbued with a sadness and longing, and in others it was more directly

the target of indignation. Where we do see something closer to an emotional consensus among those migrating is in the shared outrage towards Musk. It is here that we see the migration as a whole display a form of emotional entrainment.

“Restating this. The tanking of Twitter is either due to massive incompetence borne of dripping hubris & entitlement on the part of Musk, or it is the deliberate malicious act of a sociopath. #TwitterDown #TwitterTakeover #TwitterBlue #TwitterMigration”

“So, Elon Musk either is a Nazi, or wants to be liked by them. Just who everyone wants to run one of the biggest social media platforms, right? #RIPTwitter”

This shared outrage towards Musk fosters a momentary sense of commonality and community between those migrating from Twitter. Musk emerges as a symbolic object which receives and stores this collective indignation. Unlike the short squeeze where we saw the emergence of exclusive cultural barriers to outsiders, the primary point of division here is embodied in Musk himself. This leaves the movement open to anyone who shares a similar sentiment towards Musk, only excluding those who do not share this sentiment.

Another important point of contrast with the short squeeze is in the formation of a *collective identity*. In the short squeeze we saw markers that worked to represent the collective such as “autists”, “apes” or “retail traders”. The Mastodon migration initially appears to lack such markers, however when we examine the shared mechanism of action – the display of Mastodon usernames – we see a sort of collective identity emerge in the general *form* of the username.

In Chapter 7 I highlighted the functional purpose of the usernames – namely in facilitating a move to Mastodon – and deliberately looked for points of difference in these usernames (i.e. different servers) to understand decentralisation. Now, I am looking past these points of difference and looking for the commonalities – namely how the shared form of the username signals a move to Mastodon generally. Each tag follows a simple format

which makes it easily distinguishable as a Mastodon username - @username@instancename.tld.

While users may be migrating to different instances, this consistent format allows for a commonality in action and general purpose to develop. Examining where these tags appear, we see that it is primarily in the user descriptions or usernames (Table 8)

Location of Mastodon Handle	Total Count	Percentage of Tweets
Tweet text	4250	15.41%
Username	8855	32.10%
User description	18357	66.54%

Table 8 Number of occurrences of a Mastodon tag in either the text, username or user description

In practice, this means that activity on Twitter is not simply centred around the synchronisation of posting usernames as an action - for example, tweeting “you can find me on Mastodon at [username]”. Rather, the action is often contained in the addition of a username to the user’s Twitter profile description or profile name. In this way, the Mastodon username is often *appended* to the users' performances of indignation towards Musk, sadness and loss towards Twitter, or hope and confusion towards Mastodon. It too then becomes imbued with each of these sentiments towards each of these objects. As the most distinctive emotional consensus which emerges is the indignation towards Musk, Mastodon usernames most clearly emerge as a symbol of resistance towards Musk.

These usernames serve as a way of performing a resistance to Musk’s ownership of the platform. The general form of the usernames emerges as a symbolic object in itself – acting as a way for users to differentiate themselves from other Twitter users, and more

importantly Musk and his supporters. In doing so we see the creation of a transient collective on Twitter - a community of new Mastodon users who are dissatisfied with Musk's ownership. This collective perhaps becomes more cohesive on Mastodon itself where users will actively engage on the new platform, however it too exists through these performances on Twitter.

8.2.2 Spotify: Performing the boycott through platform screenshots

As I noted briefly in Chapter 5 both the firestorm and counter-firestorm appeared to have their own mechanisms of action – the former encouraging *boycotting* and the latter encouraging *buycotting* (Boulianne, 2022). Through the lens of IRCs, where the mutual entrainment of such action creates collectives and imbues objects with symbolic significance, this gives a opportunity to compare the symbolic production of the firestorm and counter-firestorm.

To explore this, I focused primarily on the images shared in both the firestorm and counter- firestorm. This is because from my analysis in Chapter 5 images - particularly platform screenshots - appeared as a central way of performing the Spotify boycott and buycott. This dynamic appeared comparable to the way in which users performed the short squeeze on Reddit through screenshots of Robinhood. As such, utilised a similar method to conduct a distant reading of both the firestorm and counter-firestorm – however this time using Image Sorter which arranges images based on colouring (see Pearce et al., 2020). I then moved to a closer reading of individual image clusters.

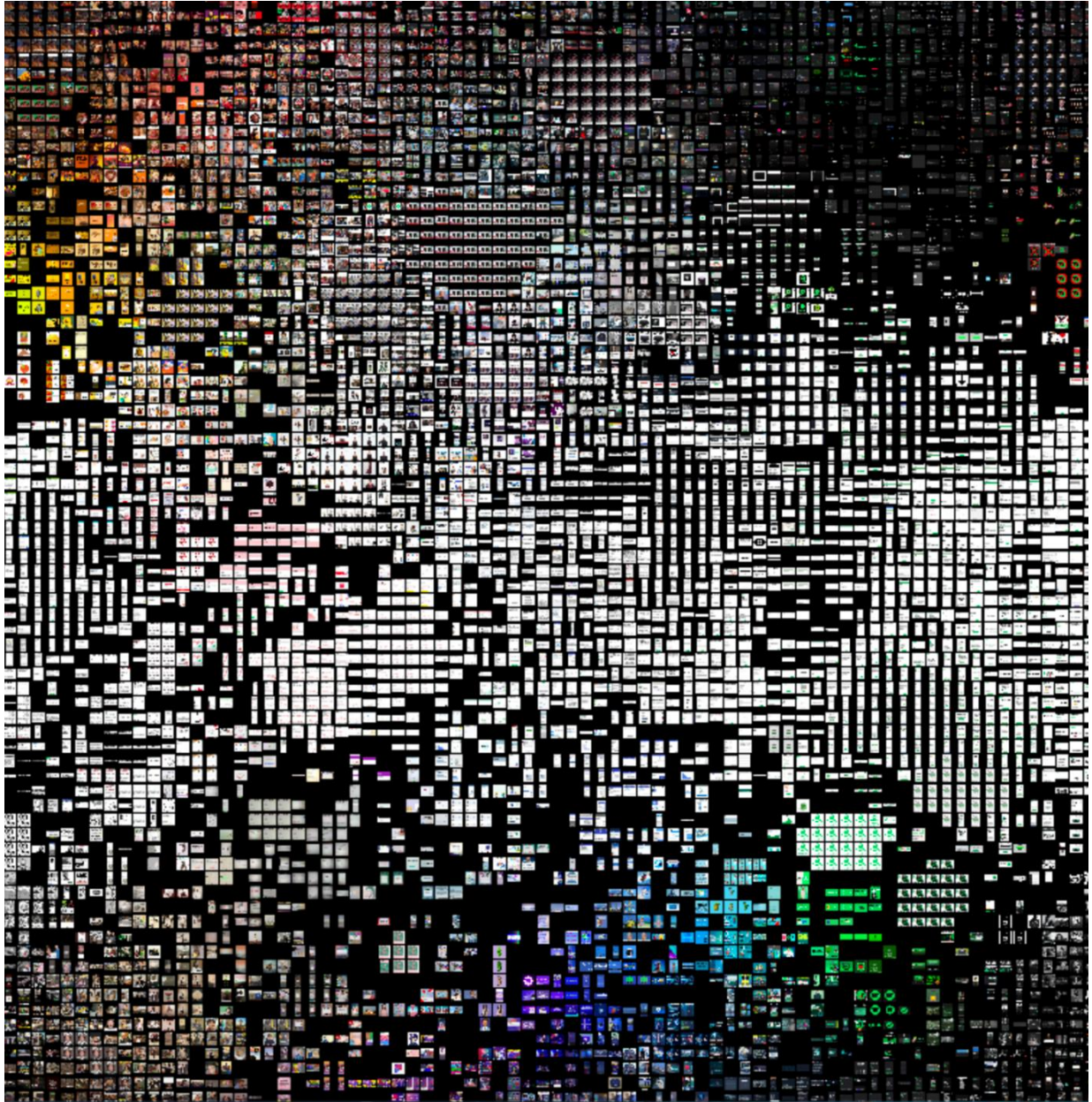


Figure 51 Meta image of posts on the Spotify firestorm tags, generated using Image Sorter V4

From a distant reading, most stark is the abundance of white in the middle of the image. Zooming in here, we see that varied screenshots of Spotify’s cancellation process are common (see Figure 52). This includes email confirmations from Spotify which read “we’re sad to see you go”, as well as direct screenshots of the process of cancellation (which are often accompanied with text giving reasoning for the user leaving). These various screenshots of Spotify cancellations make up roughly 1/6 of the meta image.

Following Collin's, we can see a sort of mutual entrainment of action forming here in the collective posting of screenshots of Spotify's cancellation process. As I argued in Chapter 5, Spotify clearly emerged as a target of outrage for various violations – i.e. platforming misinformation, platforming racism, poor music quality, not paying artists enough. These screenshots begin to hold such emotional energy. Spotify's cancellation interface becomes symbolic of this outrage - it becomes a means of taking action against Spotify, as well as a way of performing such outrage on Twitter.

Your plan

CANCELLED

Spotify Premium

Let us know more about why you are canceling:

3000+ COVID deaths per day in the US alone, and you have clearly chosen profit over life by continuing to platform Joe Rogan's disinformation.

How likely are you to subscribe to Spotify Premium again in the near future?

☐ Extremely likely
☐ Likely
☐ Neutral
☐ Unlikely
☒ Extremely unlikely

Skip Submit

1:14

spotify.com — Private

You've canceled Spotify Premium.

Your subscription will end on 2/15/22.
To help us improve Premium, please take a minute to tell us about why you canceled.

What's the main reason you canceled your Spotify Premium?

☐ I am switching to a different Spotify Premium plan
☐ I cannot find the music or podcasts that I like
☐ I had issues with payment and billing
☐ I cannot afford Spotify Premium
☐ I had issues with plan verification
☐ I don't use Spotify Premium enough
☐ I have found another audio or music service I like better
☐ I have had technical problems related to using Spotify Premium
☒ Other (please specify below)

Let us know more about why you are canceling:

FUCK JOE ROGAN. FUCK COVID DISINFORMATION.

How likely are you to subscribe to Spotify Premium again in the near future?

☐ Extremely likely
☐ Likely
☐ Neutral
☐ Unlikely
☒ Extremely unlikely

Skip Submit

You've canceled Spotify Premium.

Your subscription will end on 2/21/22.
To help us improve Premium, please take a minute to tell us about why you canceled.

What's the main reason you canceled your Spotify Premium?

☐ I am switching to a different Spotify Premium plan
☐ I have found another audio or music service I like better
☐ I had issues with payment and billing
☐ I cannot find the music or podcasts that I like
☐ I had issues with plan verification
☐ I cannot afford Spotify Premium
☐ I don't use Spotify Premium enough
☐ I have had technical problems related to using Spotify Premium
☒ Other (please specify below)

Let us know more about why you are canceling:

You profit from the promotion of misinformation through Joe Rogan's program, and given the choice to do something about it, you chose to do nothing...you continue to do nothing while people die. I am going back to Apple Music.

How likely are you to subscribe to Spotify Premium again in the near future?

☐ Extremely likely
☐ Likely
☐ Neutral
☐ Unlikely
☒ Extremely unlikely

Skip Submit

Figure 52 Various screenshots of the Spotify's cancellation interface

In addition to this, in the meta image (Figure 51) we see numerous distinctive meme clusters scattered throughout. These are visible as large patches of identical images. These meme clusters form when a large number of the same image are shared en masse. Zooming in on some of these meme clusters, much are dominated by various, usually unflattering, images of Joe Rogan, or are attacking Spotify (see Figure 53).

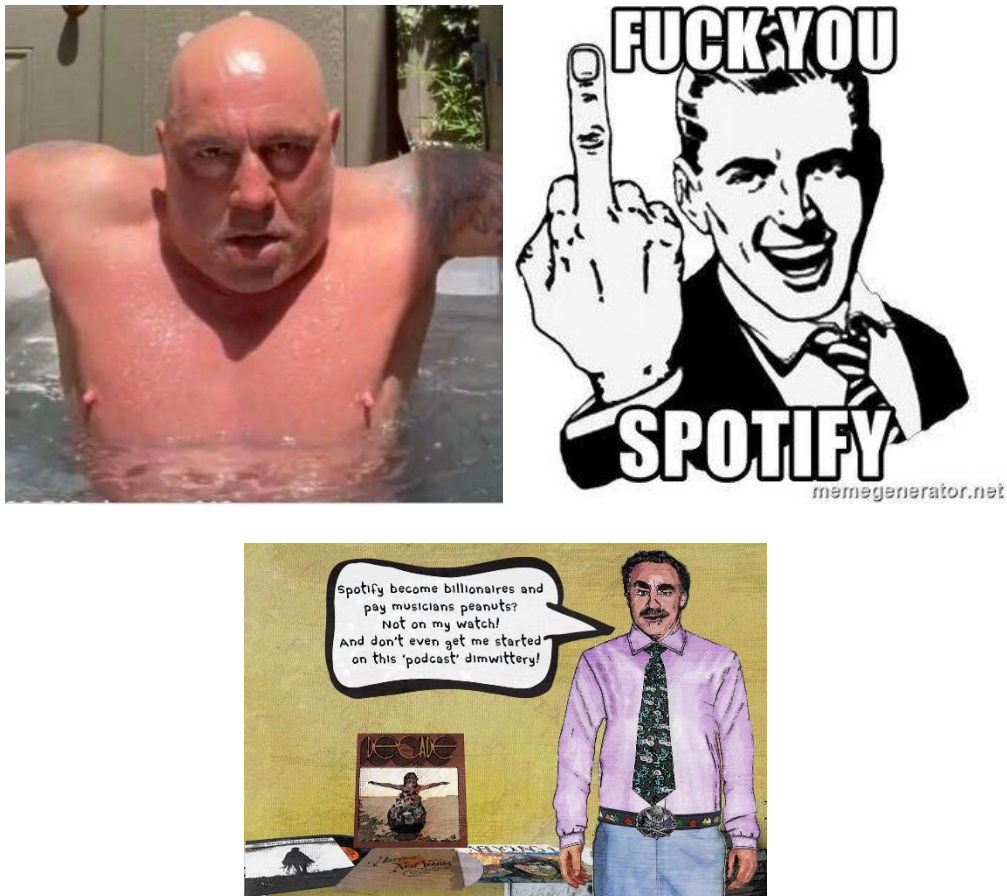


Figure 53 Various screenshots of memes in large meme clusters from the firestorm meta image.



Figure 54 Meta-image of the counter-firestorm tweets

At a distant reading the meta image counter-firestorm (Figure 54) appears somewhat similar that of the firestorm. There is again a distinctive separation between the light mode dark mode screenshots. Here, however a larger number of meme clusters dominate the meta image. These differences become more stark when we zoom in to the platform screenshots. Whereas in the firestorm these screenshots are mostly of the deletion process, here they are mostly of news articles and tweets. There is only one major cluster of screenshots of purchasing receipts for Spotify premium, which contains

around 20 images. This is far less pronounced than those cancelling Spotify in the boycott, where screenshots of cancellation took up approximately 1/6 of the meta image. At least in terms of the visual vernacular, the *buycott* seems far less prevalent as a means of action than the *boycott*. A simple reason for this is that users who support Rogan enough to engage in a buycott already have Spotify premium. However, this does not mean that there is an absence of mutual entrainment visible here. Rather, instead of coalescing around buying Spotify subscriptions, users are coalescing around the sharing of memes. This in turn takes on the emotional valence of the counter-firestorm.



Figure 55 Various screenshots of memes in large meme clusters from the counter-firestorm meta image

As we see in Figure 55, there is some variance among the memes. Some seem to be conspiratorial and anti-vaccine coded, while others appear to attack Young, the mainstream media or the firestorm mob more generally.

Further, though both #ThanksJoeRogan and #ThankYouSpotify received significant attention during the period - together being used a total of 768,470 times over the month - it was #thanksjoerogan which received by far the most activity. #ThanksJoeRogan appeared 512,252 times while #thankyouspotify only half as much, appearing 256,218 times. There certainly is a considerable expression of support for Spotify, however this is not close to as pronounced as that towards Rogan. This is an interesting distinction, because it highlights a point of misalignment between the framing of the firestorm and the framing of the counter movement.

Here emerges a distinct challenge for Spotify – on the one hand, the platform has taken on symbolic significance as a target of outrage in the firestorm due to its platforming of Rogan, however in the counter-firestorm it is Rogan who takes on the valorisation and solidarity. Spotify emerges as the primary point of difference in the firestorm - which gives individuals and artists to something to unite *against*. However, they do not take a central position as the symbolic object which people unite *under* during the counter-firestorm. This position is instead given to Rogan.

This dynamic was only exacerbated when Spotify caved to the firestorm and removed episodes of the JRE. As I argued in Chapter 5 this placed Spotify in the middle of two diametrically opposed firestorms. That is, a unified target of outrage but one that continued to provoke moral distinction.

“Sensible People: ‘I’m cancelling Spotify because of Joe Rogan’s racism, sexism and Covid disinformation.’ Conservatives: ‘I’m cancelling Spotify because they took down 110 episodes of Joe Rogan saying things I enjoy.’ #DeleteSpotify #cancelspotify #ByeSpotify #racistrogan”

Spotify’s removal of Rogan’s episodes was seen by the counter-firestorm as “caving” to the firestorm. However, to the firestorm it actually appeared as a wholly inadequate

measure that only reinforced the need for Rogan to be removed entirely, and raised questions as to their prior allegiance with him. By attempting to appease both sides, Spotify ultimately emerged as a unitary object of indignation for both the firestorm and counter-firestorm.

8.3 Outrage and moral action: mediated moral enterprise

In Chapter 7, I explored the mass user migration to Mastodon in the wake of Musk's acquisition through the blend of moral enterprise theory and contemporary social media theory. I argued that we could understand this as *mediated moral enterprise* which is a tripartite process of *idealisation*, *materialisation* and *actualisation*. Through this, I argued that the mass migration resulted in somewhat limited actualisation of the decentralised vision. This was in part due to the pressures resulting from user and network embeddedness in a Twitter platform, where centralisation is a core feature. Pressures of *naturalisation*, *attention*, and *pace* work either to encourage centralisation, or discourage the migration. Despite these pressures, an ongoing process of idealisation through mediated moral enterprise worked to steer the movement in line with the Mastodon vision.

Abstracting these dynamics, I argued that these pressures represent a more general tension between moving from what is idealised to what is actualised through a platform's materialisations. That is, although users idealised a decentralised alternative to Twitter, and Mastodon materialised these ideals, the mass migration was constrained by Twitter's materialised features for centralised communication.

This conceptual frame appears to work best when we have competing platforms. That is, a movement between platforms in which distinctive ideals are in competition. How then, may it apply in the Robinhood short squeeze and the Spotify boycott, where such dynamics are not immediately evident? For each of these cases I apply the mediated moral enterprise frame slightly differently – first, exploring how Reddit users attempted to actualise financial democratisation through Robinhood, and second exploring how Spotify was *reidealised* to emphasise the power users and artists.

8.3.1 Robinhood: Disrupting big finance through big finance

Robinhood was originally idealised as an alternative to traditional finance which empowered retail investors. According to a 2014 *Business Insider* article which documented the app's release, founders Vlad Tenev and Bahju Bhatt, were reportedly dissatisfied by the unequal access to financial markets afforded by traditional finance.

“The co-founders were inspired to ‘democratise access to the financial markets’ by the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement, in which protesters, upset about large bank bailouts, occupied Zuccotti Park and other financial districts for months, denouncing Wall Street and the government’s leniency toward bankers.” (Crowe, 2014)

This narrative has remained salient in the years since the app's launch. Robinhood’s website continues to emphasise the app’s mission to “democratise finance for all” and “build a financial product that would give everyone—not just the wealthy—access to financial markets” (Robinhood, 2024).

In this way Robinhood was idealised as in opposition to traditional finance. We can see this in these statements and media reports, whereby its founders struck a key issue with the existing state of the financial system and idealised Robinhood an alternative. There is an effort here to distinguish Robinhood as platform for finance rather than a financial platform. That is, Robinhood seeks to apply the logics of the platform to disrupt traditional finance, whereas a financial platform (such as a banking app) seeks to digitise or remediate existing financial practice. This also comes with the premise that platforms such as Robinhood exist as outside of institutional finance, rather than operating from inside the system.

Robinhood materialises these ideals through a combination of features. Most important is the ability to make unlimited, commission-free trades. However, this democratisation extends not just to the practices of buying and selling shares, but also to the inclusion of high-risk trading instruments to such as option trading. When a user buys an option on Robinhood, “they gain exposure to the movement of a stock, and that contract represents a potential trade of 100 shares” – significantly magnifying potential risks and rewards

(Robinhood, 2024). Further, as Tan (2021) argues, Robinhood’s interface renders all this as a “game”, streamlining only the most intelligible information to users in a mobile-esque aesthetic (see Figure 56). This “game-like” interface, in combination with the promotion of high-risk financial instruments, has seen Robinhood at the centre of several lawsuits (Randall, 2021). This exists in stark contrast to other trading platforms which bury the user financial information and encourage users to make their own sense using numerous complex analytical tools.

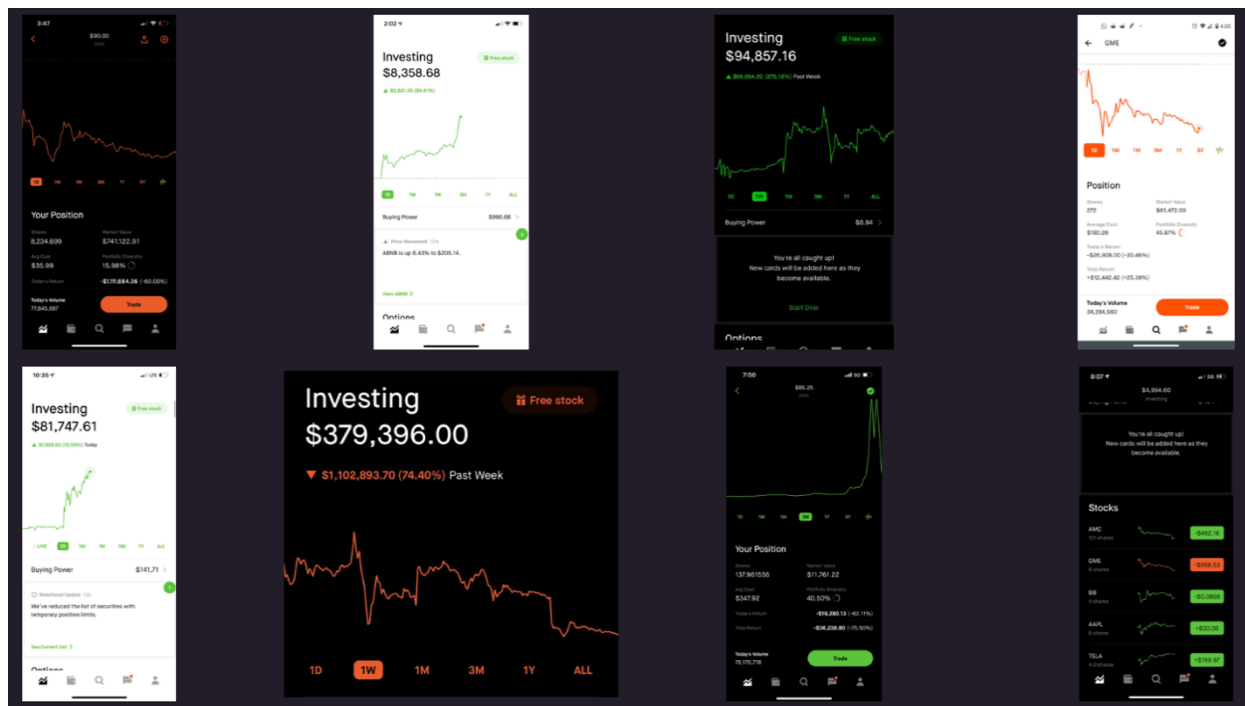


Figure 56 Various screenshots of the Robinhood interface posted during the short squeeze

This idealisation of Robinhood as a way of giving power to the retail investor over the institutional investor, and the features which materialised such ideals, strongly resonated with r/WallStreetBets users. In the short squeeze, we see an attempt to actualise a version of this struggle between retail traders and financial institutions. This utilised Reddit as a primary source of organisation, with Robinhood serving as a means of action – together forming a mechanism for financial protest (Vaughan et al., 2023). This financial protest is quite different in form and intention from the user migration I explored earlier (i.e. from Twitter to Mastodon). However much like the migration, we see a need

to examine the overlapping affordances when an action (in this case financial protest) is organised across multiple platforms (Robinhood and Reddit).

I noted in Chapter 6 that posting screenshots of one's Robinhood portfolio or recent trades served as a mechanism of mutual entrainment – that is, it developed a sense that one's individual purchasing was synchronised with a larger whole, fostering feelings of solidarity and shared purpose amongst participants. Extending this, we see that the simplicity and shareability of Robinhood's interface encourages such participation (see Figure 56). When coupled with Reddit's affordances for mass, decentralised, sharing of images and comments, this allows for the type of protest we see in the short squeeze. The leverage allowed by Robinhood's inclusion of high-risk options trading, and the gamification of these features both on Robinhood and Reddit, allowed the protest to gain massive exposure from comparatively small investments.

In each case, we see that the affordances of Reddit and Robinhood together work to encourage the actualisation of the protest's ideals. However, a key question remains – how does Robinhood, a fifteen-billion-dollar company, materialise such high-risk commission-free trading “for the people” and still make a profit? The Business Insider article discussed earlier simply stated that Robinhood was “mobile first” and could offer a “freemium” service

“it's mobile first. That has allowed the company to rethink traditional brokerage cost structures. With no human traders to pay – or ancient infrastructure running the trades – they're able to cut out those overhead costs.”

While there certainly may be savings in this regard, this is not the only way Robinhood are able to offer such services. Robinhood actually generate the bulk of their venue by selling customer trades to “market makers” through a process known as “payment for order flow” (Malz, 2021). These market makers, one of which was the investment management firm *Citadel*, compete to buy the right to execute customer orders. In this way, the materialisation of financial democratisation through “commission free trading” and a

“game like interface”, are funded by the very financial institutions which they appear to disrupt.

When Robinhood restricted trading on the 28th of January, this quite intimate relationship with major market makers became the source of conspiracy – how could the very firms they are “beating” and “punishing” be buying their trades? (Manley, 2023). The immediate conflict of interest resulted in numerous accusations of collusion. While such accusations are unfounded, or at the very least impossible to prove, the market relationships are real (Manley, 2023). The restrictions were most likely due to the fact that Robinhood, like any other brokerage, rely on clearinghouses to make trades, and as such had to put up collateral based on the volatility of the stock. When the price of a stock was highly volatile, as it was with GME and other “meme stocks”, Robinhood had to put up large amounts of collateral. In essence then, the trading restrictions were simply to reduce Robinhood’s risk – Robinhood “acted in its own business interest... to protect itself—not necessarily to protect its customers... but it was Robinhood’s business model that left it exposed in the first place.” (Newman, 2023).

Whatever the true cause of the restrictions may be, we see here a contradiction emerge between Robinhood’s *idealisation* as an entity that is explicitly separate, or even opposed to, institutional capital, and its *materialisation* of these ideals in such a way that places them in intimate connection with such capital. The resultant outrage then, is impart given power by the lifting of this veil of *idealisation* to see the realities of the platform’s *materialisations*. The outrage was not just a response to the user’s functional inability to buy more stock, but also at the symbolic betrayal of Robinhood’s ideals.

This again circles back to the ambivalences of the movement. That is, the movement’s ambivalence as simultaneously a collective protest against late capitalism, yet one which is achieved through the logic of capital accumulation and personal financial gain. There is a resonance here with Robinhood’s idealised vision to correct for the injustices and inequalities made salient in the OWS protests, yet to do so by “democratising finance for all” and disrupting big finance through the logics of and infrastructures of big finance.

One way to treat these ambivalences is to give one side of the contradiction preference. Gregersen and Ørmen (2023) for example, argue that the short squeeze illustrates an episode of “collectivised individual action” - that is, “*individual action performed primarily for apolitical and personal gains* which is only subsequently brought into a frame that charges these with explicit political collective meaning” (p. 13, emphasis in original).

However, what if we take a strong stance on this ambivalence and consider that both may be equally true as motivating factors? Then, we see a situation where deep discontent with the financial system, resulted in a protest against the system, through the very logics of the system it opposed. Individuals may have been motivated both by a desire to punish hedge funds, as well as see personal financial gains. However, the logic of their protest placed their personal gains at the expense of their fellow protestors, not just the hedge funds. Indeed, some of the biggest “losers” of the squeeze were retail investors (ASIC, 2023) and some of the biggest “winners” were hedge funds (Picker and Lee, 2022). Short sellers such as Melvin Capital certainly did lose billions (Winck, 2021), however once they closed their positions it was those retail investors who came in late which lost big (Stewart, 2023). This is not to mention the profits Robinhood made by selling trades to market makers.

Ultimately, while the squeeze momentarily united individuals in common cause against established financial entities and reflected broad discontent with the financial system, the actualisation of these ideals through the logics of Reddit, Robinhood, and institutional finance, ended up pitting retail investors against each other, and ultimately benefited the very institutions and systems they opposed.

8.3.2 Spotify: Constraining the platform boycott

Both the Mastodon Migration and the Robinhood short squeeze lend themselves to utilising mediated moral enterprise to explore the creation of a new platform in response to a social problem. We could similarly apply this in a similar way to explore the Spotify exodus. Spotify, for example, also clearly echoes a moral sentiment in their current mission statement:

“Our mission is to unlock the potential of human creativity—by giving a million creative artists the opportunity to live off their art and billions of fans the opportunity to enjoy and be inspired by it.” (Spotify, 2024)

However, the company was less focused on disrupting the existing music industry, and more so emerged as the music industries solution to music piracy (Marshall, 2015). That is, it offered a more convenient and accessible freemium alternative to music piracy that allowed companies to directly monetise listening practices that would otherwise have been captured by piracy. Indeed, Spotify actually formed through early investment deals with the “big four” major record labels - Universal Music Group, Sony Music, EMI and Warner Music. Before entering the United States market, each company acquired a major stake in Spotify (Ngak, 2011). Instead of analysing Spotify’s *initial development* as a form of moral enterprise, I will instead explore how the process of mediated moral enterprise can illuminate how existing platforms are *reidealised*.

As I argued in Chapter 7, *idealisation* is not a stage of enterprise, but an ongoing process. We saw this with both Mastodon and Robinhood, in that both platforms were reimagined through the process of outrage - whether that be as an alternative to Musk’s Twitter, or seeing Robinhood platform which was actually intimately connected to big finance. In the case of Spotify, we see that the platform was *reidealised* in such a way that emphasised the users and the artists in the constitution of the platform. By *idealising* Spotify in this way, users and artists were given a sense of control and power over what content was allowed on the platform. I outlined this briefly in Chapter 5, first exploring how Neil Young emphasised the role of the artists – placing them as complicit with the spread of misinformation:

“I sincerely hope that other artists and record companies will move off the SPOTIFY platform and stop supporting SPOTIFY’s deadly misinformation about COVID.” (Young, 2022).

Then, as this sentiment spread to Twitter, the general userbase followed suit – emphasising that subscribing users were helping fund misinformation.

In each case, this worked to situate the power of the users and artists in Spotify, encouraging these users and artists to exert power over the platform, rather than the other way around. *Reidealising* Spotify in this way encouraged a form of actualisation through a platform boycott, whereby users could cancel their subscriptions and artists could withdraw their music to instigate change in platform policies. Like the Mastodon migration this *actualised* through Twitter – utilising Twitter’s affordances for mass protest to encourage a form of “socially mediated political consumerism” (Boulianne, 2023). Users posted screenshots of Spotify’s cancellation form en masse, and several artists publicly announced their intention to leave Spotify, or had their intention shared on Twitter.

Indeed, it was widely reported that 19% of Spotify’s paying subscribers intended to cancel their subscriptions during the firestorm (Spangler, 2022). Moreover, Spotify’s stock price dropped 6% over just three days during the boycott (Spangler, 2022) – a fact which was constantly reiterated as a marker of success during the firestorm. Spotify ended up removing several Joe Rogan episodes from its catalogue, which contained racist comments or Covid-19 misinformation. Daniel Ek, Spotify’s CEO, also released a statement in which he implored that he was listening to user concerns, and that Spotify would improve its misinformation policies as a result (Ek, 2022).

This all paints a strong image of the ability to *reidealise* a platform and then *actualise* real changes. However, when we account for more recent developments, we see a slightly different picture. First, Joe Rogan is still on the platform as of May 2024 and is still actively spreading vaccine misinformation. Just over a year after the firestorm, in July 2023, Rogan hosted Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (RFK) and had a 3-hour conversation which “hit all the pandemic classics: conspiracy theories about vaccines, 5G and Wi-Fi technology, and ivermectin” (Davis, 2023). A Spotify spokesperson even release a statement to defend the podcast, saying that it was not in violation of policy because neither Rogan nor RFK stated that vaccines were *designed* to kill people – just that they had that effect (Davis, 2023). This has led some to argue that Spotify “has completely given up on addressing his relentless torrent of medical misinformation, except in the most pallid and surface-level

ways” (Merlan, 2023). Compounding this, in February 2024 Spotify signed another multi-year deal with Rogan – this time rumoured to be worth \$250 million (Associated Press, 2024). Not only is this deal worth considerably more than the previous deal, it also arguably more favourable to Rogan. That is, it does not include an exclusivity clause to ensure the podcast is only disseminated on Spotify. Rather, it includes a revenue sharing clause that allows Spotify to profit from a portion of Rogan’s ad sales.

This suggests that, while the firestorm may have initially been effective, it failed to sustain change. If we examine Spotify’s subscriber statistics, for example, we see that the exodus barely registered as a blip (see Figure 57).

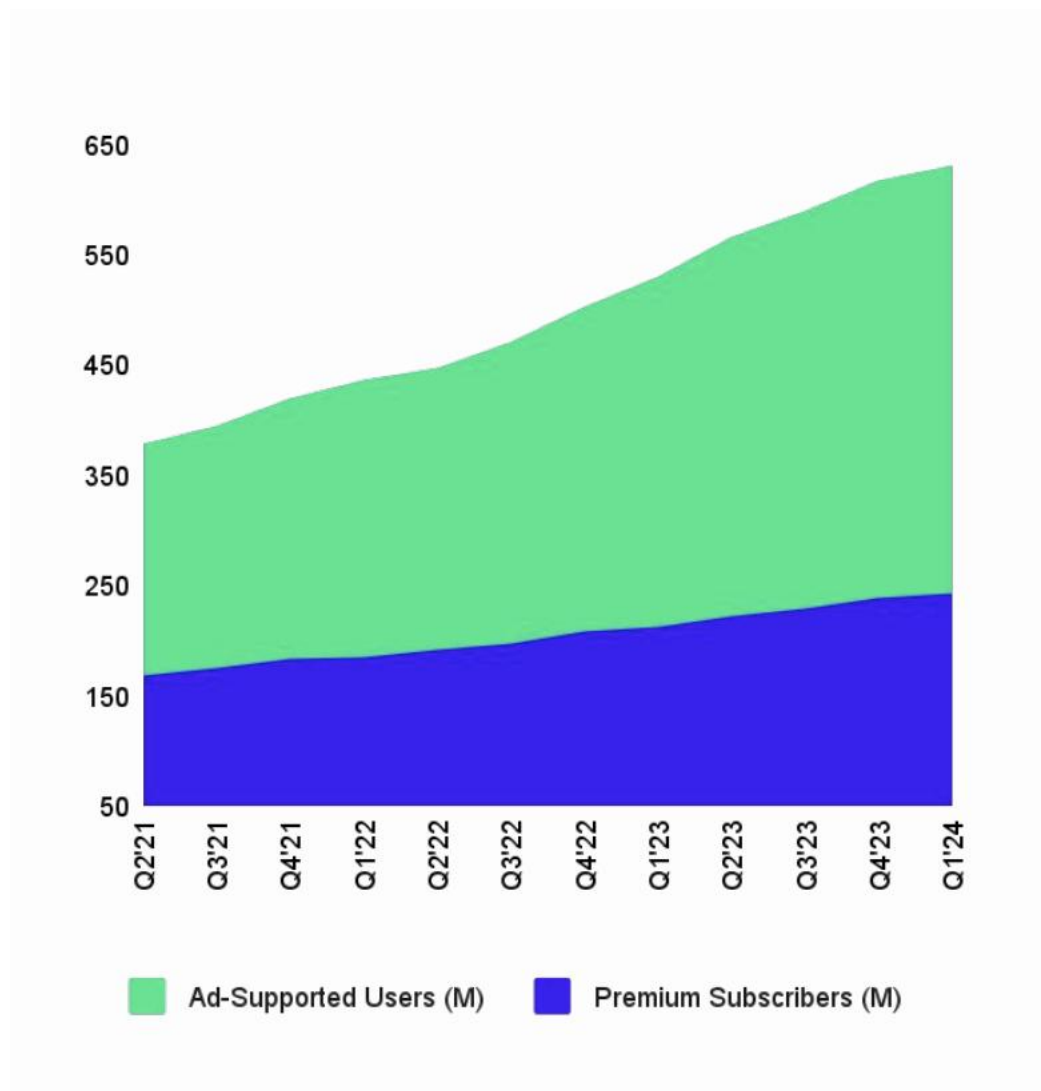


Figure 57 Spotify’s subscriber counts from Q2 2021- Q1 2024 (Spotify, 2024)

This is despite the oft-cited figure of 19% having left, or planned to leave, the platform during the firestorm. Moreover, both Young and Mitchell's music catalogues are now back on Spotify despite the platform's continued allegiance to Rogan (Pierson-Hagger, 2024).

Some argue that boycotts are low-effort, and largely a form of "virtue signalling", and therefore it is unsurprising that they fail to sustain meaningful change (e.g. see Brodigan, 2024). However, as Boulianne (2022) argues, while activities such as changing one's profile picture, or tweeting on a hashtag during a firestorm could be characterised as "low-threshold", they act as a "stepping stone" towards boycotting or buycotting which is a "more intense form of cause-oriented participation". Boycotting Spotify, whether a user or an artist, is anything but low-effort and this is by design. To *actualise* user and artist agency over the platform's decision making then, necessitates a process of working against the platform's *materialisations*.

First are the artists. Young's assertion that artists who kept their music on Spotify were complicit in the spread of misinformation, suggests that artists have the agency to withdraw their music from Spotify at any time. This may be true for some self-published artists, however for most artists the distribution rights of their music belong to their publisher. That is, usually one of Sony Music Publishing (Sony), Universal Music Group (UMG), and Warner Music (Warner) who together control around 70% of the recorded music market (Giblin and Doctorow, 2022). In 2023, 74% of all music streamed on Spotify belonged to one of these three publishers, or the independent music publisher Merlin (Stassen, 2024). This means that any boycott of Spotify must be done with the express consent of the publisher. This is exemplified in the fact that Young's original letter was not addressed to Spotify, but his *publisher* – Warner (Young, 2022). He later thanked his publishing house for standing with him and allowing him to remove his music from the platform.

"Before I told my friends at Warner Bros about my desire to leave the SPOTIFY platform, I was reminded by my own legal forces that contractually I did not have the control of my music to do that. I

announced I was leaving anyway, because I knew I was. I was prepared to do all I could and more just to make sure that happened.

I want to thank my truly great and supportive record company Warner Brothers - Reprise Records, for standing with me in my decision to pull all my music from Spotify. Thank You!” (Young, 2022)

This places an immediate challenge in *actualising* artists agency on the platform - a challenge which only exacerbates when we consider that these two of these publishing houses (Sony and UMG) still own a significant portion of Spotify. Again, Spotify was not originally idealised as a so much as a disruptor like Mastodon or Robinhood, but as the music industry's response to a market that had already been disrupted by piracy. This meant Spotify formed through a series of deals with the major record labels, which ended up giving them major ownership stakes in Spotify:

“Inked in 2008, the year the company launched, these deals gave 6 percent of the company to Sony, 5 to Universal, 4 to Warner, and 2 to EMI—which eventually ended up with Universal after the two giants merged” (Giblin and Doctorow, 2022)

These relationships had real effects on the movement. For example, when one of Young’s former band mates, David Crosby was asked if he would stand with Young’s boycott he simply stated that he was no longer in control of his music.

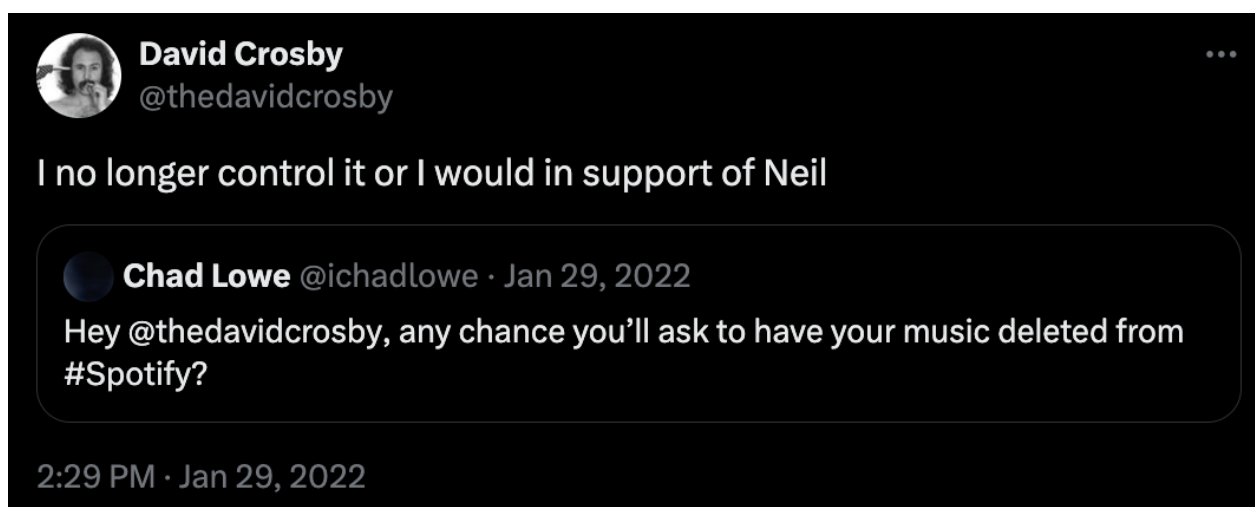


Figure 58 David Crosby tweet explaining why he did not delete his music from Spotify during the firestorm

While these relationships do not always *refuse* artist boycotts, they do certainly place a conflict of interest which may discourage it. This is made worse by the simple fact that while a boycott for users may mean saving money, a boycott for artists means losing money. Sustaining a boycott then comes at an expense to both the artists and the label. While this may be seen as a worthwhile sacrifice for artists, they then face the challenge of convincing their label to lose money for the sake of protest. Independent artists, who are not on major labels, face similar pressures. Often, these cannot afford to lose the little income or exposure that Spotify allows them. An ostensibly small sacrifice for independent artists is precisely not small because Spotify has already put them in a precarious financial position.

Second are the users. Users certainly save money by boycotting, and do in principle have direct control over their subscription. This would ostensibly suggest that boycotting the platform is relatively low-effort, and can serve effective form of protest for consumers that can be sustained indefinitely. However, it is not so simple. Spotify exercises a form of “curatorial power” (Prey, 2020), shaping *how* users consume music. Over time, this works to create a certain user dependency on Spotify.

At its most simple, we can see this in the passing over of user-generated content – such as personal playlists, collaborative playlists, friends and following lists, and user profiles. Each are the result of user’s actions, and shape how they consume music and music related content, yet are controlled by Spotify. Boycotting Spotify then is not as simple as ceasing consumption of one product and supplanting this with another, but also giving up one’s own work in developing personal and collaborative curations and changing the way a product is consumed. Though this may seem somewhat trivial, consider that these playlists are often collections of music with strong sentimental attachments – a “breakup playlist”, a “wedding playlist” or even a “final exam studying playlist”. Streaming platforms make it deliberately difficult to transfer these to a new service, as to retain users. Spotify in this way repurposes a user’s labour to act as a tether, keeping them on the service.

But we can also see this in those playlists generated by Spotify. As Prey (2020, p.8) highlights, Spotify is designed to extract user listening data, feed it into complex algorithms, and deliver it back to the user in the form of hyper-personalised playlists. Prey's central argument is that these playlists represent a shift away from the power of the label and their generation of albums, and towards Spotify's curation of playlists. For Spotify this works to "deepen the dependency of record labels on playlist promotion while reducing its own dependency on the content provided by these same labels". However, we can also see how these playlists – as new ways of consuming music– become habits that are embedded in a users general listening practice, and therefore naturalise a dependency on Spotify for users. These hyper-personalised playlists are generated by Spotify, but are just as much the result of a user's own personal listening data.

We see again a certain tension between *idealisation* and *materialisation* which was evident in both the Mastodon migration and the Robinhood. Users and artists work to *reidealise* Spotify as a platform which is able to be controlled by those users and artists. However, the ways in which Spotify has *materialised* various user dependencies on the platform, as well as the structures of label/artists ownership, work to limit how this control can be *actualised*. This is not to suggest that these tensions are the primary reason for the boycott's failure, but rather to highlight a distinctive constraint on user/artist agency which undoubtedly shaped the boycott.

8.4 Conclusion – Bringing the case studies together

This chapter has brought together key findings from each individual case study through a cross-case analysis. Through six micro case studies, I have illustrated how each of components (spread, social functions, moral action) and associated concepts (online firestorms, interaction rituals, mediated moral enterprise) may be generally applied across a variety of cases. While I have provided a relatively short overview of each micro-case study, we can see how new aspects of each controversy are revealed when different components of outrage guide the focus. In doing so we begin to build a more cohesive picture of each outrage event.

Through this cross-case analysis, I can distil three general statements which describe the tensions of mediated outrage.

- (1) First, on the spread of outrage- mediated outrage rapidly captures public attention, but spreads in a way that is constricted by, and reproduces, existing expressive access.
- (2) Second, on the social functions - mediated outrage fosters cohesion and collectivity but does so through various forms of exclusion.
- (3) Finally, on the moral actions - mediated outrage fuels collective action against platforms' perceived moral violations, but the mediation of this action shapes dissent within the platforms' logics.

These general statements of tension remain generally consistent in form across the micro-case studies, despite differences in contexts, platforms and issues. The following chapter will discuss each of these in further detail, making reference to the work in this chapter as well as each of the prior case studies.

Chapter 9: Conclusion – The Tensions of Mediated Outrage

This thesis has explored the question: *How do digital platforms act as both mediators and targets of outrage?* My approach to this question has been to treat mediated outrage as a multi-focal object, which I have broken down into three related components. Each case study addresses this question with regard to an individual component of this object - the *spread* of outrage, the *social functions* of outrage, and the *moral actions* of outrage. In case study one I found that mediated outrage has certain explosivity to its spread. This is both in terms of the intensity of reaction and speed of spread, but also the rapid expansion of the issue space. This spread often occurs through amplifiers who situate an accusation and spread it throughout their network. In case study two I showed that mediated outrage has the power to bind individuals together, and create a distinctive sense of solidarity. Following Randall Collins' work on Interaction Ritual Chains, this emerges through the mutual entrainment of emotion, and synchronisation of action. This emotional energy is stored in symbolic objects, such as the targets of the outrage or the markers of collective identity. Finally, in case study three I found that mediated outrage has a power to rapidly instigate various forms of collective action that can work towards actualising entirely new platforms, or different forms of existing platforms. I describe this as mediated moral enterprise, which I explicate through three interrelated processes of idealisation, materialisation and actualisation.

However, most important is that these empirical accounts reveal the need to understand the various *tensions* through which mediated outrage operates. I started by arguing that in academia and popular discourse it is common to think about mediated outrage through a lens which problematises both outrage and the platform on which outrage is performed, that is - we often see the spread of outrage to be explosive, intense and amplified by digital platforms; we often see the social functions of outrage as methods of normative reinforcement or intense othering, and we often see the moral actions of outrage to be anti-social actions such as harassment, shaming or even the implementation of regressive laws and policing.

A normative lens is the source of strength of a number of the theoretical and conceptual ideas I have explored throughout this thesis. However, when we consider digital platforms at both layers of mediated outrage – that is, both as the site in which outrage is performed, and as the target of outrage in some way – we see each component is best characterised by the various tensions that exist. This means seeing each aspect of mediated outrage through a profoundly generative potential, but a potential which is realised through a certain thorniness or challenge. This is perhaps because, as has been the growing sentiment in media sociology in recent years, platforms themselves are deeply ambivalent in their operations. Thus, when we place the platform as both the mediator of outrage and the object of outrage, these ambivalences become especially salient.

In each of the case study chapters I identified a context specific *tension* within each component. In the previous chapter, I conducted six micro-case studies to examine these tensions in different contexts, looking to highlight the generalities across contexts. I concluded with three general statements, each articulating a general tension of mediated outrage. Specifically,

- (1) First, on the *spread* of outrage- mediated outrage rapidly captures public attention, but spreads in a way that is constricted by, and reproduces, existing expressive access.
- (2) Second, on the *social functions* - mediated outrage fosters cohesion and collectivity, but does so through various forms of exclusion.
- (3) Finally, on the *moral actions* - mediated outrage fuels collective action against platforms' perceived moral violations, but the mediation of this action shapes dissent within the platforms' logics.

I will now explicate the generality of each in more detail by bringing together the empirical findings from each of the case studies.

9.1 Understanding the three tensions

9.1.1 *Mediated outrage rapidly captures public attention, but spreads in a way that is constricted by, and reproduces, existing expressive access*

In each case study we saw that outrage had a certain explosivity to its spread. This was both in terms of the intensity of reaction and speed of spread, but also the rapid expansion of the issue space. I explored how outrage cascades to include new actors, issues, and violations as it spreads throughout networks. This is often achieved through amplifiers – those accounts who are “highly-connected” in a network - who situate an accusation and spread it throughout their network (Marwick, 2021). In this way, outrage can feed on novelty – with the firestorm being reignited by new accusations or new actors being pulled in. When this process targets platforms, we see a profound potential of outrage to reveal those operations which are so often taken-for-granted placing these in public scrutiny. In the case of the Spotify firestorm, for example, we saw a movement from public outrage at Spotify’s platforming of misinformation, to their platforming of racist content, as well as issues of artists compensation and music quality. In the case of the Robinhood short squeeze, we saw the cascade move between platforms – revealing the connections and dependencies of the “platform ecosystem”. That is, we saw a new firestorm develop targeting Google for deleting negative Robinhood reviews – highlighting Google’s position as an infrastructural core of the broader ecosystem, as well as the expectations of neutrality that this brings. While I did not directly explore this cascading in the Twitter migration case, this is relatively self-evident in the constant media coverage of new issues surrounding the acquisition. These firestorms capture public attention and bring issues to discussion may otherwise remain dormant. However, in each case we saw that there were constraints around who could participate in this spread.

The first and most obvious constraint is the potential to become an amplifier. This mirrors a point made by Marwick, that those with a larger audience generally have greater control over the frame and direction of frame and direction of outrage, and thus can become an amplifier of harassment. In this way, the power to shape the cascade of outrage rests

primarily in those individuals who already have a substantial following. This was not always the case, as we saw several smaller accounts rise to prominence in the counter-firestorm during the Spotify controversy. Moreover, this dynamic appeared to work slightly differently on Reddit, where amplification occurred more so as community-based rather than individual-based process. However, in many cases it was individuals who already had a substantial following who appeared as amplifiers of the firestorms.

The second constraint is on how firestorms are policed by counter-firestorms. Because outrage is so often intensely politicised, it is often the target of reflexive discourse – that is, counter-firestorms which are generated in opposition to the firestorm. In the case of the Spotify firestorm, and Twitter Migration, we saw the generation of a sort of meta-outrage – that is, outrage at outrage. This usually manifest as outrage at the calls for “deplatforming”, or “boycotts”, which the firestorm was centred around. In the case of the Robinhood firestorm, this reaction appeared as less of a counter-firestorm and was more so contained to a critical response from some sections of the mainstream media. This response attacked or ridiculed the short squeeze more broadly. In each case, we saw that the firestorms were represented firstly as “outraged mobs” which generally minimised the individuality and rationality of participants - such as through Musk calling those who opposed him “NPCs”, or Brett Weinstein stating that Spotify and Joe Rogan were “under attack” from “censorious mobs”.

However, more problematic was the tendency to personify the firestorm through its amplifiers. Personifying the mob opens it up to more traditional attack vectors, and allows for the counter-firestorm to cascade into new moral violations which the amplifier has committed. This also opens the door for harassment as a form of action. Whereas the firestorms examined often did not mirror harassment component of Marwick’s models, the counter-firestorms clearly do involve intense harassment. Following Marwick’s model, this harassment does not manifest equally. In each case we see that it is those *marked characteristics* which serve as attack vectors to frame the harassment. In the case of the Spotify firestorm, we saw attacks directed at Young and Mitchell based on their age and irrelevancy, or attacks on those doctors from the “soft” medical

professional such as social work. In the case of the Twitter migration, we saw Musk level accusations that ex-employees who had amplified the firestorm were “faking” their disability, or were “paedophiles” because of their work on homosexual dating apps such as Grindr. This also extended to female journalists, who were subject to gendered harassment based on news stories they had written. This policing limits access to who is permitted to access the positive potential of online firestorms, placing an inherent risk to those who display characteristics which could be interpreted as vulnerabilities in amplifying outrage.

The Robinhood firestorm serves as an interesting foil to these dynamics. In this case we see that negative reactions to the short squeeze were actively shared on Reddit. These posts often represented the collective as a crazed irrational mob, much like the Spotify and Twitter cases. These attacks often placed “crazed mob” as the result of Reddit’s design and community dynamics. This created a form of platform antagonism – whereby the means of organising the movement through decentralised leadership, was attacked by those journalists who occupy considerably more centralised control over public opinion. This worked to create a sense of in-group solidarity on Reddit, and appeared to valorise the movement.

This galvanising of the Robinhood firestorm is interesting when we compare it to the Spotify and Twitter firestorm. In communities such as Reddit, which are largely protected by the veil of pseudonymity and community-based amplification dynamics, we see that attacks were repurposed to build movement solidarity and galvanise the collective. In cases where the firestorm was largely amplified by individuals and journalists, we see that those amplifiers who display marked characteristics serve as a way of personifying the mob and become the victims of targeted harassment. In each case we see a profound potential for outrage to spread in a way that rapidly captures public attention and in turn draws out issues with the current operations of platforms. However this, spreading occurs in a way that is constricted by, and reproduces, existing forms of expressive access.

9.1.2 Mediated outrage fosters cohesion and collectivity, but does so through various forms of exclusion

In each case we saw the power of outrage to bind individuals together and create a distinctive sense of solidarity. In the short squeeze, we saw a transient collectivity form in the purchasing of “meme stocks” through Robinhood, and the sharing of these purchases on r/WallStreetBets. This coincided with various ways of imagining the collective – both through imagining themselves through the vernacular markers of “autists”, “retards”, and “degenerates”, but also through the more broad reaching “retail traders”, and “retail investors”. In the Twitter migration we saw the general form of Mastodon usernames, rather than a specific label of collective identity. The common form Mastodon usernames emerged as a way of performing resistance towards the acquisition, storing a sentiment of indignation towards Musk. These usernames were commonly placed in a users profile description or as their Twitter handle. This served both a functional purpose of enabling the movement between platforms, but also the symbolic purpose of building a community of resistance on Twitter. Finally, in the Spotify firestorm we saw a mutual entrainment in action of the shared platform boycott. Notably here there was no clear marker of collectivity as we saw in the Mastodon usernames or short squeeze markers. Rather, what was interesting here was comparing the comparative level of entrainment between the firestorm and counter-firestorm. That is, while we saw a strong platform boycott develop, the platform buycott was far less salient.

Though each case demonstrated the variable power of outrage to bind individuals together, I noted that this cohesion was always formed through exclusion. That is, the way that outrage binds individuals together is precisely through the exclusion of another. At it’s most intuitive, this involves the exclusion of the object of outrage. In the Musk case, for example, we saw the collectivity form in opposition to Musk and his supporters. This reflects the formation of an “us” in opposition to “them”. However more interesting was the forms of exclusion which were not so clear cut. In the case of the short squeeze, we saw a form of exclusion occur within the ritual itself. Drawing from Collins, there was stratification at both the level of ritual “status” (who can participate) as well as ritual “power” (who has control over the movement). Access to the success of the short

squeeze was restricted to those inside the r/WallStreetBets vernacular, but the access to failures and subsequent outrage was allowed to be felt more broadly. Moreover, In the Spotify firestorm and counter-firestorm, we saw Spotify firestorm and counter-firestorm, we saw Spotify emerge as the object of indignation for both movements. Spotify ultimately emerges as a unitary object of indignation for both the firestorm and counter-firestorm. The counter-firestorm and firestorm existed both in opposition to each other, but also in unified opposition to Spotify. In this way Spotify managed to act as a unified object of indignation, without strictly fostering unity between collectives.

Though each case study posited a slightly different form of exclusion, there was the general consistency that exclusion always occurred. Again, this highlights a potential of outrage to bring communities together, however one which is always premised on various forms of exclusion.

9.1.3 Mediated outrage fuels collective action against platforms, but the mediation of this action shapes dissent within the platforms' logics

In each case we saw a unique form of collective action emerge through the outrage directed at platforms. This demonstrated the potential of outrage to mobilise individuals to enact substantive changes in our platform ecosystem. I developed a model of mediated moral enterprise to understand this process. Specifically so, I situated this model through three stages of idealisation, materialisation and actualisation. In each case study I explored a platform that was idealised is a radical alternative to the status quo – whether that be in Robinhood as democratising disrupter to institutional finance, Mastodon as a decentralised alternative to top-down platform power of Twitter, or Spotify as a space governed the collective agency of users and artists. These platforms situated a problem with the existing order of things, and reimagined the platform as a solution. In the cases of Robinhood and Mastodon I explored how past idealisations led to the creation of each platform - materialising these ideals. In the Spotify case I argued that the existing platform was reidealised to emphasise the collective power of users and artists.

Each idealisation however still had to come into being - to actualise. To do so involved the users actively working both with the materialisations of the platform in question, and those of the platform in which outrage was being performed on. The case studies each presented a slightly different mechanism of actualisation, depending on the specific mix of platforms and ideals. During the Musk acquisition, we saw an attempt to actualise a decentralised alternative to Twitter through the mass user migration to Mastodon. In the Spotify firestorm, we saw a similar dynamic whereby users and artists boycotted Spotify in order to pressure them to remove misinformation and racism. In the Robinhood short squeeze, we saw Reddit users attempt to actualise their version of financial democratisation through Robinhood. Here we saw a deep seeded discontent with the financial system manifest as a form of financial protest, but one which shifted towards a firestorm when Robinhood restricted trading.

In each case, there was a degree of continuity between what was idealised and what was actualised. Spotify removed over 100 JRE episodes and placed warnings on COVID misinformation as a result of the platform boycott; many Twitter users successfully made the leap to Mastodon; Twitter is facing significant financial challenges from the user and advertiser exodus (as of writing in May 2024); r/WallStreetBets users forced significant losses on several key hedge funds, and Robinhood did face an SEC investigation and numerous legal challenges over its actions during the short squeeze.

However, in each case what was interesting were the challenges which emerged between this actualisation and idealisation. Indeed, the general strength of the mediated moral enterprise framework, as I see it, is in guiding analysis towards the key constraints which emerge in-between each of the three processes. The ways in which an idealised platform can come into being constrained by the relationship between the workings of the ideal platform itself, as well as the workings of the platform on which the outrage is performed.

In the Twitter Migration case study I drew out three specific tensions that emerged as a result of organising a movement away from Twitter, on Twitter. Specifically, I highlighted the pressures of naturalisation (Twitter's features becoming taken for granted), attention

(Twitter distributing attention to opinion leaders), and pace (Twitter amplifying the speed and volume of reaction). These pressures worked against Mastodon's ideals – that is, encouraging centralisation – or more directly to discourage the migration all together. In the Robinhood short squeeze we saw a movement which sought to “democratise finance”. This was idealised through Robinhood which acted as a way of giving power to the “retail investor” over the “institutional investor”. However, Robinhood still had to operate through the logics of institutional finance – it sold trades to market makers, and had to take on risk for stock volatility. As such, there was a certain disconnect between what was idealised and what was materialised in Robinhood. As such, the actualisation of these ideals ended up pitting retail investors against each other, and ultimately benefited the very institutions and systems they opposed. In the Spotify firestorm we saw that Spotify had materialised various user dependencies on the platform through their playlists. Moreover, we saw that existing relationships of label/artists ownership persisted, placing much of the control over music on the labels rather than the artists. This worked to limit how platform boycott could be used to actualise user and artists agency over platform operations.

In each case we see a potential of outrage to rapidly instigate various forms of collective action that can work towards actualising entirely new platforms, or different forms of existing platforms. However, such mechanism of action must be channelled through the materialisations of existing platforms, which in turn shapes the relative success of such action. In most cases this leaves a gap between what was idealised and what can be actualised through mediated outrage.

9.2 Limitations

While these are interesting findings, it is important to recognise the limitations of the approach taken in this thesis. The main limitation is in the relatively small scope of platforms studied. Much of the analysis was centred on data collected from Reddit and Twitter. These are strong candidates for analysis, given that they often appear as central platforms in outrage events, however they are by no means the only platforms relevant to mediated outrage. Though I have approached each case study with this eye to generalise,

this no doubt would be strengthened by a greater variety of cases and platforms. We can see the need for this in the spread of outrage, for example. Here, we saw quite significant differences in how outrage was amplified on Reddit versus Twitter, and by extension who became the target of a counter-firestorm. How might these dynamics differ on a platform which affords full anonymity and thus refuses the identification of specific amplifiers, such as 4chan? On the flip side, how might this contrast with a platform with more “closed” social networks and full personal identification, such as Facebook? Such questions provide a useful line of further inquiry through which the components of my model can be better generalised, and the tensions further developed.

Building on this point, I had a limited cross-platform focus in each of the case studies. I generally limited my analysis to one primary platform (Twitter or Reddit) and then went on to also analyse external content that had been shared on the primary platform. This single hop between platforms undoubtedly oversimplifies the complexity of the cross-platform mediation of outrage. If one thing is clear from each of these case studies, it is that each did not simply represent a “twitter storm” or a “reddit short squeeze” but a complex event that was mediated by a range of different platforms. This was immediately evident in each of the meta-images for example, which included a range of screenshots from different platforms covering the controversy. Or in the identification of cross-links on Twitter, which included a range of different platforms – from personal blogs, to large video sharing sites such as YouTube. We could undoubtedly keep following the outrage across each of these platforms, applying similar methods to identify cross-posting and then continuing to hop.

This alludes to a more general limitation with studying such large-scale outrage events, in that it is difficult to know when to stop. This is both in the sense that we can continue following the outrage across platforms, and (in some cases) we could continue following the outrage for an indefinite amount of time. In the latter sense my focus specifically on acute events was helpful, but this was challenged by events that were continuously reignited. Specifically, I am referring to the Musk firestorm here, which has perhaps now

(as of writing in late 2024) evolved into a more latent controversy around Twitter which is continuously reignited through acute events.

Finally, I have intentionally “lumped” platforms together as a single object as to make general comment. My intention here was, following Zerubavel, to ensure that I do not miss the forest for the trees. Such an approach is especially helpful in dealing with the malleability of platforms - that is their instability as an object of study – as we can look to make general comments on the form of platforms, rather than overly specific comments on features. This being said, in retrospect there is one key point where this approach has been limiting in the context of the research problem – that is, my failure to meaningfully differentiate between events in which a platform is the primary mediator of outrage and a different platform is the target of outrage (e.g. Twitter and Spotify in the Joe Rogan controversy), with events in which a the same platform is both the target of outrage and the mediator of outrage (e.g. Twitter in the Musk acquisition). This does not so much limit my general model and the components, however it does represent potential differential that may significantly change the shape or salience of the tensions I identified. That is, there is a difference between Twitter shaping the dissent against itself, versus shaping the dissent against Spotify. Future work could perhaps utilise the model presented in this thesis to differentiate between such cases, and explore how the tensions may differ.

9.3 Significance

The first contribution of this thesis is in providing a conceptual model for understanding mediated outrage. Specifically, outrage that is both performed on and in some way targets a digital platform. Such outrage events have become an increasingly common aspect of social life. Indeed, each of the cases studied in this thesis have occurred within my four years of study. In attempting to understand each of these outrage events, I provide a set of concepts that may provide useful for future work that seeks to untangle the complexity of such events. While each of the concepts identified are not understudied or novel in isolation, the contribution of this thesis in their mutual application, blending and synthesis. Each of these together contribute to a broader

theoretical framework of mediated moral outrage which remains broadly generalisable while providing a room for situational variance.

The most novel of the conceptual work developed is mediated moral enterprise. Here, I synthesised Becker's (1963) concept of moral enterprise with contemporary work on materialised action (Schraube, 2009) and affordances (Davis, 2020), theorising three interrelated processes of *idealisation*, *materialisation*, and *actualisation* as a scaffold for digitally mediated moral claims making.

Also relevant is my work on the spread of outrage, where I distanced extant links between online firestorms and moral panics (e.g. Johnen et al., 2018) and fostered new links with Marwick's (2021) work on MMNH. This provides a conceptual lens which is better attuned to identifying the ambivalences of social reactions – that is, their capacity to simultaneously challenge powerful actors, while reinforcing dominant norms. In doing so I extend the utility of the “amplifier”. In common usage the amplifier is used to criticise platform harassment policies for policing only individual instances of harassment and missing the individual(s) incite the mob (see Marwick, 2021; Lewis et al., 2021). While this may be true for platform responses, I show how this is not the case when a firestorm is policed by a counter-firestorm. Specifically, I argue that such amplifiers are often a central figure in the generation of counter-firestorms, and therefore themselves become the targets of harassment.

Finally, in applying Collin's (2004) IRCs to digital platforms, this thesis adds to a growing body of literature in the area of mediated interaction rituals (see Johannessen 2023). While this does not display a similar degree of conceptual novelty as my work on the spread of outrage or moral action of outrage, it further illustrates the utility applying IRCs to digital environments. Particularly so in showing how mutual entrainment is fostered through digital practices such as sharing screenshots and purchasing stocks, and how markers of identity achieve salience through their repetition (e.g. “autists”, “retail traders”, “retards”) and come to hold the emotions of the movement.

Together these components form a model of mediated outrage which synthesises various conceptual projects from across media studies and sociology, but also adjacent disciplines such as psychology and public relations. Methodologically, I have aligned this model strongly with the digital methods approach, which digital platforms operating both as an object of study as well as a resource (see Marres and Moats, 2015; Rogers 2013, 2019). In each case study, I demonstrated how each component of outrage can be explored through methods which repurpose the outputs of digital platforms. Doing so allows us to tackle both questions of the medium (i.e. “what are the ways in which digital platforms shape outrage through their affordances?”) and questions of the social (i.e. “what are the ways in which mediated outrage shapes platforms”) in tandem.

This model and associated methodological approach can provide media sociologists with a way to explore the complexity of outrage events that both target and are performed on digital platforms. However, aligning with the concept-driven approach (Zerubavel, 2021) that I took in this thesis, I do not expect this model to be applied in a rigid way. Core to my approach was an effort to treat the conceptual “inputs” as sensitising – that is, use concepts as suggestions for what might be interesting or relevant, rather expecting them to provide fixed attributes or definitive definitions (Blumer, 1954). I expect the conceptual outputs of my thesis to take a similar form and be applied as sensitising rather than definitive guides. Ideally, this will allow future work to use and adapt the model beyond the cases at hand to elucidate other phenomena that share abstract qualities with mediated outrage, as well as explore instances of outrage that have been performed on platforms different to those studied in this thesis.

In addition to this conceptual contribution, I have also made several empirical contributions to the literature. The most basic is the analysis of the outrage dynamics of each of the cases – that is the social functions of the Robinhood short squeeze, the spread of the Spotify controversy, or the moral action of platform migration in the Musk acquisition. Again, each of these events occurred relatively recently, and are each the focus of emerging academic attention. I hope that my analysis of each can provide a useful addition to this growing body of literature surrounding each case.

In the cases of the Twitter Migration and GameStop short squeeze, I have aligned my discussion and analysis directly with this emerging literature. My work on the GameStop short squeeze reinforces Vaughan et al. (2023) argument that language on Reddit worked to create an exclusive space, however I challenge their assertion that it created “disconnected” zones discourse between Twitter and Reddit. Moreover, my usage of IRCs here provides an alternative perspective to the connective action approach employed by both Vaughan et al. (2023) and Gregersen, A., & Ørmen, J. (2023).

My work on the Twitter Migration speaks directly to extant studies exploring the Mastodon platform, most notably that of Raman et al. (2019) and Gehl and Zulli (2022). I directly operationalize the key “innovations” of Mastodon as posited by Raman et al. (2019) – namely the “the decomposition of a global service into many independent instances”, and the “process of federation” – and provide an empirical test to see how these factors actualise during the #TwitterMigration. Moreover, I build on Gehl and Zulli’s (2022, p.4) assertion that a defining feature of Mastodon is its *non-centralisation* rather than *decentralisation* – that is, a situation where there is no “preexisting centre from which power devolved—and back to which power could be recentralised...”. I use this distinction to argue that Twitter, as a preexisting power centre, exerts pressure on this vision.

While I did not align my analysis of the Joe Rogan firestorm with event specific literature, primarily due to the firestorm’s recency at the time of analysis, it does complement work published since. Colbjørnsen (2024) for example, explored the events primarily through analysis of “forms of communication issued by Spotify and Rogan”, finding that for Spotify “the case revealed an ad hoc approach to decision-making and a lacking awareness of the responsibilities that come with assuming a gatekeeper function”. My work detailing the events and issues animating each amplification event on Twitter provides an empirical elaboration on the specific issues and responsibilities which were of relevance.

In addition to these case-specific contributions, the most significant empirical contribution of this thesis is its illustration of the general *tensions* of mediated outrage. This directly builds on the theoretical contribution insofar as I have located a tension in each component of mediated outrage. This provides a useful development to contemporary discourse surrounding mediated outrage, which usually constructs outrage as destructive and problematic.

It also provides an alternative perspective to such academic work which seeks to problematise outrage and the role of platforms in amplifying it. This thesis has explored and applied key conceptual and theoretical perspectives on mediated outrage from sociology and media studies, but also from adjacent disciplines such as psychology and public relations. A general consistency in many of these works, despite coming from different disciplines and levels of focus, was a tendency to construct mediated outrage as problematic. That is, they generally problematise the role of the media in amplifying the outrage and shed light on the negative social impacts of outrage spread. This is a strength of many of these theoretical and conceptual works, as they often are utilized to explore instances where outrage serves to “punch-down” on a scapegoated or marginalised other. However, as I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, outrage also often targets platforms. In these instances, the power asymmetry between the collective who are performing outrage, and the target of outrage is reversed. That is, outrage at platforms “punches-up”. Here we see certain potentials in mediated outrage to hold such powerful platforms to account. These potentials, however, are also mediated by platforms and thus certain complexities, pressures, and contradictions are introduced. My thesis has worked to untangle these dynamics through illustrating three core tensions of mediated outrage. That is, I highlight the specific challenges, contradictions and potentials in the spread, social functions and moral actions of outrage. These tensions not only provide a valuable alternative perspective to the growing body of literature which highlights the problematic aspects of outrage, but they also align strongly with the well-established perspectives within media studies and sociology which highlight platform ambivalence (e.g. Phillips and Milner, 2017; Bucher, 2019).

To this end, I see the findings of this thesis as potentially useful in informing public contestations around platforms. A general awareness of these tensions may assist movement participants in amplifying the pro-social potentials of mediated outrage while minimising or accounting for the challenges. The clearest example of this comes from the #TwitterMigration where we saw users actively trying to steer the migration towards decentralisation despite the evident challenges, through strategies such as creating instance threads, writing Mastodon usage guides, and developing tools to assist the migration. Such resistance to platform pressures provide a strong example of the ability of users to exert power over the platform, and actualise better alternatives. Moreover, a greater awareness of the politics and pitfalls of becoming an amplifier of outrage can encourage the generation of networks of solidarity and support alongside networks of outrage. In each case we did see such pockets of support arise when amplifiers become the target of counter-firestorms. This was particularly evident when Reddit users became targeted in the mainstream media, where such attacks worked to galvanise the firestorm. By expanding our focus to bolster such networks of solidarity for amplifiers, while retaining our outrage at the practices of platforms, we can help account for the potential silencing effects of harassment.

Taken as a whole, this thesis has developed and applied a conceptual model for understanding mediated outrage. This model accounts for the various potentials, challenges, and contradictions of mediated outrage. In doing so, it offers novel insight into how outrage manifests on, with, and through platforms. Future work may look to apply this model to explore similar online outrage events – a phenomenon which is increasingly common in everyday social life. Or, more pragmatically, we – as the users of platforms, and participants of contestations - may utilise this work to better inform how we challenge platform power with and through their affordances.

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