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Jennifer J. Asenas
California State University, Long Beach, jennifer.asenas@csulb.edu

Brittany Hubble
California State University - Long Beach, Brittany.Hubble@student.csulb.edu

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Trolling Free Speech Rallies

Social Media Practices and the (Un)Democratic Spectacle of Dissent

Jennifer J. Asenas & Brittany R. Hubble

Abstract

The purpose of our article addresses two concerns of the special issue: taken for granted assumptions in the academy and complicating the way in which we have contented ourselves with anger at the expense of thoughtful engagement. Our essay explores the influence of Twitter on public dissent. We analyze the YouTube videos posted about the April 17th Free Speech rally as a text that demonstrates how the conventions of Twitter both shape how people publicly participate in and "report" dissent. Based on our analysis, we argue that the mapping of Twitter conventions onto both public dissent and citizen reporting turns the ACLU mantra of "'combat[ing] hate speech with more speech'" on its head. So, while we agree that political expression and dissent are necessary to democracy, this kind of expression and dissent cultivates political resentment that undermines the foundations of democracy. We conclude with scholars' responsibility to address this situation by cultivating both the right and responsibility of expression by balancing tolerance with respect and speaking and listening.

Introduction

Since he was sworn in as the 45th President of the United States, Donald Trump's America has been regularly and publicly expressing support and dissent of the President and the perspective and values for which he stands. However, the violence, property damage, and arrests of protesters on February 1, 2017, when then alt-right Breitbart editor, Milo Yiannopoulos, was scheduled to speak at UC

Jennifer J. Asenas is a professor of communication studies and Brittany R. Hubble is a graduate teaching assistant, both at California State University, Long Beach, Long Beach, California. Email contact is Brittany.Hubble@student.csulb.edu
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Berkeley, indicated a deep and angry political divide between citizens and a portent of violence to come. Some students were outraged that Milo was allowed to speak and stated, "'We won't put up with the violent rhetoric of Milo, Trump or the fascistic alt-right.'"[1] But the University refused to cancel the event and the chancellor defended the campus' decision to allow Milo's event to take place stating, "the courts have made it very clear that there is no general exception to 1st Amendment protection for 'hate' speech or speech that is deemed to be discriminatory."[2] In response, progressive and liberal students gathered outside Sproul Hall, the site of the 1964-65 Berkeley Free Speech Movement. What began as a peaceful protest quickly became violent as protestors in black masks attacked police barricades and destroyed property. Although Yiannopoulos' event was quickly cancelled and he was removed from campus, the violent protests escalated resulting in extensive property damage and injuries.

Conservatives responded with outrage on social media and in the streets. Yiannopoulos' Facebook post following his evacuation from the Berkeley campus represents the emerging concerns of conservatives: "the Left is absolutely terrified of free speech and will do literally anything to shut it down"[3] and claimed that he would hold a series of protests at Berkeley's campus in response. Although Yiannopoulos has yet to return, conservative citizens organized online and responded with two demonstrations of their own and others like it across the United States, with the other most notable rally for free speech in Boston, MA. These rallies were opposed by liberal and progressive citizens, and in particular, a militant anti-fascist group called Antifa.[4] Such rallies have been highly charged as citizens scuffled with each other while police attempted to maintain order.

Dissent has a long and necessary tradition in the United States, which is enshrined in the First Amendment protection of expression. In fact, a "healthy democracy encourages the rhetorical act of dissent as a right of free speech and an antidote to political repression."[5] As the birthplace of the 1964-65 Free Speech Movement, UC Berkeley and the city, in general, understand the role of dissent and expression in a healthy democracy. But long time Berkeley reporter, Frances Dinkelspiel, argued that the Berkeley protests of 2017 were "completely different" because these fights were directed toward other American citizens.[6] The same has been true at other protests where citizens have injured, and in Charlottesville, VA, even killed each other. Although these protests bore similarities to other instances of public dissent in a democratic society, they also shared significant similarities to another decidedly undemocratic forum: social media. Democracy requires that "politically equal citizens participate in their own self-rule," which requires communication that "enable[es] citizens to deliberate over, define, and decide the common good."[7] Given these requirements, we may consider social media an important outlet for political expression, but it is not democratic and may not foster the communicative practices that support democracy.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the influence of social media on the

communicative practices of public dissent. To do so, we analyzed YouTube videos of trolling at Free Speech rallies in Berkeley, CA and Boston, MA. Our analysis of these videos suggests that rallies constituted a spectacle of dissent whose communicative practices were shaped by the conventions of social media, which were then enacted and also recorded at Free Speech rallies for the purpose of re-presenting them in YouTube videos. The resulting echo chamber turns the ACLU mantra of "combat[ing] hate speech with more speech"[8] on its head and short circuits the process of rhetorical invention of productive dissent. Toward that end, we will begin by explaining the link between free expression, dissent, and democracy. Next, we describe the political importance of social media and the conventions of discourse cultivated through participation on these sites. Using those conventions, we analyze trolling videos of the Berkeley and Boston Free Speech events posted to YouTube to demonstrate how the practices of online communicative behavior has been mapped on to in-person exchanges during protests. We then conclude with a discussion of the consequences of this type of political expression.

Freedom of Expression, Dissent, and Democracy

The right to free expression as a basis for democratic practice enjoys wide support, though the justifications vary. Philosophical support relevant to this analysis tends to fall into two camps: cooperative or adversarial. The cooperative approach is, perhaps, best expressed by Alexander Meiklejohn, who connects the First Amendment to democracy on public rather than individual grounds. The work of the First Amendment is to ensure that "everything worth saying shall be said."[9] Free expression is protected not because the individual has a "desire to speak, but because we need to hear. If there are arguments against our theory of government, our policies in war or in peace, we the citizens, the rulers, must hear and consider them for ourselves."[10] For Meiklejohn, the correct interpretation of the First Amendment begins and ends with the collective.

In contrast, Martin Redish takes an individualist approach to the connection between the First Amendment and democracy. He advances a theory of "adversary democracy" that "acknowledges the inevitable existence of conflict among competing ideologies and competing interests as a descriptive matter and embraces its pluralism and diversity as a normative matter."[11] Rather than seeking a public good, democracy enables an individual to affect the outcomes of public decisions for her own good. The freedom of speech must be protected so that individuals can "discover their personal needs, interests, and goals—in government and in society at large—and to advocate and vote accordingly."[12]

Legally, these two perspectives play out in two rationales to protect dissent: the marketplace of ideas and democratic self-governance. The marketplace of ideas suggests that better ideas will win out over poor ideas when in competition. In his dissenting opinion in *Abrams v. United States*, 250 U.S. 616 (1919), Justice

Holmes famously argued, "The best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market, and that truth is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out."[13] Since then, the "metaphoric 'marketplace of ideas' has been one of the most often cited and influential tropes in judicial decision making."[14] The second justification argues that freedom of expression plays an integral role in the maintenance of democracy. Justice William Brennan who wrote in his concurring opinion in *Richmond Newspapers, Inc., et al. v. Virginia et al*., 448 U.S. 555 (1980): "The First Amendment embodies more than a commitment to free expression and communicative interchange for their own sakes; it has a structural role to play in securing and fostering our republican systems of self-government."[15] Taken together, these lines of thought provide powerful justification for not only the tolerance, but the necessity of dissent.

When dissent is "suppressed . . . democracy itself is lost and the people are turned against themselves."[16] For the purposes of this essay, we take dissent to mean "advancing a significant difference of opinion or expressing a substantial disagreement without making a complete break with the prevailing viewpoint."[17] Such a perspective does not limit dissent to radical protest or exclude it, but it does put "difference into play, short of treating adversaries as enemies."[18] In this way, dissent functions to contest "that which is taken for granted" and bridges "differences to generate constructive dialogue and deliberation."[19] It "works toward the realignment of common sense, which is the *modus operandi* of democracy as a politics of contestation" that seeks to "leverag[e] critique with cultural capital to sustain constructive relations in the context of conflict and to prevent friction and rivalry from degenerating into hostility. The double gesture makes democratic polemics productive."[20]

Given that revealing difference may constitute an affront to prevailing laws, norms, and attitudes, the right to express dissent without the fear of legal repercussion is a fundamental precursor to democratic practice. The Berkeley Free Speech Movement provides an example of the relationship between free expression, dissent, and democracy.

The 1964-65 Berkeley Free Speech Movement grew out of the Mississippi Freedom Summer, where students from around the country worked with civil rights organizations to assist in voter registration and education programs. Upon returning to their home campus, some Berkeley students set up tables to provide literature to students about the Civil Rights Movement. While disseminating pamphlets at a Congress of Racial Equality table, campus police requested identification from Jack Weinberg. After refusing to comply, Weinberg was arrested and placed into a police car while students stood watching. Someone in the crowd shouted "Sit down." And the students did—for 32 hours. On December 2, 1964, as a last resort, thousands of students occupied Sproul Hall in an attempt to force the administration to address the restrictions of on-campus political speech. The students demanded that the administration recognize their right to free speech and academic freedom and end the ban of on-campus political activities. In the early hours of December

4th, police moved in and arrested 800 protesting students. But by January, Martin Meyerson, the chancellor who replaced Edward Strong, established rules for political activity for all political groups on campuses and areas designated for free speech.

The Berkeley Free Speech Movement demonstrates the importance of expression to democracy for both the community and the individual as Berkeley students returning from their activist work attempted to inform their peers about the treatment of their fellow citizens and the political work necessary to change those conditions. It also demonstrates how expression has a structural role as information is a precursor to political activity.

Current campus free speech issues concern protecting expression and people. Since the violence at Yiannopoulos' speaking events at both the University of Washington and University of California, Berkeley, universities have attempted to prevent speaking events that pose threats to safety. For example, the University of Auburn attempted to block Richard Spencer, President of the National Policy Institute, from speaking on their campus citing "legitimate concerns and credible evidence that it will jeopardize the safety of students, faculty, staff and visitors."[21] However, Judge W. Keith Watkins ruled that there was no evidence that Mr. Spencer advocates violence and ordered the University to allow Spencer to speak.[22] The same was repeated at the University of Florida, where the University attempted to prevent Spencer from speaking, but Spencer threatened to sue, and the University spent $500,000 to provide the security forces necessary to ensure the safety of students and faculty.[23] This strategy may become more commonplace, particularly since the Supreme Court reaffirmed the protection of hate speech in their 2017 *Matal v. Tam* ruling in which Justice Samuel Alito, writing for the Court, argued that "speech that demeans on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, or any other similar ground is hateful; but the proudest boast of our free speech jurisprudence is that we protect the freedom to express 'the thought that we hate.'"[24]

We have, thus far, explained why free expression and dissent are essential components of democracy. However, a description of the recent issues in free expression described above would be incomplete without including the role of social media. Both Yiannopoulos and Spencer have a significant online presence that contributes to the high degree of contention at their speaking events. Yiannopoulos was one of Twitter's "most notoriously contentious voices,"[25] until he was finally banned from the platform after he encouraged his followers to harass *Ghostbusters* actor Leslie Jones. This campaign of harassment was the last straw for Yiannopoulus who had, for years, "used Twitter not only to voice his controversial opinions, but to direct his legion of followers . . . toward his opponents."[26] Spencer is not quite as sensational, but still uses social media platforms to bolster his profile. For example, after the University of Auburn threatened to cancel his speaking event, Spencer not only took his case to court, but also the court of public opinion, "telling his 56,000 Twitter followers that he was flying to Auburn and purchasing safety gear."[27] Social media was also used to target Auburn students, "some by name," and threaten them with

violence for organizing in opposition to Spencer's visit. These same students "opted to join a peaceful protest near the school's football stadium."[28] These examples of how social media is used to express political opinions as well as target and harass those whose political beliefs differ indicate the growing relation between free expression, dissent, and cyber- and public space that we explore in the next section.

Social Media and The Spectacle of Political Expression

There is no denying the role of social media in shaping what we think about politically. A recent investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election revealed that "Russian agents intending to sow discord among American citizens disseminated inflammatory posts that reached 126 million users on Facebook, published more than 131,000 messages on Twitter and uploaded over 1,000 videos to Google's YouTube service."[29] Social media also bypasses traditional media gatekeepers and allows users to broadcast their political views to anyone with internet access. Political candidates have used this medium to communicate with voters, but perhaps, none as successfully as Donald Trump whose political "ascent and Twitter's significance on the political stage are inextricably linked."[30] Trump's "aggressive and unconventional" use of Twitter reversed the role of candidate and news media. Rather than the candidate responding to campaign reporting, news outlets ran stories concerning Trump's tweets, which "generated news for many days throughout the campaign."[31] The same has been true in the first year of his presidency, as Trump has tweeted about domestic and foreign affairs alike. Even nonsensical tweets like "covfefe" sent the Twitterverse, Late Night television, and news organizations into a frenzy.

The content of political posts on social media is not its only political effect. To the point of this essay, social media also cultivates communicative practices that influence not only what people think about politics but how they think about their relationship to the public and how to engage each other on political matters. The research we include in this section addresses Twitter specifically, but there is certainly a case to be made that most social media platforms share features that mutually reinforce these same communicative practices. Katrin Weller, Axel Bruns, Jean Burgess, and Merja Mahrt have argued that Twitter is both "underdetermined and recombinant,"[32] which means that although people may use Twitter differently, all Twitter users "participate in a shared media technology with particular functionalities and communicative architecture," one of which is a "new type of 'publicness': the personal public."[33] Personal publics are defined in opposition to traditional publics, which are informed by traditional news media outlets that professionally report political activity through hierarchical and impersonal one-way communication channels. In contrast, personal publics are informed and defined by three features: (1) users select displayed material "according to criteria of personal relevance (rather than following journalistic news factors)," (2) users address and are

addressed by "an audience which consists of network ties made explicit (rather than being broadcast to a dispersed, unknown mass audience)," and (3) communication between users are "mainly in a conversational mode (rather than in the one-way mode of 'publishing')."[34]

The personal and conversational mode of presenting and engaging with others is combined with a kind of written orality. Although Twitter is a written form of communication, "many tweets do resemble oral communication in their style and tonality," which enables people to establish and maintain a "'connected presence.'"[35] In its best form, Twitter binds individuals and communities together and can facilitate communication in support of democracy. However, that is often not the case. Rather than communicating in a way that respects the differences of others while discussing ideas, "a substantial share of social media users feel these platforms are uniquely angry and disrespectful venues for engaging in political debate."[36] In fact, Jodie Nicotra's analysis of public shaming events finds that Twitter's structure makes it the "perfect environment for public shaming."[37] This shaming occurs in the form of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. While this may allow some users to feel comfortable or justified in their expressions, others believe that the "rhetoric of free speech is being abused in order to shut down dissent and facilitate bigotry."[38] These examples of shaming and harassment are not isolated. In fact, the situation deteriorated to the point that in 2016, Twitter, a company that had repeatedly stuck to its belief in "free speech," began using tools to curb rampant hate speech and harassment.

With the recent debates over free speech on Twitter, Vox writer, Carlos Maza took up the issue of the purposes of Twitter and the changes they have made in the context of this free speech debate. From 2009 to 2015, Twitter's policy included the following: "Each user is responsible for the content he or she provides. We do not actively monitor and will not censor user content, except in limited circumstances."[39] This policy was consistent with Twitter's goal to promote free speech and allow its members to speak with influential figures like politicians without barriers. However, Twitter's former CEO, Dick Costelo, explains how Twitter's free speech experiment failed to facilitate productive dialogue and actually backfired on many of its users. For example, Costelo interviewed internet feminist Lindy West, who described the horrific tweets she received from the platform. Some of these included, "No need to worry about rape" and "that big bitch is bitter that no one wants to rape her."[40] West was one of the many individuals who were driven away by the "trolls, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and misogynists" who took advantage of the "free speech" Twitter granted them.[41] Much has changed since 2015, as Twitter is now willing to censor content and deactivate accounts. In addition to suspected terrorist organizations, individuals like Milo Yiannopoulos are among those who have been banned from Twitter for posting inappropriate and harassing content.[42] The changes Twitter instituted are intended "to build a conversation" instead of disrupting it. However, controversy over the private company's ability to censor content as well as the subjective categorization of

inappropriate content on Twitter continues to fuel the ongoing debate about free speech, dissent, and censorship.

Brian Ott's analysis of President Trump's use of Twitter finds similar features identified in the previously reviewed studies. Ott argued that the communicative practices encouraged on Twitter are: simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility. Space limitations on Twitter demands simple ideas, which "endlessly redirect our attention elsewhere via hyperlinks" and "reshapes human cognition in ways that nurture simple-mindedness and promote short attention-spans."[43] Twitter also encourages impulsivity because, "thanks to wireless technology, one can tweet from virtually anywhere at any time. Since tweeting requires little effort, it requires little forethought, reflection, or consideration of consequences."[44] Finally, Twitter rewards incivility. Research demonstrates that "emotionally charged Twitter messages tend to be retweeted more often and more quickly compared to neutral ones."[45]

Taken together, these studies suggest that the conventions of Twitter cultivate communicative practices that are highly personal, self-reinforcing, and superficial. While this is not the only way to use Twitter, or any other form of social media for that matter, there are users who take these practices to an extreme and are popularly referred to as trolls. The goal of internet trolls is more than flaming or provoking someone online. Trolls are "motivated by what they call lulz, a particular kind of unsympathetic, ambiguous laughter" that revels in the "misfortune of someone you dislike," only with "sharper teeth."[46] American trolls, in part, justify their behavior through the First Amendment, and believe that it is their "constitutionally protected right to irritate strangers on the internet."[47] And generally speaking, "American trolls regard any form of online censorship, including on-site moderation policies, as a basic infringement on their civil liberties."[48] Having perfected their craft online, the trolls we analyze in this essay have moved from public cyberspace to public physical space. In this way, we see the practices of trolling as a cyberspace specific communicative practice cultivated on social media and mapped on to the practices of physical public dissent. The practice of recording and posting trolling activities at protest rallies re-presents dissent not as the use of expression to productively dissent, but as spectacle.

French Marxist scholar, Guy Debord, writing in the late 1960s argued that the conditions of capitalism had separated individuals for their actual experiences and replaced them with pseudo-experiences that appear as reality, but are instead spectacle. The "modern conditions of production," argued Debord, replace all "that once was directly lived" with "mere representation" through images.[49] The result is not simply an accumulation of images, but rather a "social relationship between people that is mediated by images."[50] James Trier argued that the film *The Matrix* carries "great resonance between Debord's concept of the spectacle and the cinematic science fiction representation of a world of near total separation and passivity."[51] In other words, the spectacle is a social relation that presents itself as reality. For Debord, the spectacle "appears to leave no room for escape or for the expression of any individual or group

agency."[52] While we do not agree with the totalizing effect of the spectacle, we do believe that YouTube trolling videos function as a spectacle of democratic dissent.

YouTube offers a unique platform to analyze how the conventions of Twitter manifest in the spectacle that are the free speech rallies in Berkeley and Boston. One key feature of the videos posted on YouTube is that unlike a comment or Tweet on other forms of social media, the content cannot be edited after it is posted. While someone could technically delete a video and use video editing technology to change the video and repost it, this is not an easy or common practice on YouTube. Rather, YouTube videos and their corresponding comment sections often represent an unedited and uncensored interaction between the individuals in the video and viewers.[53] Additionally, videos shared on other social media platforms, such as Twitter, typically originate on YouTube. As the primary source for video representations of the free speech rallies, YouTube serves as an important link between the dialogue on Twitter, exchanges at free speech rallies, and post-rally commentary. This link facilitates a repetition cycle where people Tweet about free speech and the rallies, show up to these rallies to record and be recorded by others, and finally recorded video content appears on YouTube only to have the same politic that was expressed on Twitter and at rallies extended to the comment sections under the videos. Both the cycle and the content continue to repeat themselves with little to no change from the initial rallies in Berkeley, allowing YouTube to serve as a reincarnation of the very spectacle these videos sought to capture.

Free Speech Rallies

After the fires were quelled on UC Berkeley's campus following the cancellation of Yiannopoulos' speech, the issue quickly moved from politics proper to the politics of free speech. In response, on April 15th, the Liberty Revival Alliance put on the pro-Trump rally as a declaration of their right to free speech. And UC Berkeley hosted a Free Speech Week.

There have been several other "free speech" and "Unite the Right" rallies since the protests at Berkeley. The Boston Free Speech Rally on August 19, 2017 was a particularly notable one because of the controversy the rally stirred over free speech. As a permitted event, police blocked reporters and Antifa activists from entering the barricaded Boston Common, which held the less than 50 attendees of the rally. Despite their exclusion from the event, counter-protestors made sure their presence was not ignored by outnumbering the rally goers with crowd of 45,000. Anticipation of the large counter-protest scared off a number of the scheduled speakers and led the event's coordinator, John Medlar of Resist Marxism, to uninvite others.[54] Although participants attempted to continue the event in full force, the escalation of the counter-protest resulted in the rally ending after only 45 minutes.[55] In response, the Resist Marxism organization immediately started planning their follow up rally on November 18, 2017 to continue their fight for free speech in Boston.

On November 18, 2017, despite being denied a permit by the city, Resist Marxism and Boston Free Speech reconvened in the Boston Common for their "Rally for the Republic."[56] Like the August rally, the November rally was met with a large group of counter-protesters and police officers barricading the two groups from each other. Approximately 100 counter-protesters showed up to speak out against the less than 40 rally goers resulting in 3 arrests.[57] The rally was relatively peaceful compared to previous protests, which is likely because of the low turnout and the barricaded separation of the two sides prevented much interaction during the rally.

The trolling videos we analyze were specifically taken from the Free Speech events in Berkeley and Boston. They differ significantly from the news broadcast stories that covered the protests. Visually, the videos are recorded from a first-person perspective, and their titles often reveal their politics. These "fragments" of the rallies hardly construct a "finished discourse that presents itself as transparent."[58] Instead, we understand these fragments as a collection of texts that articulate "the missing premises"[59] to provide the context for those texts. We find that these trolling videos are extreme iterations of the features of social media communicative practices. In the following analysis, we both complicate and organize our analysis according to Ott's categories of: simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility.

Simplicity

Simplicity in Ott's analysis suggests a lack of in-depth or uncritical consideration. Simplicity in dissent, however, may belie its elegance and effectiveness. Powerful political statements may be elemental. For example, during the Memphis sanitation workers strike of 1968, African American sanitation workers asserted their humanity and dignity with their "I am a Man" signs. Simplicity in trolling videos mocks the integrity of a political position and the intelligence of the protesters, which undermines dissent as a practice that publicly articulates alternative views.

One of the strategies to undermine the credibility of anti-fascist protesters is to mock their claims. It might otherwise be titled, "Where are all the fascists" which is a common comment heard on many of the trolling videos either by off-screen participants or by the person featured in the posted videos, as is the case at the August Free Speech rally in Boston in a video posted by Sandre Stream. His goal in the video is to demonstrate a lack of evidence of fascism, even though there are certainly signs of the alt-right, such as protesters wearing Pepe the Frog face masks. However, the purpose of his video and commentary is to make comparisons between the "patriots" and Antifa using visual evidence and information gathered from the crowd. Pointing the camera at the Antifa protesters who are all dressed in black, Stream states, "here are the anti-fascists who are, ironically dressed up like Mussolini's doom squads," he then features the Free Speech protesters whose dress is significantly less standardized and states, "whereas the patriots, often considered fascists, are all dressed up individually from all walks of life, all with the same common cause, to defend free speech." In response to the Antifa chants

about fascism, Stream asks the crowd, "How many fascists are actually here today?" No one claims to be a fascist. One protester states, "we're not Nazis. We're just annoying." From this Stream concludes, "It seems as if the fascists are young ladies in MAGA hats and elderly veterans who fought Nazis in WWII." The video then features Stream yelling at the Antifa protesters that no one has claimed to be a "dirty fascist," so it "seems like they all went home. Good job. Mission accomplished. You can disperse now."[60] Later in the video, Stream is heard yelling back and forth with Antifa protesters asserting the same refutation: "None of us are white fascists. Maybe two, I don't know" he states, mockingly.[61] By presenting the lack of evidence of the presence of white fascists, Stream presents counter-protesters as ill-informed citizens who make gross generalizations.

The second strategy that presents dissent as uncritical is the inability of participants to provide a coherent explanation of their political position. Sometimes this is done through name calling, like what Stream does by calling his interlocutor a "moron." At other times this is done through interviews with protesters. In a Fleccas Talks video recorded during Berkeley's Free Speech Week, the video cuts to a protester who states that the other side is "pro-misogyny," to which the interviewer asks, "In what way though? How do they do that?"[62] The protester responds, "by being pro-misogynist and by espousing pro-misogynist rhetoric, right?"[63] He asks another protester why she is at the protest and she states, "I don't agree with his views."[64] The interviewer asks, "which are you not happy with?" She responds, "Um, I think" and then she shrugs and shakes her head. The interviewer presses her, "Did he say something that you just don't like?"[65] "Um" she says, "I can't figure out a quote in particular."[66] Fleccas strings together a number of these "interviews," suggesting inarticulateness as a common state of affairs among protesters. A final strategy is to assert incoherence. In one of BasedinLA's videos from the Berkeley Free Speech rallies, Jeffery Klein sees an Antifa protester holding up a black and red flag and asks what the flag stands for. His friend responds that it stands for "Anarcho-Communism," which means "it's state property with no state" to which they both agree does not make any sense and the friend asserts, it's because "they're politically illiterate."[67] Although Klein's videos demonstrate that he is not shy about talking to people, he remains satisfied with his friend's conclusion.

Impulsivity

Impulsivity on Twitter or any form of social media is facilitated by its accessibility and ease of use and manifests itself in the form of regrettable posts and videos. The arrival of hundreds of protesters and counter-protesters at these rallies is not an impulsive act, but trolling tactics that "trigger" protesters make dissent seem impulsive. Trolls take advantage of the situation by dropping in on varying groups and inserting themselves into their protest or conversation. While initially, this insertion may seem like an attempt to generate dialogue between the two sides, the opportunistic troll is

actually trying to instigate fights and antagonize counter-protesters. The goal for the trolls here is to make protesters reveal their hypocrisy.

To elicit responses, trolls insult protesters, calling them "snowflakes" and ask "Are you triggered? Do you need a safe space?"[68] Safe spaces have become an integral part of the free speech debate, specifically used by the right to showcase the protesters' emotional incapacity to handle free speech. Many of the alt-right protesters rejoice over calling the left snowflakes and use this tactic to criticize them, but more importantly, to elicit an even stronger emotional response to bring their tactic full circle.

Another tactic is to "invade" the space of protesters and refuse to leave when requested. The goal is to frustrate protesters for the purpose of revealing their true, ideologically contradictory, colors. For example, Duerst The Wuerst is asked to leave as a courtesy to others around him who do not perceive him as a person who supports their political views. Although he is unwilling to say that he is supportive of their position, Duerst responds by saying that it is the protesters fault for not understanding him and that he is a citizen who is simply interested in "what's going on in [his] city."[69] Apparently before the video began recording, he was pushed out of a public space and as he engages other protesters he states, "this sounds to me like a 'what was she wearing' argument…You're blaming the victim here. You're saying that I'm responsible for the violence against me…because I'm not wearing the right thing."[70] He continues to press the protesters around him, asking them what they would like him to do. His goal seems to be to get the activists to ask him to leave, which the woman finally does and spends the rest of the video having to explain why her request is not hypocritical.

Protesters at the Boston Free Speech Rally were less forgiving of Struth Boston's presence. The video begins with a crowd surrounding Struth Boston and a woman yelling at him, "Nobody wants you here. Hate speech is not free speech."[71] Struth responds, "so what you're saying is that having a conversation with them [Free Speech Protesters] is not productive." The three women in the frame respond, "yes." "Then would you please have a conversation with me; not shouting, not interrupting each other. Please tell me why I should join your political movement,"[72] asks Struth. One woman responds, "Because it is the right thing to do." Another says that they should be join "because people have been oppressed for years."[73] Struth responds, "Are you aware that the path to hell is paved with good intentions?" To which another woman responds, "Are you really going to say that shit right now? These people have every right to be angry. People who don't speak out directly against white supremacy are taking their side because that's what they're looking for. They're looking for complacent people. People who are willing to just talk it out. They're looking for people to lie down and take . . ."[74] at which point Struth attempts to interrupt and the woman replies, "I'm not done, excuse me." And without a hint of irony, Struth continues, "you've interrupted me five times."[75] At that point, the so-called conversation devolves into shouting during which the women yell at him

to leave shouting that "this is a hate free zone," "when have you been oppressed? You're a white straight male."[76] Struth says that he's had the "shit kicked out of him" for being white to which some of the crowd respond "good."[77] The highlight of the exchange, though, was after the group pressed Struth to state his position. He responds, "I don't want to say anything." To which the surrounding activists begin to chant "Get the fuck out"[78] while he puts on a helmet. Soon thereafter, Struth is escorted out of the crowd by the Boston Police department. This interview is also posted by another YouTuber titled "Boston Free Speech Rally EXPOSED"[79] confirming that the goal of at least some is to reveal protesters as hypocrites.

Incivility

The claim of incivility has often been deployed as a "civilizing" strategy to "effectively silence and punish marginalized groups (e.g., labor; women and people of color; the poor; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGBT] people)."[80] According to Nina Lozano-Reich and Dana Cloud, "[p]rotestors inherently do not operate within the realm of decorum."[81] Trolls instrumentalize the rhetoric of "incivility" by deploying strategies that aim to either incite or celebrate hostility and violence for its own sake or lulz. Accessing the "incivility" trope is perhaps the most pernicious category of the three analyzed in this essay, and it is also a trolling favorite—the goal is to revel in the violence and make it appear inevitable.

The fights are the epitome of how the spectacle of dissent manifests during the rallies and in attempts to promote free speech. One key indicator of the fights and incivility initiated by the trolls as a primary contributor to the spectacle of dissent is the fact that fights, both physical and verbal, make up the vast majority of videos available on YouTube.

The fight videos demonstrate that the violence is for pleasure. During the rallies in Berkeley and Boston, each side provoked one another by shouting obscenities at each other such as "pussies" and "shut the fuck up."[82] Some protesters seemed to be present for the sole purpose of fighting, which is confirmed by passers-by observing the violence in the streets around them. One commenter posted "I would attend these 'protests' only with an ar-15 and 250 rounds."[83] Another YouTube commenter stated, "Can we just exterminate everyone within a 50-mile radius of Berkeley already?"[84] BasedinLA includes a video of Antifa protesters taking swats at him, attempting to take or damage his recording equipment, and taking the belongings of other protesters. He also talks to someone off screen who says the intent of some protesters to engage in violence, which was indicated by their "football armor" worn "underneath jerseys…How can that not be gearing up for a fight?"[85] Although troll videos normally glamorize the violence of one side, they clearly show that both sides intentionally provoke the other, suggesting that both sides, in fact, want violence.

Interestingly, one of the features of trolling videos are the calls to not engage in violence, only for pushing, shoving, and hitting to ensue anyway. For example, BasedinLA yells, 'Stop swinging sticks! No, please don't fight. This is terrible."[86]

As Struth Boston is escorted out of the crowd, people yell "No violence!" as he is shoved multiple times before the police escort him out.[87] In this way, trolling videos suggest that the violence is a desired and inevitable feature of dissent.

Conclusion

Through our investigation of YouTube troll videos, we have demonstrated two interrelated arguments that affect the status of democracy. First, these videos demonstrate that communicative practices cultivated on social media are now enacted at physical protests, most notably by trolls. Second, YouTube trolling videos of the Free Speech events in Berkeley and Boston re-present dissent as spectacle. Such presentations that trivialize not only protesters, but the activity in which they are engaged, undercut the role of both expression and dissent in democracy.

While trolls may be frustrating and seem to be rebels without a cause, Whitney Phillips argued that it would be a "mistake to dismiss…trolls' behavior as politically meaningless."[88] Through her analysis of trolling, Phillips finds trolls to be a kind of cultural trickster that reveals a state of cultural affairs that "isn't always pleasant"[89] and may be political by default. In this way, we might see trolls as an important resource for dissent. However, in the cases we review, the troll may represent the "limit to incivility" in which "dissent dissolves into sheer hostility and confrontation."[90] Robert Ivie argued that "democracy's crucial rhetorical challenge" may be finding "topos of complementary differences" that does not "eliminate conflict" but moderates the "demonizing tendencies of agonistic pluralism."[91]

Productive dissent is possible and, ironically, a portion of BasedinLA's videos also demonstrate the possibility of engagement between interlocutors who hold opposing views. The segment features a conversation Jeffery Klein has with someone during the protest about how he feels about the Trump administration as the surrounding crowd chants "Fuck Donald Trump." BasedinLA's Jeffery Klein, who is an openly gay conservative, says, "I don't feel as an adult that oppressed as a gay person."[92] The off-camera protester responds by saying that he does not believe that the Trump administration supports the LGBT community and that it has negative consequences for LGBT persons. The two end up having a constructive conversation in which they find points of agreement. We would argue that the exchange between the two demonstrates that it is the communicative practices of trolling and social media re-presentation that spectacularize dissent. This example actually demonstrates that productive dissent is possible in a functioning democracy.

Finding these places of rhetorical invention is an important task as unrest and trolling continue in the United States. The most recent "Free Speech Rally" took place days before the completion of this essay. As the comment sections of the YouTube trolling videos suggest, the feelings of resentment are reinforced through the participation in watching and responding to the trolls of dissent who engage in communicative patterns that perpetuate what Jeremy Engels labels a "politics of resentment."

Resentment, Engels argued, is no longer felt only by those who are members of "persecuted minorities who might justifiably be upset at being shut out of the decision-making process" but by the "majorities who make decisions and run the show."[93] Political rhetoric that cultivate resentment "coerce publics and manufacture consent by manipulating the vitriolic emotions that often accompany the feeling that one is a victim," which is problematic when "one is not really a victim, or when one has identified the source of suffering incorrectly."[94] While Engels tracks the way in which Richard Nixon inaugurated the politics of resentment, our analysis demonstrates how resentment is cultivated not by political elites, but by the conventions of Twitter (not Twitter itself). These conventions are used not only on its site but also in the way in which citizens then use those same conventions in public displays of dissent. For our democracy to regain its health, we must find symbolic forms that provide a "way in" and a "way through," not forms that "lead us in and leave us there."[95] Engels encourages us to find curative rhetorics and, perhaps, the best place to start is to find ways to cultivate curative dissent. We argue that the university must take a central role in this process.

As scholars who have the opportunity to encourage our students to think of themselves as citizens who are parts of a whole—regardless of their particular ideological perspective—we must do more than defend the right to political expression. We must also teach the responsibilities of expression that go beyond previous campus practices. To do less may compromise the future health of our democracy.

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