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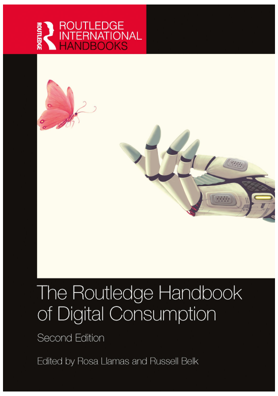
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Considering the impacts of transgressive behaviors among interactive online audiences

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Alex Baudet, Marie-Agnès Parmentier, Eileen Fischer

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16

CONSIDERING THE IMPACTS OF TRANSGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS AMONG INTERACTIVE ONLINE AUDIENCES

Alex Baudet, Marie-Agnès Parmentier, and Eileen Fischer

Introduction

Online audiences can interact in many ways. For instance, as we (Parmentier and Fischer 2013) noted in the first edition of this book, people can welcome fellow audience members, empathize with them, educate them, and give them gifts (e.g., Giesler 2006; Parmentier 2009; Schau et al. 2009). In regard to the objects of their attention, audiences can gossip about them, cheer for them, create artifacts that extend narratives, and generate collective intelligence about them (e.g., Baym 2000; Parmentier 2009). By and large, these practices – most identified through the study of audiences who are "fans" of the object of their attention – seem aligned with taken-for-granted prescriptive and proscriptive social norms, which can be defined as rules or principles that specify actions that are "required, permissible, or forbidden" (Sripada and Stich 2006, p. 281) in social interactions.

Yet, as even the most casual reading of headlines regarding contemporary variants of online audience interactions would indicate, many behaviors of this type violate some or many social norms, with some even going so far as to engage in illegal behavior (e.g., Yar 2018).

And although, in our earlier work, we recognized the existence of audience behaviors that violate social norms (we called it "audience irresponsibility" in our earlier chapter) (Parmentier and Fischer 2013, p. 177), our collective understanding of such behavior remains under-developed to date. In this chapter, therefore, we turn our attention to the norm-breaching behaviors that interactive online audiences may engage in. We will refer to this phenomenon as **transgressive behavior by interactive online audiences;** we adopt the term "transgressive" in reference to the violation of norms**.** Recognizing that instances of transgressive behavior by interactive online audiences vary greatly, we will explore variation in the implications of this broadly defined category of phenomena for (a) the objects of the audience's attention, (b) members of the audiences, and (c) the platforms on which these audiences interact.

The chapter is organized as follows: we begin by reviewing relevant literature that better helps to establish the variability in what might count as transgressive behavior by interactive online audiences. We then detail three case studies of such behavior, paying particular attention to the implications the interactions have had for objects of the audiences' attention, for members of the audience, and for the platforms on which interactions occurred. We conclude

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our paper with reflections on the challenges associated with conceptualizing, studying, and creating policies relating to transgressive online interactive audience behaviors.

Prior literature on transgressive behaviors by interactive online audiences

Over the last few years, both consumer researchers (e.g., Golf-Papez and Veer 2017) and scholars in other fields (e.g., Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016; Marantz 2020; Marwick and Miller 2014; Nagle 2017; Phillips 2016; Veletsianos et al. 2018) have devoted considerable attention to online interactions that could be classified as transgressive. Collectively, their work draws attention to several different, albeit overlapping, types of such behaviors.

For example, "astroturfing" (e.g., Keller et al. 2020) involves coordinated campaigns where messages containing false information that supports a specific agenda are distributed via social media platforms; these messages employ deception to create the appearance of being generated by an independent entity. "Cyberbullying" refers to repeated, negative, and unwanted online messaging about a person by some group (e.g., Olweus and Limber 2018). In "cyber-mob attacks," large sets of actors gather online to collectively harass, threaten, or discredit their targets, which can be individuals, groups, or other entities (e.g., Awan 2016; Krumsiek 2017). Closely related to such attacks is the practice of "dog whistling" in which words or symbols with a double (or coded) meaning that is abusive or harmful are used to signal fellow audience members to attack a specific target (e.g., Bhat and Klein 2020). "Doxing" is a practice wherein online actors gather and circulate personal information about an individual by a third party, often with the intent to humiliate, threaten, intimidate, or punish the identified individual (e.g., Douglas 2016). Public shaming (e.g., Kasra 2017), closely associated with online "cancel culture" (Clark 2020), is yet another common behavior in which audience members collectively call out their target for alleged misdemeanors; ironically, audience members who transgress norms of equity and civility often do so in aid of policing the behavior of someone whom they regard as having engaged in a moral norm violation. Equally ironic is online activism that is so extreme it takes the form of "vigilantism," where activists transgress normally acceptable boundaries of citizen behavior (e.g., Favarel-Garrigues 2020). Perhaps the most discussed transgressive behavior is "trolling," which can take many forms and which often incorporates some of the other specific practices enumerated in this paragraph (e.g., Golf-Papez and Veer 2017; Phillips 2016).

To help us think systematically about variability in transgressive behaviors by interactive online audiences, we point to a number of dimensions along which specific instances vary. The first is the s*pecificity versus diffuseness of the object of the audiences' attention*. Whereas in our own earlier thinking regarding audience attention, the question of what the audience was attending to did not attract much reflection, we would argue that in order to understand transgressive behaviors among interactive online audiences, it is valuable to recognize that – in a given instance – the object of attention may be as diffuse as all women who challenge norms of toxic masculinity (e.g., Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016) or as specific as a single woman who is, for whatever reason, the target of abuse (Veletsianos et al. 2018). Since instances of transgressive online behavior can evolve over time and across platforms, what starts as a focused case of transgressive behavior can escalate into a diffuse one.

A second dimension along which transgressive online behavior varies is the extent to which it entails the *deliberate promulgation of falsehoods about the object of attention*. Many instances of transgressive online behavior arise from audience members sharing what they regard as true information or valid opinions about an object of attention. For example, those engaging in Islamophobic conversations on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and various other platforms (e.g., Awan 2016) may well believe they are circulating accurate facts and reasonable assessments, despite the inarguably racist nature of their posts. At the other end of the continuum are interactions that circulate misinformation that both the originator and those interacting with them know to be untrue, which is often the case with trolling behaviors wherein a group amuses one another by circulating outrageous falsehoods about some target of their attention (Phillips 2016). In between these two extremes are cases where an audience member deliberately promulgates some falsehood(s) but where others who recirculate that content may be truly convinced of its veracity.

It is important to note that not all online audience interactions that entail the deliberate promulgation of falsehoods are necessarily intended to harm the object of attention (just as many interactions that entail no falsehoods *are* intended to be harmful). For example, deliberate falsehoods are fundamental to the satire of Twitter accounts such as "Fake Steve Jobs" (Kirman et al. 2012) or Ben Palmer's "Hope this helps" Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/ihopethishelps) in which he impersonates brand pages to answer complaining customers. These may be regarded by some as mildly annoying or in bad taste, but they are largely regarded as entertaining.

A third dimension along which transgressive audience behaviors can be compared and contrasted is the extent to which they are *institutionally circumscribed.* We use the term "institutionally circumscribed" to refer to the extent to which rules or regulations discourage the behavior. Institutional circumscription may occur at one or more levels. Most notably, disincentives may be specific to the online platforms on which audiences are interacting, or they may be specific to given legal jurisdiction.

At the platform level, there is considerable variability in the behaviors that are formally allowed, actively monitored, and/or algorithmically facilitated (e.g., Jacobs, Sandberg, and Spierings 2020). Historically, even those platforms that claimed to have rules precluding certain behaviors have been lax in enforcement, meaning, in effect, that these behaviors were infrequently policed in spite of formal policies suggesting they would be disallowed. Indeed in some cases algorithms have encouraged viewing of material that is in principle circumscribed. Recently, however, some platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have stepped up the enforcement of their rules, tightening restrictions on sharing misinformation (Wiener 2020) or adding a warning label to contested information (e.g., Conger 2020). This increasing enforcement has occurred at last in part in response to highly publicized incidents of online transgressive behaviors and the concomitant threat that governments will increasingly regulate the markets in which platforms compete (e.g., Wong 2020).

At the level of legal jurisdictions, there is huge variance in what is legally banned versus allowed (e.g., Library of Congress 2020). Many jurisdictions have rules forbidding forms of transgressive behaviors, such as hate speech and cyberbullying, but often have difficulty enforcing them owing to the technological affordances that online audiences find on various platforms. Certain countries have already assigned responsibility to both offending audience members and to the platforms that enable them: Germany, for example, passed a Network Enforcement Act in 2017 as a way to fight hate speech, imposing stiff penalties on companies such as Twitter and Facebook to force them to do more content moderation. Under this law, "social networking companies can face fines of 50 million euros if they fail to remove 'manifestly unlawful' content within 24 hours after it is flagged or within 7 days in less clear-cut cases" (Feiner 2019). Over time, it is possible that more jurisdictions will move toward making platforms responsible for the transgressive behaviors of the online audiences they host. For now, however, there remains considerable institutional tolerance of transgressive behaviors within many legal jurisdictions.

Having surveyed various generic types of online audience behaviors that have attracted attention for their transgressive nature, we now seek to better understand the complexity of this phenomenon by a consideration of specific cases. In the following sections, we describe three instances of online audience interactions that have attracted considerable attention, paying particular attention to what norms are perceived as having been violated and with what apparent consequences for audiences, the objects of their attention, the platforms they interact on, and other stakeholders who are affected.

GamerGate

GamerGate began in 2014 when video game designer Zoe Quinn received violent threats after an ex-boyfriend shared a 9,000+ word rant about her. The GamerGate movement quickly evolved as a crusade against journalists and critics who dared voicing concerns about the toxicity of the video games culture, drawing attention from the video games industry and the mainstream media.

What happened?

In August 2014, an ex-boyfriend circulated a defamatory post about Zoe Quinn, the designer of the game Depression Quest, accusing her of infidelity and sleeping with a gaming critic in exchange for positive reviews on her games. This post became a catalyst for GamerGate, as gamers were defending their subcultures against growing criticism highlighting the prevalence of racist and misogynist representations in video games (Consalvo 2012). Responding to such critics, gamers claimed that women and social justice warriors (SJWs) were colluding with game critics in an attempt to destroy the gaming subculture (Salter 2018).

While the claim that Zoe Quinn had received positive reviews in exchange for sexual favors was undoubtedly false – the game critic in question had never reviewed any of Quinn's games – the post got picked up on 4Chan and resulted in an "orchestrated abuse campaign" (Salter 2018, p. 247). After her personal address and phone number were found and distributed online, Ms. Quinn received death and rape threats and was sexually harassed on the phone (Quinn 2017). And while the movement that rallied around the hashtag #GamerGate started with her violent targeting, it quickly widened its scope to include journalists, critics, and other video game creators who raised their voice against sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia in video games (Suellentrop 2014).

The hashtag #GamerGate, which is now thought to have been created by a handful of 4chan users, was first shared on Twitter by actor Adam Baldwin in support of the movement (https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Timeline_of_Gamergate). It quickly became a "breeding ground for all kinds of conspiracy theories surrounding the 'corrupt' systems that allowed Quinn and Sarkeesian to figure in the industry as they do" (Johnston 2014). Baldwin's intervention fueled the abuse campaign against Quinn and other women in the video game industry, all while hiding under the banner of protecting "ethics" in video game journalism (Mortensen 2018; Salter 2018). Notably, Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist media critic, received death and rape threats for months. At the end of 2014, she even had to cancel one of her talk at the Utah State University after the university received an anonymous email threatening to reproduce the anti-feminist terrorist attack that happened in Montreal in 1989 and killed 14 women. Prior to #GamerGate movement, Ms. Sarkeesian had already been the target of angry detractors: in 2012, a game was created using an image of her face in which each time players clicked their mouse, her face would become more and more tumefied (Wingfield 2014).

What are the impacts of this interactive online audience's transgression?

What started with a very specific object of attention – Zoe Quinn – quickly evolved into a culture war, with attention moving back and forth between specific objects (e.g., Quinn, Sarkeesian) and more diffuse ones (e.g., politics in video games) sometimes to serve GamerGate supporters' arguments, sometimes to serve the movement's opponents.

This case is relevant to understanding repercussions of online audience's transgression on several fronts. First, it sheds light on the "sinister power afforded to those brazen enough to construct their own false realities and foist them on others." (Warzel 2019). GamerGate has demonstrated how powerful orchestrated actions can be in distorting the truth and fueling online outrage. While the harassment suffered by Quinn, Sarkeesian, and others were undeniably led by some GamerGate supporters, the movement has been particularly active at creating an alternate truth to delegitimize and attack its critics. Early in the GamerGate campaign, instructions were being posted on setting up sockpuppet accounts (fake online identities created for the purposes of deception) aimed at providing a means to engage in the harassment of GamerGate targets while benefiting from anonymity. Later, in September 2014 (https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Timeline_of_Gamergate), a second hashtag, #NotYourShield, sprouted online. The manufactured hashtag campaign orchestrated by 4chan users instructed members to create sockpuppet Twitter accounts impersonating women and people of color. The objective was to show that "female and non-White gamers did not want more diversity in games" (Mortensen 2018). This tactic did not originate with GamerGate: in the months prior to GamerGate, 4chan users had used a similar tactic posing as "angry feminists" and using the hashtags #EndFathersDay and #WhitesCantBeRaped in order for them to trend on social media and undermine the legitimacy of "social justice warriors" (Warzel 2019). Additional tactics were also used to bury dissenting voices: Twitter's hands-off approach to the moderation at the time of GamerGate allowed organized online mobs to monitor #GamerGate and intimidate critics of the movement in order to shut down any potential dialogue (Salter 2018).

Second, the movement gave rise to "harassment influencers" (Warzel 2019), personality-driven influencers who saw conflicts surrounding GamerGate as an opportunity to increase their following by fueling culture debates. With the rise of such influencers, the mostly anonymous supporters had personalities to interact with and rally around.

Third, despite the opinion leaders discussed above, GamerGate was self-defined as a leaderless, self-organized movement. It is important to remember that GamerGate was not a unified group (Mortensen 2018), with many of the supporters of the movement being unaware of the coordinated campaign of hashtags and disagreeing with harassment campaigns. Mortensen (2018) characterizes the behavior of this heterogeneous movement as swarm-like in the sense that "their behavior was not determined by a clear plan but was given direction by the actions of some core individuals, often perceived at second or third hand, through the reactions of others in the swarm" (p. 789). The swarm nature of GamerGate, coupled with anonymity of participants, and denial strategies using the "no true Scotsman" fallacy – an attempt to protect a generalization (e.g. GamerGate is a pacific movement) against counter-examples by dismissing them as irrelevant – made it difficult to prove that GamerGate was responsible for doxing (e.g., SWATing which consists in providing the police with false information in order to trigger a raid at someone's home) opponents of the movement.

The revenge of the TikTokers: when Trump went to Tulsa

In June 2020, Former President Donald Trump's re-election campaign organizers were the target of an astute prank orchestrated by a surprising collection of social media users. It mixed a middle-aged, middle America, "#titktokgrandma" (Lee 2020), Mary Jo Laupp and her followers, with teenagers belonging to the Alt, Black, and K-pop (Korean-pop music aficionados) factions on the video-sharing social network platform TikTok. The prank resulted in a mass false-registration drive to the event. Interestingly, this grassroot political activism emerged from a platform that bans official political activity.

What happened?

This coordinated action was inspired by young Black TikTokers' voicing their frustrations about Donald Trump's audacity in holding a re-election rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, site of the 1921 race massacre, on the same day as Juneteenth (June 19th), a holiday celebrating the end of enslavement of African Americans (the rally was later moved to June 20th). Mary-Jo Laupp, 51, provided the original call to action to sabotage the event in a TikTok video she shared on the evening of June 11th. Her idea was to have fellow angry TikTokers reserve tickets for the event, but with no intention of showing up. If the deception turned out to be successful, she thought, Trump would find himself humiliated, all by himself, in an empty auditorium (Lorenz, Browning, and Frenkel 2020).

The morning following Laupp's post, her video had gone viral, with more than 700,000 likes and 2 million views (Lorenz, Browning, and Frenkel 2020). Furthermore, comments at the bottom of the video were now offering tips on how to effect the ruse by using Tulsa zip codes, providing fake names, or operating alternate Google voice numbers. The original video had taken a life of its own and fueled a series of memes: new content featuring teens dancing to the Macarena with screenshots of their confirmed rally tickets in the background and captions celebrating their intention to deceive was rapidly being shared on the platform and beyond (see examples of videos here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utERTzrLD2Y&ab_channel=LALAVEK). As the Trump camp rejoiced and tweeted record anticipated numbers of attendees – "more than a million tickets reserved!" (Evelyn 2020) – the tricksters tried to keep a low profile by deleting their posts within 24 to 48 hours.

In subsequent analyses of what happened, the press has widely reported that K-pop fans were thought to have spread the subterfuge, using their increasing prowess at mobilizing their troupes for political action through social media, including but not limited to TikTok. One YouTuber who participated in the prank claimed that the different TikTok factions involved had good knowledge of how to boost content to "get where they want" (Lorenz, Browning, and Frenkel 2020). Ultimately, the Tulsa Fire Department reported that only 6,200 tickets of attendees were scanned on the day of the event, leaving most of the 19,000-seat auditorium empty (Lorenz, Browning, and Frenkel 2020). While it is likely that a conjunction of factors – including the very real threat of contracting Covid19 – led to what former Republican strategist Steve Schmidt called the "Emptysburgh Address" (Lee 2020), teenagers online celebrated loudly what they felt was the "best senior prank ever" (Lorenz, Browning, and Frenkel 2020), and old media and its own audience took stock of the significance of the transgression.

What are the impacts of this interactive online audience's transgression?

This case was an instance of a specific object of attention, the Trump-Pence Tulsa rally, being targeted by mostly young audience members of multiple factions (e.g., Alt, Black, K-Pop) on the platform TikTok, originally, but also via the tricksters' own audience on other social networks including Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook.

This example is an interesting one for at least three reasons with regards to furthering our understanding of transgressive behaviors by interactive online audiences. First, while trolls and other pranksters are usually associated with actions belonging to the right end of the political spectrum (Freelon et al. 2020), this was a trolling incident initiated and supported by audience members leaning more to the left. Second, while promulgating a falsehood in an attempt to deceive another party is typically understood as something morally reprehensible, when the target of such efforts is the Troll-in-Chief himself, a deception might be seen as more laudable. Third, since official political activity is not to take place on TikTok, even if the Trump campaign organizers had been made aware of the ruse and had attempted to fight back, ambiguity around what is institutionally circumscribed on the platform might have complicated their attempts. Thus, when interactive online audiences act on their turf and transgress norms in an effort to damage highly polarized figures, they can end up being celebrated for it, possibly even more when they are young and otherwise thought of as not particularly consequential in a particular realm of life such as politics. Now that the trolls have been trolled though, we can anticipate that future attempts at messing with attendance data will be highly scrutinized (Lorenz, Browning, and Frenkel 2020). But surely, based on the verve that we have seen here and the "low-cost participation afforded by digital media to reach potentially sympathetic publics" (Freelon et al. 2020), the interactive online audiences will think of new ways by which to commit the transgressions they feel are important and necessary to further whatever cause they espouse.

GameStop

In 2020, GameStop took WallStreet by surprise. The video game retailer's stock price was trending far beyond what market watchers believed it was worth, putting pressure on hedge funds that had bet against it on Wall Street.

What happened?

Financial markets have witnessed a rise in the number of individuals investing in stock during the Covid-19 pandemic. Among reasons cited for this, experts believe that lockdown-related savings, policy stimulus, low interest rates, as well as easier access to investments via the proliferation of trading apps have contributed to this increase.

Most individual investors in financial markets follow a strategy involving buying stocks at a low price and selling them for a higher price in order to generate profit. Other types of investors called short-sellers – frequently hedge funds – use the opposite strategy. Simply put, these professional investors make a profit by betting a stock will drop in price: they borrow a stock from a lender, sell the stock when the value is still high, and then buy the stock as the price drops and return it to the lender.

Before GameStop made headlines in 2021, it used to be one of the most shorted companies. While professional investors continued betting against the GameStop stock, retail (i.e., non-professional) investors' discussions about stocks on social media platforms and specifically Reddit's subforum "WallStreetBets" started fueling interest in buying the stock, resulting in driving up its value, ultimately leading to huge financial losses for short-sellers.

It is not the first time that social media sentiment has disrupted financial markets with stocks at the center of online audience attention now referred to as "meme stocks." These meme stocks, named after their popularity on social media, are generally overpriced stocks that experience rapid spikes of growth. In the case of GameStop, the stock was trading around US$ 4 in March 2020 and spiked to US$ 347 in January 2021. While the stock had been discussed on WallStreetBets weeks before it spiked, it turned into a cultural phenomenon after members of the forum framed their actions as a form of rebellion against short-sellers. In the words of Reddit CEO Steve Huffman (Swisher 2021):

"Members of WallStreetBets noticed that several hedge funds were shorting the stock, meaning institutional investors were going to make huge profits when the stock price fell. That offended them. And that's why Redditors wanted to keep GME high, to squeeze the big guy."

What are the impacts of this interactive online audience's transgression?

The interaction led to mixed results: some hedge funds such as Melvin Capital, which lost 53% in January 2021, registered heavy financial losses; others made a lot of money, one example being Senvest which walked away with a US$700 million profit (Sonnemaker 2021). Similar results were observed for individual investors.

Such market volatility drew the attention of officials and regulators. The U.S Congress held hearings to investigate the responsibility of several key figures of the GameStop case such as Vladimir Tenev, CEO of Robinhood, a trading app that restricted purchases of GameStop stocks due to the volatility, fueling the crash of its price. Reddit's CEO Steve Huffman was also called to testify as officials questioned whether or not the platform enabled a form of illegal stock manipulation (Zeitlin 2021).

Although the story is still unfolding, experts believe that it is unlikely that this event will lead to prosecutions against any of the actors identified in the GameStop case. It may, however, lead to changes to rules that didn't account for the rise of commission-free trading and use of online discussion boards (Stacey 2021).

This case more broadly draws attention to the power of meme-fueled interactions. For no clear reason, the millions of users in the subreddit WallStreetBets shook up financial markets in a way that resulted in billion-dollar losses for short-sellers. And while the repercussions are huge for both institutions and individuals, the WallStreetBets community acted within the rules of financial markets. As Steve Huffman (Reddit's CEO) argues (Swisher 2021):

"[I]t's the SEC [U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission]'s job to prevent market manipulation. And they write the rules. And then everybody else operates according to those rules, more or less. […] So it is perfectly legal for people to talk about stocks, to make recommendations, to share what they're doing, to share what they're thinking, to egg each other on. That's not manipulation. That's just talking."

To integrate the dimensions of transgressive behavior introduced initially with the cases discussed immediately above, we offer Figure 16.1.

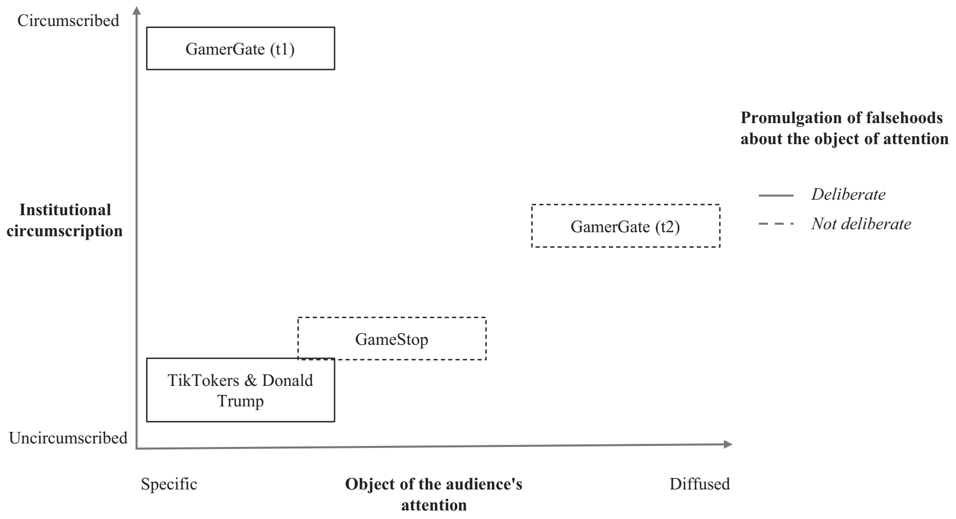
Circumscribed
GamerGate (t1)
Promulgation of falsehoods about the object of attention
Institutional circumscription
Deliberate
Not deliberate
GamerGate (t2)
GameStop
TikTokers & Donald Trump
Uncircumscribed
Specific
Object of the audience's attention
Diffused

Figure 16.1 Dimensions of transgressive behaviors
Source: Own elaboration.

On the x-axis, cases are mapped according to whether the object of the audience's attention is specific or diffused, while the y-axis shows whether behaviors were institutionally circumscribed or not.

Discussion

When we began this chapter, we naively assumed that transgressive behaviors by interactive online audiences would mostly be unambiguously objectionable to any "reasonable" party. We quickly realized things weren't nearly so clear-cut. If we were to sum up what we ourselves learned from writing this chapter it would be that when it comes to making sense of our focal phenomenon, the starting point has to be "it's complicated." We chose the three case studies profiled above for precisely this reason. The now infamous "GamerGate" incident is perhaps the typical case of transgressive behavior that we imagined when we began this project, the "TikTokers Revenge" and "GameStop" cases less so. Yet, when we compare the three cases, each of which entails some form of harm to the object of attention, what differentiates them most strikingly is the extent to which the victims are sympathetic. Nor can we say that GamerGate is the "typical" case of transgressive interactive online audience behavior because of the extent of harm caused to the objects of the audience of attention: indeed, our assessment is that it would be nearly impossible to compare the extent of harm caused from one case to the next, when all the consequences of each instance are taken into account. With these reflections in mind, we offer some suggestions both for future research and for those who use social media platforms and participate with other online audience members.

Implications for research

This phenomenon deserves more scholarly attention than it has received thus far from consumer and marketing researchers. With notable exceptions such as Golf-Papez and Veer

(2017), consumer and marketing researchers have focused on the non-transgressive audience behaviors that we ourselves discussed in the first edition of this book. Transgressive online behaviors by consumers of social media platforms deserve our attention as well, given the social impacts these forms of behavior are indisputably having.

This said, we believe that researchers will benefit if they take, as a starting point, the fact that distinguishing behaviors that we, as scholar-citizens, approve of from those we don't is ultimately a matter of perspective. What we regard as norms that are being violated might be norms that are valorized within a given audience that has been hanging out on a subreddit or a closed Facebook group for a period of time. Thus, the notion that norm-violation defines transgressive behavior must take into account that norms vary widely. Relatedly, we believe that researchers will benefit if they embrace the paradoxical fact that the very same transgressive audience practices that are used to pursue agendas that are (in our view) morally reprehensible are also being used by other audiences to pursue agendas that we would view as morally laudable.

Following from these observations, we would advise researchers who study these phenomena to be mindful of the context of contexts (Askegaard and Linnet 2011). Any particular instance of transgressive online audience interactions must be situated in the historical and social context in which it occurs; equally, it must be situated in the context of the platforms on which it is being enacted. If we are to understand the implications of this broad category of behavior for people, for organizations, and for societies, we must not simplify or decontextualize the cases we examine.

Implications for users of social media platforms

It may be trite, but it is nonetheless true that there is a need for those who use platforms to become educated about the gamut of behaviors that fall into the broad category of transgressive online audience interactions. Users of social media platforms need to inform themselves so that they are aware not only of the potential ways that they might be harmed by such audience interactions but also about the ways that they might be fueling or furthering transgressive behaviors that have the potential to cause harm to others.

Of course, as we have noted, not all transgressive online audience interactions result in much harm and engaging in some of them may actually serve socially beneficial purposes. But users need to be mindful of the potential for harm, to themselves and others, when they interact with others online. Even seemingly simple acts, like posting to Facebook a private communication from a customer service provider who has made a faux pas, can escalate in ways that were never intended. In general, audience interactions that take place in a public or semi-public forum have the potential to take on a life of their own. Thus, while engaging playfully with other online audience members is not something we are advising against, educating oneself about the potential ways that transgressive behaviors may evolve is something we advocate.

Implications for practitioners

As social interactions become increasingly connected through the growing use of social media, many experts predict that online misbehaviors – or transgressive behaviors as we discuss in this article – will not only persist but get worse (Rainie et al., 2017). Assuming this trend grows, social media platforms may be overwhelmed by the number and complexity of contentious cases they face, straining the attentional and possibly the financial resources of even the most well-endowed organization. Experts anticipate platform owners will increasingly rely on artificial intelligence to help prevent or quickly act on transgressive behaviors (Rainie et al., 2017). Yet while AI-powered technologies are increasingly powerful, their learning processes are still influenced by the datasets they're trained on. For this reason, users and developers of such solutions must pay close attention to the context to which they apply these technologies, and how their learning applies to complex new cases of transgressive behaviors. As our analysis indicates, the idiosyncratic, ever-evolving, and morally complicated nature of transgressions will challenge even human and artificial intelligence alike.

Further reading

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