

Internet trolls live to upset as many people as possible, using all the technical and psychological tools at their disposal. To quote a famous Internet meme, trolling is why we can't have nice things online. Or at least that's what we have been led to believe.

In this provocative book, Whitney Phillips argues that trolling, widely condemned as obscene and deviant, actually fits comfortably within the contemporary media landscape. Trolling may be obscene, but, Phillips argues, it isn't all that deviant. Trolls' actions are born of and fueled by culturally sanctioned impulses—which are just as damaging as the trolls' most disruptive behaviors. Phillips shows how trolls align with social media, and she documents how trolls, in addition to parroting media tropes, also offer a grotesque pantomime of dominant cultural tropes, including gendered notions of dominance and success and an ideology of entitlement. We don't just have a trolling problem, Phillips argues; we have a culture problem. *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things* isn't only about trolls; it's about a culture in which trolls thrive.

Whitney Phillips is Assistant Professor of Writing at Mercer University.

"Opens up an opportunity for much-needed dialogue about the ethical-political implications of online antagonism."
PopMatters

"A terrific introduction to the world of trolling, exploring how trolls put on figurative masks (or literal masks in the case of online anonymity) and generate lulz from those they encounter."
Curtis Frye, Technology and Society Book Reviews

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THIS IS WHY
WE CAN'T HAVE NICE THINGS

WHITNEY PHILLIPS

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Mapping the Relationship between
Online Trolling
and Mainstream Culture

WHITNEY PHILLIPS

5 LOLing at Tragedy: Facebook Trolls, Memorial Pages, and the Business of Mass-Mediated Disaster Narratives

Building upon chapter 4, which posits a symbiotic and ultimately homologous relationship between early Anonymous and Fox News, this chapter considers the behavioral and rhetorical overlap between Facebook memorial page trolling and sensationalist disaster coverage. In addition to mapping the development of RIP trolling—in which online instigators post abusive comments and images onto pages created for and dedicated to the deceased—the chapter examines the highly contentious and ultimately parasitic relationship between memorial trolls and Facebook itself.

Recalling Elliot Oring's account of disaster humor,¹ the chapter goes on to suggest that, purposefully or not, RIP trolls highlight the exploitative and sometimes downright trollish underpinnings of mainstream disaster coverage. Rather than providing a snarling, sociopathic counterpoint to mainstream media, then, Facebook memorial page trolls (RIP trolls for short) enact a grotesque pantomime of precisely the corporate logic that transforms tragedy into a business opportunity—further blurring the ostensibly clear-cut line between those who troll and those who do not.

The Crunchy Side of Convergence

I first heard about Facebook memorial page trolling in March 2010. This introduction came via a troll named Paulie Socash, who was the Internet friend of an Internet friend familiar with my research. At Paulie's behest, I created a fake profile—I chose the moniker David Davison—and watched as my Facebook wall lit up with hundreds, maybe even thousands, of trolls, all of whom flagged themselves as such with profile names referencing well-known memes.² Although it was difficult to know exactly how many people were behind this initial onslaught (a single person could and usually would operate a number of profiles simultaneously), it was clear that whatever this was, it was big.

Almost immediately, troll profiles began friending other troll profiles (identifiable by handle and profile picture), forming an antisocial network of sorts. All one needed to do was log in and scroll through his or her news feed, which would show exactly what was being trolled by whom—perfect for research purposes. For the first few months of the project, I'd spend hours each day simply lurking, that is, quietly following trolls from public page to public page. Once Facebook began pushing back against trolling behaviors in late 2010, automatically banning profiles that were engaging in trollish-seeming behaviors (not posting anything on one's own wall, posting numerous messages to strangers' walls, frequently being blocked, sending far more friend messages than were ever accepted, constantly rotating between different profiles, often from the same IP address), this approach became increasingly difficult. In response, I began reaching out to and interviewing individual trolls/groups of trolls, including Paulie Socash, Peter Partyvan, Wilson Mouzone, Soveri Ruthless, Frank Baga-donuts, and Pro Fessor, as well as a rotating cast of one- or two-time contributors, from whom I gathered invaluable and otherwise inaccessible data, including screencaps, gossip, and concrete timelines. Given how effective Facebook's anti-trolling measures proved to be, it would not be possible to replicate this study, making the trolls' contributions critical to understanding expansion (and retraction) within this particular troll space.

Digitally Mediated Mourning

In October 2009, Facebook employee Max Kelley addressed Facebook's changing attitude toward so-called memorial accounts.³ Previously, Kelly explained, there was no way to deactivate a Facebook account once a person had died. Consequently, the deceased's profile would occasionally show up in friends' suggestion boxes ("Reconnect with Bill by posting something on his wall!"), prompting a number of users to complain.

After considering their options, Facebook decided to implement a new policy: friends and family members now had the option to permanently memorialize the dead person's account. Existing friends would still have access to their friend's wall but would not receive any messages regarding that profile. Additionally, only confirmed friends would be able to search for the profile, and no one would be able to log on as the deceased (a move for the profile, and no one would be able to log on as the deceased (a move that could be interpreted as a preemptive strike against mischief).⁴ By implementing this policy, Facebook was deliberately positioning itself as a potential grief space, somewhere mourners could go, as Kelley stated, "to save and share their memories of those who've passed." After all, he

continued, "when someone leaves us, they don't leave our memories or our social networks."⁵

In mid-February 2010, Lisa Miller of *Newsweek* praised these changes, arguing that "this is how we collectively mourn: Globally. Together. Online."⁶ According to Miller, it was entirely appropriate that Facebook should provide networking support for mourners, an idea that reached full flowering with the seemingly overnight popularity of Facebook memorial pages. Unlike a memorialized account, which functions as a snapshot of a person's life just before he or she died, memorial (or RIP) pages allowed everyone, from those who knew the deceased to those who first encountered the story online or on television, to participate in the grieving process. Members could post condolence messages, communicate and grieve with other users, or simply keep track of group announcements.

What's more, involved parties—whether friend, family member, or sympathetic stranger—were able to link relevant news items (as well as the memorial pages themselves) onto their own Facebook profiles, thus directing even more traffic, and therefore attention, to an emerging story. If a particular story generated enough on-site buzz, media outlets would run a story about Facebook's engagement with the story, which would raise the visibility of the original story, as well as the associated memorial page(s). More exposure meant more page views, and more page views meant more Likes, and more Likes meant more group members; unsurprisingly, the biggest news stories generated the strongest reactions on Facebook.

A Series of Unfortunate Events

It was this perfect symbiosis between Facebook and corporate media that set organized, widespread RIP trolling in motion—a development that took a turn for the macabre during a particularly eventful two-week period in early 2010. The opening salvo came on February 25, when SeaWorld trainer Dawn Brancheau was killed by Tilikum, a 12,000-pound killer whale, as the two performed in front of a live stadium audience.⁷ Within minutes of Brancheau's death, trolls began uploading macros onto /b/ featuring a homicidal whale as well as variations on rule 34, an unofficial rule of the Internet declaring that whatever "it" is, there is porn of it. With the invocation of rule 34, Dawn Brancheau the person was thus transformed into Dawn Brancheau the meme—that is to say, a dehumanized, sexualized object of lulz.

As frequently happens on /b/, the Tilikum/Brancheau family of memes began to incorporate additional memes, including references to the now-infamous "Epic Beard Man" video. The video, which was uploaded onto

YouTube ten days before Brancheau's death, captures an altercation between an older white man (of the eponymous epic beard) named Thomas Bruso and a fifty-year-old black man. The white man wears a shirt that reads "I am a motherfucker"; the black man, whose nose has been broken, repeatedly calls for an ambulance, which he pronounces as "amber lamps."⁸ /b/ found the phrases "I am a motherfucker" and "amber lamps" particularly amusing, and when the RIP party spontaneously jumped from /b/ to Sea-World's Facebook page, an untold number of trolls flooded its wall with Epic Beard Man references and Tilikum macros, including one that read "Should Have Called the Amber Lamps."⁹

February 25 also marked the disappearance of Chelsea King, a pretty, blond white teenager from San Diego. In King's hometown, thousands of volunteers scoured San Diego County for clues, and community leaders organized candlelight vigils and prayer circles.¹⁰ On the Internet, well-wishers from across the country utilized Facebook's networking platform to express sympathy and help cheerlead the search effort. The page "Chelsea's Light," for example, which was created by the King family almost immediately following King's disappearance, amassed over eighty thousand members within three days,¹¹ while unofficial pages like "Help Find Chelsea King: Missing California Teen"¹² pulled in tens of thousands of additional fans and group members, the vast majority of whom had never met King but nevertheless felt connected to the case.

Thanks to the media attention surrounding—and subsequent trolling interest in—the Dawn Brancheau case, trolls who otherwise might not have been paying attention were already plugged into the twenty-four-hour cable and online news cycle; consequently, they were some of the first responders when people began creating and, more importantly, making public, dozens of fan groups and RIP pages for King. For the next few days, trolls split their time between Brancheau's and King's respective pages, wreaking havoc with the admins of each and resulting in the first of many so-called trollercausts (indicating a high rate of profile deletion, a state of affairs easily remedied by the creation of new accounts).

Then on March 1, thirty-year-old John Gardener III was charged with the suspected rape and murder of Chelsea King as well as the murder of fourteen-year-old Amber DuBois, a local high school student who disappeared in 2009.¹³ As soon as the news broke, Facebook users began creating scores of RIP Chelsea King and Amber DuBois pages, precipitating a renewed flood of trolling. Soon after, a San Diego man named Mike McMullen created the page "I Bet a Pickle Can Get More Fans than Chelsea King."¹⁴ A play on "I Bet This Pickle Can Get More Fans than Nickleback,"

McMullen's page featured a picture of a scowling, underwear-clad cartoon pickle gripping a crudely photoshopped cutout of Chelsea's head.¹⁵

Almost immediately, Pickle was flooded with offensive images and statements as well as the impassioned condemnation of users who "liked" the page in order to defend Chelsea's memory. Not surprisingly, word spread quickly; a few days after it hit Facebook, an ABC affiliate in San Diego (10 News) ran a segment condemning the page and its creator. When confronted by reporter Joe Little in a Facebook message thread, McMullen seemed unfazed, choosing instead to speak as the pickle itself. In response, 10 News consulted Michael Mantell, a clinical psychologist, who concluded that there had to be something seriously wrong with McMullen.¹⁶

Although McMullen wasn't personally responsible for all the content posted to Pickle, he did provide a forum for a deluge of negative and X-rated comments. "Extreme butthurt," wrote poster Tyrone Dickinnot. "WU TANG CLAN AIN'T NUTTIN TO FUCK WIT," added George Everyman. Francis Bagadonuts posted a Google Earth image of the home allegedly belonging to one of the posters who objected to the page and whom posters Tracy Balls and Tasha Salad proceeded to torment; someone asked if there were any nude pictures of Chelsea King's body; someone threatened to rape the sister and mother of someone who had defended King's memory.¹⁷

As shocking as this segment might have been for 10 News' audience, these comments were comparatively tame—much of what was posted to Pickle was much too obscene to air, even if pixilated. Furthermore, the segment failed to acknowledge—indeed, seemed wholly unaware—that the real story extended far beyond a single fan page. This was not just about Mike McMullen; this was not just about Chelsea King. Contrary to 10 News' assumption that "I Bet a Pickle" was an isolated event, the behaviors exhibited on Pickle, as well as negative or otherwise ransacked Chelsea King pages, had already gone global.

Around the World in 80 Trolls

Indeed, similar patterns of behavior were unfolding in Britain and Australia, both of which were experiencing their own uptick in high-profile deaths. In Great Britain, and on the same day that Chelsea King's body was found, news broke that BBC presenter Kristian Digby had died of autoerotic asphyxiation.¹⁸ Just as /b/'s response to Dawn Brancheau's death lent trolling momentum to the Chelsea King story, Digby's death breathed new life into organized attacks against British television personality Jade

Goody, whose ongoing and very public battle with cancer (which she finally lost March 22) had inspired a whole subgenre of British trolling.

In Australia, and nearly simultaneously, eight-year-old Trinity Bates and twelve-year-old Elliot Fletcher were both murdered.¹⁹ Like their American and British counterparts, the ranks of Australian trolls exploded, sending the Australian media into a Facebook-bashing fury. Unlike American news outlets, however, which at the time conflated “cyberbullying” with “trolling,” Australian bloggers, reporters, and even law enforcement knew precisely what they were up against, and incidentally were the first nation to take punitive measures against trolling behaviors—see the 2010 case of Paul Bradley Hampson, aka Dale Angerer, who photoshopped an image of a penis onto an existing photo of Trinity Bates, posted the image to Bates’s Facebook memorial page (among other obscenities posted to Elliot Fletcher’s page), and was subsequently arrested for child pornography.²⁰

Despite differences in media representations and legal interventions, Australian trolls quickly began sharing resources with their American counterparts; from late February onward, American trolls were just as likely to raid Australian memorial pages as Australians were to raid American pages. Whatever a troll’s nationality, he or she would blanket his or her friend lists with invites to RIP pages and groups, which would be forwarded down the chain to the friends of friends, and the friends of those friends, thus introducing local tragedy to a transnational audience.

During this initial period of global expansion, I was intrigued to discover that one could easily and accurately determine a Facebook troll’s nationality simply by examining how they trolled. Their real names may have been withheld, but their cultural experiences bled through (and, once the trolls began to use Skype for group voice chat, could be confirmed). Australian trolls, for example, tended to be extremely aggressive, likely due to Australia’s severe censorship laws—the logic being that if you’re already flirting with illegality, you might as well go full force. British trolls were especially social, and often used trolling as an opportunity to make (and lose) online and offline friends. American trolls, by contrast, were simultaneously the most secretive and the most boastful, given the protections afforded by the First Amendment. So, while Australian trolls expected their government to prosecute, American trolls assumed their government would, ultimately, protect, and often cited civil liberties organizations like the ACLU as a legal failsafe (as one troll half-jokingly put it, the ACLU defends terrorists, so it wouldn’t have a problem intervening on behalf of trolls).

In this way, participating trolls wore their nationalities like a World Cup soccer uniform, providing further (if unexpected) evidence for the theory of cultural digestion. These trolls were quite literally marked by the cultures that spawned them, so much so that even anonymity couldn’t disguise where they were coming from.

The Antisocial Network

In addition to inadvertently spurring the popularity of memorial page trolling, Facebook’s social networking platform helped engender a distinctive trolling style, one that hews fairly closely to “traditional” trolling but that differs both structurally and in overall tone. The following three sections chronicle these points of overlap, and illustrate just how imbricated Facebook is in the RIP trolling story.

The Technological Affordances of Facebook

The form and function of Facebook trolling was, from its very inception, predicated on the technological affordances established by Facebook’s programmers. It was through the adoption of these affordances—which don’t just encourage but engender user enmeshment—that trolling became a fundamentally *social* activity. This differed greatly from most forum trolling and certainly trolling on /b/, which was almost always blindly anonymous. Participating anons may have worked together during a particular raid, but they rarely stood still long enough to establish social ties and certainly didn’t have a persistent online identity to which particular successes may be affixed.

Facebook trolling, by contrast, necessitated the creation of strong affinity networks. Most conspicuously, given their desire to maintain community ties after a profile had been deleted, Facebook trolls tended to stick with the same family of trolling names. This way, respawn accounts (new accounts created after an old account or set of accounts had been banned) would have an easier time finding and being found by other trolls, and would allow individual trolls to take credit for their on-site exploits. For example, every time my profile was banned, I would respawn as David, integrating this basic nominal building block into both first and last names regardless of gender (David Davison, Brittani Davidson, David Briggs). Paulie maintained two profile roots, Paul for male accounts and Leigh for female; Frank was Francis, Fran, François or Frankie; Ruthless was Ruth or Ruthie, etc. It might seem like an obvious point, but having stable names

to call each other meant that trolls suddenly had persistent social identities to maintain, and could start making friends.

There is of course a flip side, since although persistent social identity helps engender community formation, it also encourages the development of stable personae with which to have persistent conflict. The ongoing war between trolls and anti-trolls is a case in point. To compress several years' worth of antipathy into a single paragraph, the seemingly overnight popularity of Facebook trolling caused a great deal of distress in average users; a number of anti-trolling groups began cropping up, including "I Think Internet Trolls Are Losers,"²¹ "Stop the Bullying!"²² "Army against Low Life Trolls"²³ and "These Cruel Facebook 'Trolls' Need to Be Locked Up for Attacking RIP Groups."²⁴ Although many of these groups were created in earnest, most if not all were swiftly infiltrated by trolls, who shifted their focus from trolling online mourners to trolling other trolls—hence the title "anti-troll" (and its corresponding objective, "anti-lulz").

The most infamous of these anti-trolls was Mike Lonston, who in 2010 set to work doxxing (i.e., revealing the real-life name, phone number, address, and/or workplace of) as many trolls as he could. Lonston's interventions spurred the creation of "Mike Lonston Week," an organized pushback in which dozens of trolls cloned dozens of Mike Lonston profiles ("cloning" a profile meant creating an unauthorized, identical profile) in order to gain access to anti-trolling groups and undermine Lonston's influence within anti-lulz circles.²⁵ Unsurprisingly, very little love was lost between "proper" trolls and antis; according to the "real" trolls, anti-trolls are tediously self-righteous at best and pathologically messianic at worst, often using the friends and families of the deceased as pawns in a war that, according to the trolls I've worked with, is more about ego and reputation than good-faith defense against the dark arts. Conversely, the antis' (public) position is that trolls are mentally ill social parasites who must be stopped at any cost.

Whatever the true motives of either side, the troll/anti-troll rivalry quickly escalated. Often spending weeks or months stalking their targets, antis amassed stockpiles of incriminating screenshots and handed identifying information, including any and all dox, over to the authorities. In the United States, such acts of anti-trollish vigilantism were for the most part ignored by law enforcement, a point over which stateside trolls frequently gloated. In Great Britain, however, the stakes were much higher—a point that antis, particularly Mike Lonston, were quite successful in exploiting. Again, it is critical to note the ways in which Facebook's platform influenced, if not outright determined, the behavior of its resident

trolls, anti- or otherwise. You don't see these kinds of drawn-out and highly personal pissing matches on /b/, or on forums where identity is either fleeting or simply nonexistent; this was a Facebook-specific phenomenon.

Trolling and the Facebook Self

In addition to replicating the behavioral patterns of "legitimate" users, the Facebook trolls I worked with eagerly harnessed existing on-site sensitivities. Due to the knee-jerk sympathies they generated, RIP pages were an attractive, almost obvious, choice. This is not to say that all Facebook trolls engaged in memorial page trolling. Quite the contrary—from the trolls' perspective, Facebook was a smorgasbord of exploitable situations and people. One possible (and in my opinion highly likely) explanation is embedded within Facebook's basic architecture, which positions the user as the subject of every sentence he or she utters, indeed as the center of his or her particular social universe. Self-involvement, in other words, is built into the code; one is primed to take things personally. This is not to say that Facebook users are solipsists, exactly. But the relationship between user and content is, and is designed to be, solipsistic. After all, the "I"—and a carefully constructed, often fastidiously maintained "I" at that—prefigures every interaction and lends itself to a particular brand of ego investment and emotional sensitivity. The trolls I worked with were more than eager to take full advantage.

Furthermore, to the extent that Facebook's architecture encourages emotional investment in regular users, it encourages emotional divestment in trolls, thus ushering in increasingly outrageous and aggressive behaviors. After all, while "real" Facebook users are continuously reminded of and interpolated by their own "I," troll users are continuously reminded of and interpolated by the "I" they're *not*—an ongoing process of emotional repudiation that may explain why Facebook trolls during this period frequently shifted to the third person to describe their own actions. At first I was taken aback by this tendency. I'd be chatting with a collaborator, and suddenly he or she would mention some amusing thing his or her profile had done, as if the profile were somehow separable from the person whose profile it was. I eventually came to realize that, in the trolls' minds, their profiles *were* separable from their "true" selves. Theirs may have been the fingers pushing all the buttons, but they weren't the ones doing the damage, not exactly.

Obviously, the person behind the troll is explicitly and directly responsible for any and all trollish behaviors. They are the ones doing the

trolling, regardless of what handle they're using. That said, while the person can be equated with the profiles he or she creates ("I am David"), the resulting profiles cannot similarly or necessarily be equated with the person ("David isn't *me*"); it is perhaps more accurate to say that trolling profiles, and trolling personas generally, fall somewhere between character and proxy—a sometimes-rupture sometimes-slippage between the offline and the online self that Facebook's encoded solipsism inadvertently reinforces.

Given the ease with which trolls on Facebook could find a seemingly endless stream of targets, as well as the ways in which the platform itself primed both subject and object of trolling for trolling, it is unsurprising that so many trolls regarded Facebook as an optimal stomping ground. During Facebook's period of trolls gone wild, it may have been the Internet's *most* optimal stomping ground. It was a perfect storm of technological and behavioral siphoning.

Facebook Responds

Needless to say, Facebook trolling generally and RIP trolling in particular proved to be a public relations nightmare for the Facebook brand, prompting the company to adopt increasingly strict anti-trolling measures.²⁶ In Britain, Facebook implemented the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) application—also known as the "Facebook panic button"—which could be downloaded onto users' accounts to help protect children and track the behaviors of abusive Facebook users. In the United States, Facebook adopted a number of similar yet much less publicized policies, including "greylisting" certain profile names, analyzing users' IP addresses, and even blocking suspected trolls from sending friend requests, writing personal messages, and commenting on friends' walls.²⁷ Facebook also established a "Hate and Harassment Team" to help police the site, augmenting their already robust algorithmic defenses.²⁸

This wasn't an entirely novel development. Even in the first few weeks of the RIP onslaught, before Facebook fully understood the scope of the problem, one's trolling profile could be deleted without warning. Around December 2010, however, and as a result of the aforementioned policy changes, profiles became almost impossible to maintain. Because my profiles frequently sent and received friend requests from users flagged for trolling, and because the majority of my interactions were restricted to these "greylisted" users, even I had a difficult time keeping accounts alive (I do admit to occasionally trolling Tea Party/Moral Majority-types, and was once banned from a group of white supremacists for complimenting

a gun-toting, Confederate flag bracelet-wearing, hyper-masculine homophobe for his fashion sense and good taste in accessories. I was curious to see how the man would react to being accused of stylishness—a dangerous proposition for someone obsessed with traditional gender roles and even more obsessed with his own sexuality—and was amused by how quickly he reported me for abuse).

And yet trolls persisted. Many established off-site strongholds on YouTube or Skype, where groups could maintain ties even in the face of certain profile-death. Other trolls began dealing exclusively in kamikaze attacks, wherein a profile is created only to be destroyed—resulting in behaviors that were as disorganized as they were vicious (several collaborators decried this emergent trolling style as being sloppy and uncreative, both from a tactical and stylistic standpoint). In this way, Facebook trolling functioned as an environmental adaptation. Whenever Facebook made a move, trolls would immediately counter, creating a subset of troll that was particularly adept at harnessing and exploiting existing structures.

The Ethnographer Speaks

A few weeks after a massive round of bannings, I threw caution to the ether and outed myself as a researcher. Up to that point, I'd restricted my focus to information I could glean by digging through the public links and likes of several well-connected trolls. This was the first time I'd presented my real-life self to the twenty or so trolls who made up this particular cabal, and it was the first time I'd directly broached the subject of research collaboration. By doing so, I hoped to gather more information about the trolls' relationships to and understanding of their own behaviors.

Anticipating that they would assume I was on some kind of doxxing mission, I assured potential research recruits that I was not interested in collecting identifying personal information, and that if somehow I were presented with any, say through the trolls' own disclosures, inadvertent discovery, or through idle gossip, I would lock that information down—wouldn't record it, wouldn't share the information with other trolls, and wouldn't include it in any published research. I even drafted a confidentiality agreement, which I posted to every Facebook research page I created, and which I required all research participants to read and consent to before I would ask any interview questions.

Unsurprisingly, the reaction was mixed—and with very good reason. Trolls were constantly cloning each other or simply pretending to be something else entirely. Paulie, for example, spent months undercover as a

female Klanswoman ("all they do is play Farmville and send each other hugs"), and almost every troll I worked with had created at least one alternate persona. For example, Ruthless spent a summer as a kindly black grandmother named Ruthie, and Frank frequently trolled as Fran, who at some point adopted David as her only son ("Only on the interwebz," he later wrote, "can you have a man [me] posing as a girl [Fran Stepford] become the mom of a boy [David Davidson] who is actually a girl [Whit]").²⁹ Even I gave in to this impulse, inventing with my research profiles an entire nuclear family complete with strained marriage (it was "complicated" with Paul Lee) and dopey tagalong brother (David, of course). "Oh you can trust me I'm writing a book, now tell me about your feelings" would have been entirely par for this course.

My gender was also an issue, as Facebook trolling, like trolling generally, is explicitly androcentric ("absolute sausagefest" also works, and is how I chose to frame the space in the *First Monday* article on which this chapter is based³⁰). Indeed over the course of two years of research, I encountered a mere handful of female Facebook trolls, only one of whom was willing (though not at all eager) to chat via Skype. Those who were female, and/or claimed to be female irl, were often just as sexist as their male counterparts, if not more so. The one female troll I spoke with enjoyed trolling Facebook support groups for rape victims, and bragged during a Skype interview about singling out, and in fact preferring, vulnerable female targets.

There was, however, no shortage of female-presenting trolls, most of whom were playing at femininity in order to accomplish any number of unholy objectives. As Ruthless, who at the time was trolling as Banme Anmarkzdies, explained, "I love trolling as a female, one of my favorite pastimes is making up some mock rape, abuse, neglect story that is my excuse for the way I am, and 9 times out of 10 they forgive me, and then I just LOL & JK them" (recall that in trolling parlance, "lol jk" means "haha you idiot I was just kidding").³¹

Consequently my claim that I was an academic, and a female academic at that, would have seemed doubly suspicious. Luckily, Paulie was willing to vouch for me and for my work, which helped—until an especially paranoid contingent accused me of *being* Paulie Socash, a suspicion that was given credence after someone using the handle "Paulie Socash" posted a few messages bearing the University of Oregon's IP address. Although regarded as a slam dunk by the paranoid contingent (at the time I was a PhD student and graduate teaching fellow at the University of Oregon), the Oregon IP incident could have indicated any of the following: that

Paulie/someone posing as Paulie had spoofed the IP, that Paulie/someone posing as Paulie was one of 30,000 people who had staff, faculty, or student access to the University of Oregon wifi network, or that Paulie/someone posing as Paulie had acquired guest access to the UO network. Because I could neither prove nor disprove any of these scenarios (at least not without compromising my own confidentiality agreement), the controversy persisted and still occasionally surfaces (I can hear Peter Partyvan now, clucking at what he'll surely claim is a lame attempt to cover my tracks).

Regardless of the Paulie question (or perhaps because it made the prospect of collaboration more interesting), a number of trolls agreed to participate in my research, reasoning that if I was up to no good—for example, if I'd lied about who I was or what I hoped to accomplish—they'd eventually find out and would respond accordingly. I accepted these somewhat ominous terms, and over the next few months asked an inordinate number of questions both privately and in group chat settings.

The most consistent theme of these conversations was the seemingly natural and necessary link between trolling and the mainstream media. According to the trolls I interviewed, the media was indirectly responsible for the popularity of RIP pages, and therefore was the indirect target of organized trolling behaviors. By sensationalizing the "sexier" deaths (i.e., those guaranteed to bolster ratings), the media—or as Paulie Socash often called them, "tragedy merchants"³²—essentially cattle-drove hordes of mourners onto Facebook. Already distressed and emotionally invested in the emerging story, these users were easy targets for trolls, who happily exploited their existing vulnerabilities. The media subsequently commodified these same vulnerabilities through advertising revenue.

In short, the oft-repeated (and reported) assumption that trolls devoted most of their time to terrorizing real-life friends and family members was not borne out by my experience. While certain RIP trolls did indeed attack real-life loved ones, and denied feeling any remorse no matter how traumatizing their behaviors ("I just hate everyone," Peter Partyvan once explained in a private message, his noncommittal shrug almost audible³³), most of the trolls I worked with found "real" RIP trolling either uninteresting or downright distasteful and instead were more interested in exploiting media-induced fervor. As one troll named Wilson Mouzone bluntly put it, family members haven't done anything wrong and should be left alone. He, along with many trolls, might have thought that public outpourings of grief were "tacky," and might not have understood the impulse to create,

let alone publicize, memorial pages for loved ones, stating that Facebook is never the right place and never the right time.³⁴ But most avoided, and some outright repudiated, attacks against loved ones.

That said, the same trolls who quietly avoided friends and family unabashedly reiterated the claim that “proper” targets of trolling deserved whatever they received. In the case of RIP pages, users “earned” their place in the trolling sun either by buying into existing media narratives or, ironically enough, by inserting themselves into other people’s tragedies (of which all participating trolls were simultaneously guilty). As I found, the vast majority of trolls’ RIP energies were directed at these “grief tourists,” users who had no real-life connection to the victim and who, according to the trolls, could not possibly be in mourning. As far as these trolls were concerned, grief tourists were shrill, disingenuous, and, unlike grieving friends and families, wholly deserving targets. The much-ridiculed statement “I didn’t know you but I’m very sorry you’re dead” was therefore seen as a declaration of trollability, a point emphasized in Encyclopedia Dramatica’s 2010 entry on Memorial Page Tourism.³⁵ “This isn’t grief,” Paulie once argued, echoing the spirit of the Encyclopedia Dramatica page. “This is boredom and a pathological need for attention masquerading as grief.”³⁶

Interestingly, trolls often courted this response in order to exploit users who were gullible enough to take the bait. Paulie was a master of creating and publicizing fake RIP pages for high-profile crime victims, particularly young attractive white women. As Paulie often insisted, the utter reverence grief tourists had for cute dead white girls (“they just *love* them”) perfectly captured the absurdity of expressing grief via wall post. As he explained, few things were more amusing than creating a shrine to some dead stranger, allowing the group membership to swell, then ambushing the drive-by mourners with offensive content or other shenanigans, for example, by “flipping” the page from something innocuous (“RIP [insert name of dead white teenager]”) to something outrageous (“Click ‘Like’ If You Think [dead white teenager] Deserved to Be Taught a Lesson”).³⁷ To RIP trolls I interviewed, this was lulz at its most rewarding.

Take the Media Narrative and Run

Even when restricted to grief tourism, these less vicious forms of trolling remained fundamentally asymmetrical. Furthermore, they illustrated RIP trolls’ deeply privileged (not to mention paternalistic) worldview, which the trolls subsequently used to justify what were still often quite destructive

behaviors. At the same time, participating trolls provided fascinating insight into the business of mass-mediated tragedy. Not only did RIP trolling during the period from 2010 to 2011 reveal the mechanisms by which personal tragedy is transformed into a salable narrative, it harnessed and reiterated the media’s most effective methods, and in the process challenged the efficacy and ethics of these same practices.

Trolls’ reaction to Chelsea King’s death (or perhaps more appropriately, trolls’ reaction to the media coverage of Chelsea King’s death) highlights trolls’ talent for excavating and subsequently weaponizing mainstream media tropes. As discussed in the introduction, whether or not participating trolls were deliberately engaging in pointed media criticism, pointed media critiques were forwarded, providing fascinating (if distressing) insight into how the mainstream media sausage is made.

Trolling Racist News Coverage

First, the disproportionate frequency with which RIP trolls descended upon news about dead white young people—specifically murdered white teenage girls, white teenage suicides (with particular interest paid to gay white teenage suicides) and kidnapped and/or murdered white children—revealed the disproportionate frequency with which the mainstream media filed stories about these populations. Had there been more sensationalist, multiple news-cycle stories focused on nonwhite crime victims from 2010 to 2011 (the period of greatest RIP trolling activity), the statistics may have been different. But these stories rarely generated the level of moral panic typically assigned to young white victims, and so from the trolls’ perspective weren’t worth the time or effort.

A troll named Soveri Ruthless highlighted this point on his “Chelsea King Fans: Why Aren’t You Helping to Find Jalesa Reynolds?” page. Reynolds, an African American high school student, went missing the same week as Chelsea King but hardly caused a blip on the media radar.³⁸ Chelsea was, to put it bluntly, a much more marketable victim: she was white, middle-class, and photogenic. Consequently hers was the story the nation, and subsequently users of Facebook, chose to embrace. True to trollish form, Ruthless was reluctant to attribute social or political significance to his Jalesa Reynolds page. As he explained during a Skype interview, he created the page primarily to bait self-righteous white people who were scandalized by the suggestion that they cared more about a missing white girl than a missing black girl.³⁹ Whatever his motives, the Jalesa Reynolds page called attention to disproportionate media coverage of white victims, and consequently revealed as much about the media organizations that

perpetuate inequity as it did about the Facebook users who refused to acknowledge that such inequities exist.

Trolling the Human Interest Angle

Second, trolls' engagement with the grisliest or otherwise most upsetting aspects of a particular tragedy highlights the media's proclivity for focusing on just that, the grisliest and most upsetting aspects of a particular tragedy. Trolls were able to exploit certain details, in other words, because those were the details the media chose to present. In Chelsea King's case, trolls focused on her grades, her extracurricular activities, her religious orientation, what she was wearing at the time of her death, her killer's criminal and psychological history, how her friends reacted to her death on Facebook, how her friends reacted to the Pickle page on Facebook, her personal photographs (one of which was used for the Pickle page profile picture)—in short, anything and everything the media offered up. The second the rumor and detail mill stopped grinding, so too would trolls. But the detail mill kept churning, and so the trolls kept trolling.

Although it does not address RIP trolls specifically (or even trolls generally, or Facebook, or computers), Oring's "Jokes and the Discourses on Disaster" provides a brilliant model for precisely this interplay. As Oring discusses, the "tasteless and cruel" jokes that emerged in the wake of the *Challenger* space disaster—"Q: What color were Christa McAuliffe's eyes? A: Blue. One blew this way and the other blew that way."⁴⁰—function as a counterpoint to hyperbolic media coverage, a suggestion that directly challenges the long-held assumption that such jokes *either* are evidence of human depravity *or* serve a critical therapeutic function. Oring is wary of both extremes, neither of which addresses the mainstream media's role in catalyzing disaster joke cycles.

In the wake of the *Challenger* disaster, for example, images of the explosion were played again and again, each time accompanied by a wide-eyed newscaster who reminded his or her audience that this was tragedy of the very highest order. And yet these same newscasters skirted the fact that, by playing and replaying the explosion, they were forcing their viewers to watch seven horrific deaths again and again. The emergent humor iterated this omission, calling attention to the uncomfortable truths that the media continued to exploit but refused to directly acknowledge.

Additionally, *Challenger* humor tended to poke fun at the "human interest" aspects of the story that the media did feel comfortable addressing (and consequently fetishizing)—McAuliffe's physical appearance, the astronauts' last words, what they had eaten just before their deaths, and so on.⁴¹

Just as trolls descended upon the most upsetting details of Chelsea King's death, so too did *Challenger* disaster joke tellers. The media made it difficult *not* to. At the very least, they supplied the raw materials, then decried the resulting structures as morally bankrupt.

Trolling the Business of Terrible News

Finally, and on a strongly related point, trolls' engagement with personal tragedy calls attention to just how good personal tragedy is for the business of media. As Oring explains: "Without imputing any malevolence to newspeople, it should be recognized that public disasters are media triumphs. They are what make the news. Indeed, our awareness of national or international disasters is dependent upon the media—particularly television news broadcasting. Furthermore, the frame for communication of information about a disaster is established by the media."⁴²

During the height of RIP behaviors, trolls were quick to channel and even quicker to exploit this frame; in fact, they helped construct additional scaffolding. After all, in addition to benefitting financially from tragedy, mainstream media outlets benefited from trolls' fetishized engagement with the media's fetishized engagement. Trolls happily gamed this system, and were even happier to brag about having gamed it.

In response to a repost of 10 News' Pickle segment, for example, a group of collaborators—several of whom were mentioned by name in the original segment, including Frank Bagadonuts—were delighted. "LMAO," wrote Frank. "'THEY'VE ALSO THREATENED TO RAPE HIS SISTER AND MOTHER' LOLOL," wrote David Davidson (no relation to my David Davison account). "That part almost had me in tears," Leroy Freeman added, to which Frank responded, "Oh American media, how I adore your melodrama."⁴³ Apparently forgetting that a young woman had in fact been raped and murdered, the trolls instead focused on 10 News' willingness—if not downright eagerness—to keep the Chelsea King story alive. Despite the fact that the trolls made little to no effort to hide the fact that they were trolling (they used explicitly trollish names, including "Tyrone Dickinanot," "Tracy Balls," and "Tasha Salad," and dropped troll reference after troll reference), 10 News took everything posted to the page literally, either because they couldn't be bothered to slow down and consider the source, or because they had considered the source and decided to move forward anyway. Participating trolls were banking on the media to take this bait, and in the end 10 News came through.

What's more, both 10 News and the participating trolls benefited from this arrangement. 10 News was able to keep the Chelsea King story alive,

and the trolls were able to bolster their own reputations. Recalling the relationship between early Anonymous and Fox News, then, the relationship between RIP trolls and the mainstream media was simultaneously symbiotic and homologous. Trolls needed the media to become hysterical, and the media needed trolls to terrorize; more often than not, each side lived up to its end of the bargain, and each side benefited from the overreaction of the other.

Never have these parallels been more conspicuous than in the wake of the 2010 outbreak of teen suicides. In the United States and in Great Britain, close to a dozen teenagers—all of whom were white, many gay or otherwise outcast—took their own lives. Given the common thread of social media (like most middle-class teens in the developed world, the decedents had engaged in some form of online activity in the lead-up to their deaths), the emerging narrative, and subsequent moral panic, cited “cyberbullying” as the reason our white teenagers kept dying.⁴⁴

Adding to the moral panic surrounding cyberbullying was the increasingly popular trend of creating Facebook memorial pages for the deceased, a trend that, as previously discussed, resulted in a sharp uptick in trolling behaviors. Mainstream outlets in the United States and Great Britain embraced this angle, pouring over every hateful thing trolls—which the American media still subsumed under the term “cyberbullying”—posted to Facebook. In many cases, this coverage merely reinscribed the language of trolling in order to maximize reader outrage—all the while condemning trolls for exploiting other people’s grief for personal gain.

Consider *The Today Show*’s coverage of Alexis Pilkington’s death. Lexi, a white seventeen-year-old high school student from Long Island, hanged herself in March 2010. Due in part to the rumor that Lexi had been a victim of cyberbullying (a rumor her parents denied), and that her death was the result of autoerotic asphyxiation (a rumor likely started by trolls), trolls descended upon her official memorial page and created several pages of their own, including one titled “Alexis Pilkington Hang in There!” In response, *The Today Show* produced a segment featuring interviews with her parents, home videos of Lexi during happier times, and proclamations of the teen’s bubbly all-American beauty—all of which was sandwiched between images and statements posted by trolls, including a screencap from the “Alexis Pilkington Hang in There!” page as well as an accompanying picture of Lexi’s head photoshopped through a noose. Later in the segment, three of Lexi’s high school friends were seated in front of a computer monitor. They proceeded to read a series of hateful comments off one of Lexi’s memorial pages, which the

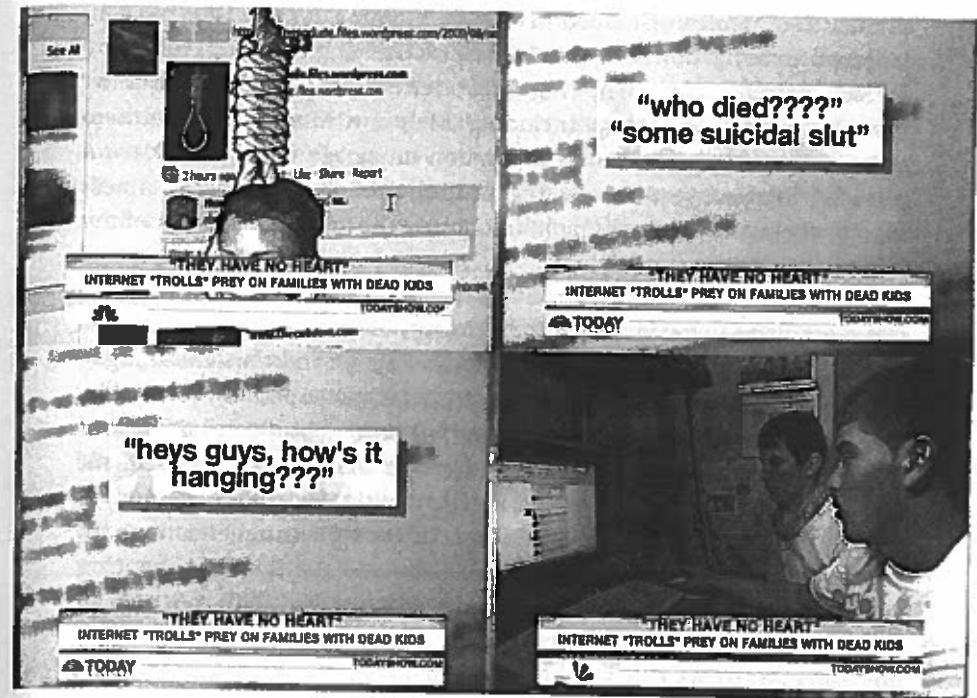


Figure 5.1

Stills from *The Today Show*’s “They Have No Heart” segment compiled by the author. First aired on March 31, 2010. Accessed on MSNBC.com on July 3, 2012.

producers helpfully transcribed for the audience (figure 5.1). Near the end of the segment, *Today* reporter Jeff Rossen wondered what kind of people would engage in such behaviors, a question more pointed (and ironic) than he seemed to realize.⁴⁵

Great Britain’s *Daily Mail*—affectionately described by trolls as the *Daily Troll*—was just as quick to condemn trolling, and just as quick to harness its distressing tone. For example, in an article devoted to the suicides of fifteen-year-olds Tom Mullaney and Natasha MacBryde, reporter Beth Hale interviewed the teenagers’ parents and asked them to describe how they felt when they first realized the trolls were attacking their children’s RIP pages. According to Tom’s father Robert, the troll-made images were “so distressing” he “[couldn’t] describe them,” an impediment Hale bypassed by describing one of the grislier images herself—specifically, Tom’s head photoshopped through a noose (clearly a popular RIP trolling trope).⁴⁶ In

a similar *Daily Mail* article titled “Help Me, Mummy. It’s Hot Here in Hell”: A Special Investigation into the Distress of Grieving Families Caused by the Sick Internet Craze of ‘Trolling,’” reporter Tanith Carey directly quoted a number of trolling macros, including “Help me, Mummy. It’s hot here in hell,” which one troll used to caption an image of Lauren Drew, a deceased fourteen-year-old. In the article, this phrase appears almost directly above Drew’s photograph, mimicking the form and content of the very image Carey was decrying.⁴⁷

Given the demonstrable correlation between media coverage of suicide and subsequent increases in suicide, this sort of coverage wasn’t just sensationalist, it was outright irresponsible. As Phillips and Carstensen argue in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, teenagers are especially vulnerable; not only do teenage suicide rates go up following reports on suicide, but the more widespread the coverage, the greater the increase.⁴⁸ Subsequent research published by the American Foundation for the Prevention of Suicide (AFPS) supports this conclusion. In their “Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide,” presented in collaboration with the Annenberg Public Policy Center, Centers for Disease Control, and UCLA School of Public Health, and other public policy organizations, the AFPS cites over fifty research studies corroborating the phenomenon of “copycat suicide” and urges news organizations to exercise caution. As the recommendations section stresses, “Risk of additional suicides increases when the story explicitly describes the suicide method, uses dramatic/graphic headlines or images, and repeated/extensive coverage sensationalizes or glamorizes a death.”⁴⁹

Whether or not the individual journalists and editors responding to the teen suicide stories were aware of these risks, whether or not they actively chose to privilege page views over public health, sensationalist media outlets provided breathless coverage of every suicide, often including precisely the sorts of details and emotion-laden language decried by health care professionals. Hale, for example, discussed the exact placement of Tom Mullaney’s body in the wake of the teenager’s “sudden and apparently savage act of despair,” and made sure to mention that Natasha MacBryde “died under a train on Valentine’s Day,” a morbid and unnecessarily poetic detail.⁵⁰ In their segment on trolls, *Today Show* reporters discussed how and when and under what circumstances Lexi’s parents found her body, all while showing images of a smiling, happy, dancing teenager.⁵¹ Other news outlets also lingered over the specific details of her death, some going so far as to frame her suicide as a clear case of “bullycide,” despite her parents’ insistence to the contrary.⁵²

Although trolls were often framed as the snarling, misanthropic villains of the RIP trolling story, sensationalist news outlets were just as invested in harnessing audience distress, and just as guilty of profiting from the resulting panic. As with the relationship between Fox News and early Anonymous, the trolls’ motives may have diverged from that of mainstream media, but their rhetorical and behavioral strategies were strikingly similar. The difference, of course, is that trolls didn’t stand to benefit financially from additional tragedy.

In the spring of 2011, I found myself smack in the middle of this storm. Because I’d already appeared in an article about the Facebook memorial page phenomenon, Beth Hale from the *Daily Mail*—the same Beth Hale mentioned earlier—sent me an interview request. According to Hale, a troll named Pro Fessor had been posting nasty pictures with captions to Natasha MacBryde and Tom Mullaney’s memorial pages. She wanted to know if she could talk to me about the pictures, and/or if I could arrange for her to talk to a real-life troll, preferably Pro Fessor himself.

I agreed to the interview, and through my troll collaborators Peter and Wilson was able to get in touch with Pro Professor. After the standard expressions of wariness (was I really a researcher/was I really female), Pro Fessor agreed to an interview, both with me and with Hale. Over the next few days, he sent me some of his favorite macros and explained how he got involved with trolling; like many of the trolls I’ve worked with, he was pleasant and polite and seemed somewhat nervous about providing “good” answers. Also like many of the trolls I’ve worked with, he shrugged off the presumption of sociopathy and stated that his behaviors were the result of boredom and unemployment as much as anything.⁵³ In his interactions with Hale, however, he reverted to his trollish tauntings, boasting about his lack of remorse and playing up his perceived villainy. In other words, he gave Hale exactly what she wanted.

Two weeks later, Hale responded in kind. Although she’d avoided sensationalist language during our conversations, she ended up publishing the highly sensationalist piece described (and criticized) above. More notable than the tone of Hale’s article, however (she did have a job to do), was the parallel between my interpersonal interactions with Hale and my interpersonal interactions with Pro Fessor. First, while both parties were thoughtful and affable in private (perhaps because they really were thoughtful and affable, perhaps because they were performing for my proverbial camera), both slipped into character—Pro Fessor as the unapologetic troll, and Hale as the uncompromising journalist—the second the curtain rose. Second, just as Pro Fessor was banking on Hale to file a sensationalist report, Hale

was banking on Pro Fessor to provide sensationalist responses. Both parties gave the other party precisely what was needed—namely, sensationalism, which is the best thing that could have happened to either.

In the subsequent months, an increasing number of media outlets began covering RIP behaviors. Because of Hale's *Daily Mail* article (I had the dubious distinction of being Google search indexed alongside RIP trolling), many of these outlets would get in touch with me, often asking for referrals to "real life" trolls who might be interested in talking. I would take the requests to the trolls, who would decide who to humor and who to shoot down. By and large, the American contingent of the trolls I've worked with were greatly amused by this attention, particularly articles in the "Help Me, Mummy" vein, which they felt only created greater trolling opportunities. British trolls had more to lose, and were much more likely to bristle at these requests. Despite the risks, however, they continued trolling, and in many cases were spurred to troll harder and smarter, often as retribution for what the trolls half-jokingly described as exploitive media practices.

Gesturing toward a Conclusion

Like so many trolling behaviors, RIP trolling between 2010 and 2011 was a study in media-fueled amplification. With each new death, Facebook trolls would feed on and exploit the ever-shriller media coverage, and the media would in turn feed on and exploit the ever-fiercer trolling response. Facing pressure from all quarters, Facebook was forced to take drastic measures, which trolls promptly subverted. The cries for Facebook to do something thus grew ever louder, giving both reporters and trolls further grist for their respective mills. It was, in other words, a monument to symbiotic noxiousness.

It was also a deeply troubling business. Because unlike previous iterations of mass-mediated disaster humor—for example, the jokes that followed the *Challenger* space disaster—RIP trolling was public, searchable, and infinitely more damaging than rolling one's eyes during a newscast or telling a horribly insensitive joke in the privacy of one's living room. Whether friend or family member or sympathetic stranger to some unlucky victim, *real* people were *really* affected—in real time, no less—by RIP trolling, complicating any analysis that focused exclusively on context.

It was extremely easy, for example, to place Tom Mullaney in an abstract category of British teen suicides, and to talk about trolls' defacement of his

memorial page as representative of a feedback response loop between trolls and sensationalist corporate media. That is indeed what happened. But it proved to be much more difficult to say so to Robert Mullaney, Tom's father—which was precisely what I was asked to do during the British radio segment discussed in chapter 3. My "expert" analysis of the situation—namely, that what happened on Tom's page wasn't about Tom personally—suddenly felt flat and inconsequential. Tom was someone's child, and now he is dead, and whether or not the trolls intended for his parents to see those images they *did*, and they were devastated, and there is no theoretical framework that can make that okay.

Even Paulie Socash, one of the most committed trolls I've encountered, and whose standard response to criticisms of trolling is an emphatic *hey guys the power button is right here*, has at times struggled with this ethical dilemma. He is, as he has explained, a normal enough guy who also happens to be a troll, and the normal enough guy side of the equation doesn't always align with his trolling persona. So when he messaged one afternoon to say that the inevitable finally happened, that he stumbled upon an RIP page dedicated to someone he knew in real life, I knew he—and not the troll he plays on the Internet—was genuinely concerned. I asked him what he was planning to do. "Monitor it," he answered, adding that if the trolling got out of hand (so far, "real" fans of the page were ignoring the trolls, the fastest and most effective way to stop a raid in its tracks) he would create a new profile and send the admins of the page a personal message. He would warn them, suggest they make the group private—which, he continued, the trollishness returning to his voice, is what they should have done in the first place.⁵⁴

I share this anecdote to call (admittedly ambivalent) attention to the often-confounding *danse macabre* that is RIP trolling. It would be easy to say—as many members of the media have said, to a flourish of attention, page views, and ad revenue—that all forms of RIP trolling are objectively bad, and that all RIP trolls are objectively evil. But such a conclusion flattens the behaviors, and the people who engage in these behaviors, into one monolithic category. And in the process shuts the conversation down before any of the political stakes or precipitating economic circumstances can fully be considered.

Furthermore, and much more problematically, reductive conclusions about RIP trolling obscure the symbiosis between Facebook, mainstream media outlets, and the trolls who help line everyone else's pockets. Of course, the fact—and it is a fact—that memorial page trolling echoes

routine corporate engagement doesn't and shouldn't mitigate the emotional impact of RIP behaviors. It does, however, call attention to the cynicism, hypocrisy and irresponsibility of routine corporate engagement with personal tragedy. Ultimately, this is the—again, highly ambivalent—legacy of Facebook memorial page trolling. By reenacting the grotesque extremes of mainstream behavior, RIP trolls force their audience to wallow in what passes for the norm.

6 Race and the No-Spin Zone: The Thin Line between Trolling and Corporate Punditry

According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, there are two basic categories of racist expression: overt racism and inferential racism. Overt racism is just that—unapologetically, unequivocally bigoted. Inferential racism, on the other hand, is a subtler, though arguably more insidious, form of racist expression. It is the kind of racism that doesn't explicitly declare itself as such, yet still forwards damaging racial stereotypes—stereotypes that are made all the more damaging by the casualness with which they are forwarded, and by the speaker's unquestioned assumption that their statements couldn't possibly be racist because they are, at least according to the speaker, *true*.¹

The following analysis focuses on the overlap between trolls' overtly racist expression and mainstream media's inferentially racist expression, with particular attention paid to the 2008 U.S. presidential election, the 2009 Obama as socialist Joker poster controversy, and Fox News' engagement with 2009's Birther movement. In so doing, the chapter provides yet another example of the breakdown between trolling and the mainstream. As I argue, trolls gleefully exploit racial tensions wherever they go, and they engage in language and behavior that is so outrageously offensive it almost defies categorization. That said, the conversation doesn't, and shouldn't, end with a simple condemnation of trolls. Just as one should place trolls' exploitative behaviors in the context of corporate exploitation, one should also consider the ways in which trolls' racist behaviors reflect and are reflected by mainstream prejudice.

The Everyday Racism of Trolling

Although the trolling collective precludes analyses of constituent anonymous members—for the very basic reason that constituent anonymous members cannot be differentiated or identified—it essentially functions as