

Improvisational Scenographies: Identity, Ideology, and Community-Based Algorithmic Moderation

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In recent years, there has been growing attention in the field of composition and rhetoric on the subject of algorithmic critique and online aggression. This paper contributes to this research by examining a viral internet meme as a case study. The meme features a private individual whose image was captured without his awareness or consent and turned viral. This study focuses on two Reddit boards to show how the identity of this individual was constructed by human and non-human actors. I go on to show how digital discourse is not simply mediated by mechanical tools, but rather improvisational scenes where the human and non-human actors are susceptible to mutual transformation. Ultimately, I argue that scholars should consider the fuller scenography of digital discourse in order to study how to best respond to these discourses, possibly rupture online aggressions, and attune ourselves to circumstances both within and beyond our control.

Over the last decade, there has been growing attention in composition and rhetoric toward content moderation and online aggression. Of course, moderating speech online is a tall order. It is resource intensive (Gillespie, 2018) and often politically complicated (Potts et al., 2019; Richter, 2021; Trice et al., 2019; Tufekci, 2013). Rather than disengagement (i.e., “don’t feed the troll”), some scholars suggested actually *engaging* online aggression to defuse hate and humanize digital subjects (London et al., 2019; Milner, 2013; Poland, 2016; Reyman & Sparby, 2019; Sparby, 2017). Much of this work is located in composition pedagogies where students are taught to better understand the digital rhetorical scene in order to respond to hostile discourses with careful, rhetorically attuned engagements (DeLuca, 2019; Gruwell, 2017; Richter, 2021) or to resist potentially bad actors by strategizing our compositions for circulation (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009; Sheridan et al., 2012).

However, everyday modes of surveillance (i.e., picture-taking) have complicated digital scenes of harassment. In a genre Lauren Cagle (2019) has called “strangershots,” everyday surveillances stand to capture our embodied, offline selves and reproduce them in online spaces to be ridiculed without our awareness. I argue then, as online and offline life become more interconnected, stu-

dents and scholars should prod the full material *scenography*—the field of technologies, practices, objects, people, bodies, times, digital/non-digital places, institutions, etc.—of discursive spaces in order to better evaluate, analyze, and criticize how systems moderate and condition discourse. I join Leigh Gruwell (2017) in arguing that teacher-scholars “should embrace a political, ecological approach to public writing that recognizes publics as the result of the interactions between multiple texts and actors over time and that attends to the ways in which power relations alternately shape, constrain, and enable those texts and actors.” More than just mediation, I argue that content moderation involves a wider improvisational scenography of memes and meme-practices¹ that performatively structure digital life. To show what I mean, I use a case study to examine how an individual, who had his picture taken without his knowledge or consent, was publicly ridiculed as a viral meme. Scholars have argued that by analyzing a digital interface, students are better able to see the connection between their online identities and their offline lives (Frost, 2011; Selfe & Hawisher, 2004; Sparby, 2017). I further this thinking by arguing that, by prodding the full scenography, students will be better positioned to “see” and attune themselves to the relationship between computers, digital humans, and the offline bodies that make up digital publics.

Before examining the case study, I’d like to first explore how surveillance has complicated the classical concept of *kairos* to better explain what I mean by an improvisational scenography in digital spaces.

Improvisation and the Problem of *Kairos*

The classical concept of *kairos* is a difficult one to pin down. However, it is more or less understood as leveraging the optimal moment for rhetorical action. In antiquity, the mythical figure of Kairos is depicted as a muscular, winged figure, holding a set of scales, with one finger surreptitiously weighting one side of the scale (Hawhee, 2004). Theologian Paul Tillich attributes a divine quality to *kairos*, which James Kinneavy finds interesting but ultimately rejects (as cited in Thompson, 2000). However, I am not so sure these divine qualities of *kairos* should be so readily dismissed. That is, upon entering into a network, we are subjected to a variety of (in)visible forces. Rational strategizing for where our compositions might travel, or its *rhetorical velocity*, becomes increasingly difficult (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009). For instance, a culture of surveillance—where our picture could be taken without our consent or where algorithms co-construct digital experience—poses complications for our sense of timing or appropriateness. In

1 By which I mean, the digital practices (such as picture-taking, commenting, sharing, retweeting, etc.), similar to what Sparby (2017) called “behavioral memes.”

other words, there are imperceptible figures monitoring our activities with a finger on the scale.

Reflecting on Georgian conceptions of *kairos* and improvisation, Dale Sullivan (1992) wrote, “If we accept Gorgias’ claim that *logos* is a powerful lord [...] we can surmise that he believed that inspiration would occur during impromptu speech” (p. 325). That is, good rhetors attune themselves to the *logos* of the moment. Similarly, E.C. White (1987) defined *kairos* as a dynamic moment that requires adaption and improvisation on the part of the rhetor, qualities that do not necessarily presuppose rational forethought. In a field of distributed agency, networked actors routinely operate improvisationally, *in the moment*, relying on a reflexive knack for generating compelling and persuasive compositions—the kind of attunement Quintilian (1921) referred to as “a certain *mechanical knack*, which the Greeks call *ἄλογος τριβή* [*alogos tribe*]” (10.7.11, my emphasis). Instagram users, for instance, capture images (opportune moments) and publish them with hashtags, and friend groups, circulating those pictures, form improvisational community engagements (Potts et al., 2019) subject to their own times and (digital) places. In other words, social media natives know a good Instagram moment when they (non) teleologically encounter one.

However, to reduce mechanical knack to an irrational improvisation might be the wrong approach. Online, algorithms enable a far more calculated adaptation to change. According to John Wild (1941), Plato makes a distinction between *techne* (understanding a procedure) and *tribe* (meaningless repetition).² However, Quintilian also argued, “what is irrational in itself will nevertheless be founded on reason” (10.7.12).³ An attunement for complex rhetorical situations is not entirely irrational, *per se*. However, what algorithms bring to the table are calculated procedures based upon user input. A machinic⁴ improvisation, in this way, has an investment in rationality and performance, in flexibility and adaptability, for what the moment has to offer, especially as the circumstances of the moment change—in other words, a computational, hyper-rational leveraging of *kairos*. As Bruno Latour (1994, 2002) has argued, technology is not merely a mediating force. It mutually transforms the human into a fundamentally different agent. A platform’s interface, for instance, embeds values (Gallagher, 2020; Selfe & Selfe, 1994) and

2 See Porter (2009).

3 See Holcomb (2001).

4 I derive the word “machinic” largely from Deleuze and Guattari (1987): “We think the material or machinic aspect of an assemblage relates not to the production of goods but rather to a precise state of intermingling of bodies in a society, including all the attractions and repulsions, sympathies and antipathies, alterations, amalgamations, penetrations, and expansions that affect bodies of all kinds in their relations to one another” (p. 90).

co-construct thoughts and actions (Cagle, 2019; Gallagher, 2020; Johnson-Eilola, 1997). In this way, algorithms have effectively bridged the gap between *doxa*⁵ and *kairos*; not only do algorithms produce probabilistic calculations of *doxa*, but the calculation itself actually co-constructs the *doxic* temperature in the room. In this way, algorithms may well have taken out the mysteries of the “fortune of the moment,” as Quintilian said, in favor of hyper-rational, improvisational calculation (10.7.32).

As we will see in this case study, online discourse often emerges through an interplay of irrational (hasty human input) as well as hyper-rational improvisations (computational, algorithmic logics that arrange user content). That is, humans and machines mutually transform the other in a complex, call-and-response improvisational scene, a scene of visible and invisible partners that that attune actors to the rhythms of the discourse. I argue, then, that defamiliarizing ourselves with these ambient partners by studying them better positions rhetors to possibly rupture these *doxic* rhythms by working through and with these rhythms.

The Case Study

Methods

This paper tells the story of a viral internet meme dubbed, “hipster in the park”—an image (Figure 1) surreptitiously taken of Christopher Hermelin, an MFA student at the New School, sitting in the New York City High Line Park with a typewriter resting anachronistically atop his lap. The image quickly turned viral across a number of platforms. While a bit dated, I focus on this case because of the large amount of available data in two separate, but very similar, boards that generated considerable attention. Reddit is a useful platform for researchers because it provides *some* access to its algorithm’s sorting logic, a system they refer to as “karma.” If users approve of content, they can “upvote” it. If users disapprove, they can “downvote” it. The net votes generate a karma point total—ostensibly incentivizing good behavior. In order to craft a clearer narrative of improvisational scenes, I conducted a sentiment analysis of these two boards. I coded every comment according to the following types: 1) comments clearly ridiculing Hermelin, 2) comments defending or sympathizing with Hermelin, 3) on-topic comments that were neither ridicule or sympathy, 4) off-topic or unintelligible comments, and finally 5) comments posted by Hermelin himself under the handle “cdhermelin.” These data points

5 As many scholars have pointed out, *doxa* is a complex concept that doesn’t always involve negative connotations like “sustaining the status quo” or “persuading via low-hanging fruit.” However, I use it here as it is commonly understood as simply “public opinion.”

are my interpretation of the intention of comments, a methodology with obvious limitations.⁶

In analyzing these two boards and the broader scenography, we are able to observe how improvisational actors work together to create discursive scenes and use these insights to offer a fuller understanding of the moderating forces that promote (or don't promote) any kind of behavior.⁷

“Spotted on the Highline”

Originally posted to the NYC subreddit (r/nyc) on August 18, 2012 as, “Spotted on the Highline,” Figure 1, which shows Christopher Hermelin, worked his way onto Reddit’s front page. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, Redditors reacted to this image with a variety of pejoratives, including: “fucking hipster,” “I have never wanted to fist fight someone so badly in my entire life,” “pathetic,” or “asshole.”



Figure 1. Original image from “Spotted on the Highline...”

6 An email-interview I conducted with Hermelin, which included his informed consent for participating in a case study, received IRB approval at the University of South Carolina.

7 In a larger study, I also draw from other publicly available information, which includes radio interviews with Hermelin, a published article he wrote about his experience, and my own email-interview with him. For this short paper, I am largely focusing on the behaviors strictly associated with these message boards.

As is the case with Internet photos, context is often flattened and meaning is derived from common cultural assumptions about the individuals featured in them (Milner, 2013; Phillips, 2015). In this case, the picture apparently shows an individual taking retro-culture to an extreme. The fuller context reveals, however, that Hermelin was story busking for passersby in High Line Park, a project dubbed, “The Roving Typist” (Cersosimo, 2014). According to her account, carlaas (the photographer and original poster) hadn’t seen Hermelin’s context-crucial sign. On the discussion board, she writes, “yeah I didn’t see [Hermelin’s busking sign], unfortunately. I was just walking fast and I took that picture.” That is, she improvisationally composed and circulated the image before she missed out on the opportunity. As soon as the image was published, the Reddit board generated a flurry of activity, Redditors working together, riffing off one another, through a discourse of affirmation: agreeing on and reproducing Hermelin’s identity through cultural in-jokes, collective back-patting, and dogpiling.

After becoming aware of this discussion board, about 24 hours later, Hermelin intervened by participating in the discussion under the handle cdhermelin. He wrote,

This is a surprisingly angry thread!

This is a picture of me. The angle obscures the sign on my typewriter case, which says, “Stories composed while you wait. Sliding scale, donate what you can.” ...

I bring nice paper, envelopes, and some stamps onto the High Line and write stories for people. I started it because I like writing flash fiction, and I like talking to people, and while I could hand-write them, the typewriter is more eye-catching, and a lot more fun. And my hands don’t get as tired. I write a story in about 7-10 minutes, and if people would like to ask for specific themes or characters or situations, they are more than welcome.

You can follow me on twitter: @rovingtypist. I go out to the High Line once a week or so.

(and for those who mentioned it, I did indeed have an iPhone with me. AND an iPad. But those don’t really matter for what I was doing.)

(Oh, and someone mentioned they saw me in Starbucks - I would never do this inside a cafe. Typewriters are super loud.)

(“Spotted on the Highline,” +142 karma points)

Hermelin’s post seems to have been somewhat successful, netting by far the most karma on the board (see Figure 4). In my email interview with him,

Hermelin told me, “This was about me as a writer as much as it was about me as an image. I wanted to make sure that my reputation as a writer and a good-natured person shone through in my responses to the attention.” So, it’s clear Hermelin was interested in preserving, or at least co-authoring, the kind of identity he’d cultivated for himself. As the data in Table 1 illustrates, a good deal of the on-topic commentary was ridicule. So, the exigence for his intervention was certainly merited.

Table 1. Types of comments in the “Spotted on the Highline” Reddit board

“Spotted on the Highline”		
Original post: August 18, 2012		
	Number of Comments	
Ridicule	59	27.31%
Sympathy	33	15.28%
Neither	20	9.26%
Off-topic	87	40.28%
cdhermelin	17	7.87%
Total	216	

His intervention may have, indeed, had a notable impact on the cultural makeup of the Reddit board, or what Sparby (2017) called a “rupture” in the memetic behavior of the board’s collective identity. Figure 2 illustrates some measure of this change. It’s worth noting, however, that the slight uptick in sympathy is largely correlated to Redditors interacting directly with Hermelin on the discussion board.⁸

The more significant data point is, however, the 77% drop in ridicule rather than the moderate uptick in sympathy. That is, after learning more information about the real-world context, it was no longer fun to ridicule the picture on the High Line. Counter to assumptions about how algorithms construct echo-chambers, the algorithm invited heterogeny. However, I think it’s wrong to say that the algorithm simply mediated the discussion. Rather, in this improvisational scene, the algorithm was susceptible to the comments just as the comments were susceptible to the algorithm. Figure 3 shows the board’s hourly activity by comment type. As we can see, Hermelin’s intervention occurred a little more than halfway through the lifespan of the discussion—time enough to rupture the doxic and kairotic rhythms and enable the actors to mutually transform the other.

8 The board generated about 218 total comments; I only had access to 216. Two comments were marked as “[deleted].”

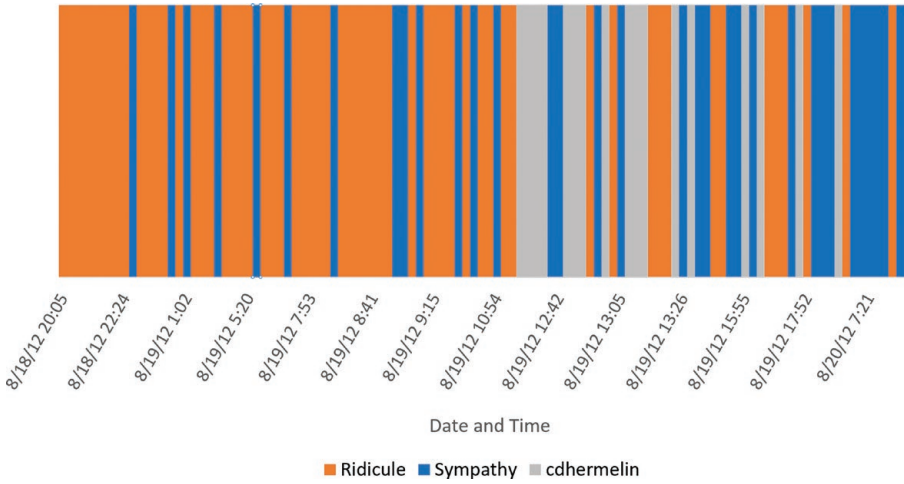


Figure 2. A histogram of the “Spotted on the Highline” Reddit board, showing a shift of comments of ridicule declining in favor of comments of sympathy after cdhermelin’s intervention.

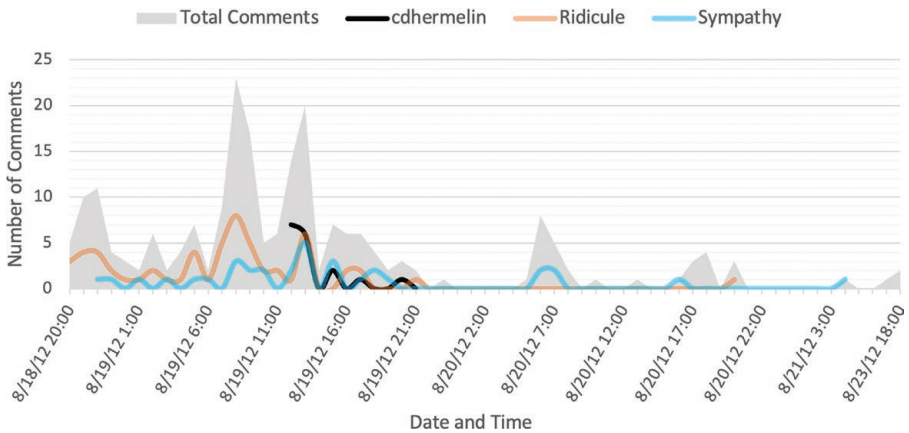


Figure 3. A chart of the “Spotted on the Highline” Reddit board, showing the trends of the types of comments throughout the life of the discussion board.

While much of the purely mean-spirited ridicule was punished with negative karma and clever attempts at ridicule were nevertheless rewarded, the board was open to change. It was adaptive, performative, and in situ (Rule, 2019)—in a word, improv. Figure 4 compares each comment’s total karma points, color-coded by comment type. By analyzing the discussion board by karma points, we can observe this kind of performative adaptability.⁹

9 While users can no longer comment or vote on these boards, the total karma points continually fluctuate by a few points to obscure the actual totals to thwart would-be “cheaters”

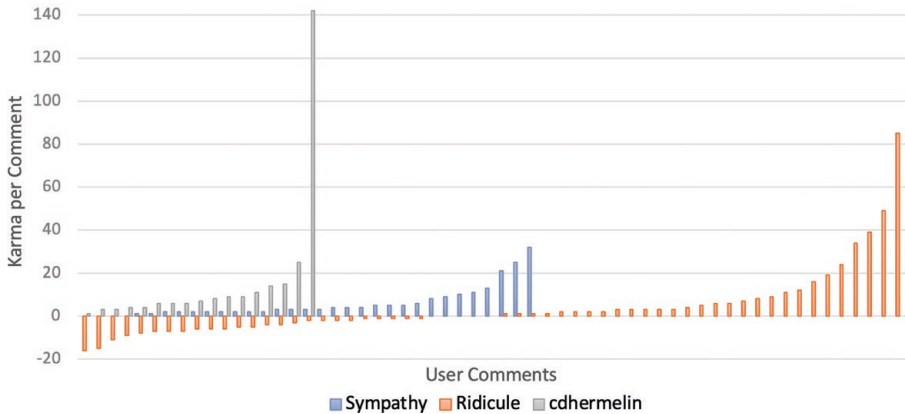


Figure 4. A bar chart of the “Spotted on the Highline” Reddit board, showing the amount of karma each comment received, arranged and color-coded by comment-type. All the comments coded as ridicule collectively netted +229 karma points, the comments of sympathy collectively netted +192 points, and Hermelin’s total comments netted +273 points.

Hermelin’s intervention was largely successful because it entered a field that shifted values from “hipster culture is annoying” to “passion projects are cool,” largely due to his and other affirmative engagements—a “yes-and” logic.

Research in online aggression finds power in engaging (thereby rupturing) aggression rather than ignoring it—eschewing the “don’t feed the troll” advice (London et al., 2019; Milner, 2013; Milner & Phillips, 2018; Phillips, 2015; Poland, 2016; Sparby, 2017). Cagle (2019) described a Reddit case involving a Sikh trans woman, Balpreet Kaur, who had her picture taken and published to Reddit without her awareness. Her image was met with anti-Muslim (even though she was Sikh) and anti-trans ridicule. In response, Kaur engaged the Reddit board, explaining her faith and “how it shapes her outward appearance” (p. 68). Consequently, Redditors praised her openness and the original poster apologized for the whole ordeal. However, the takeaway here isn’t necessarily that if only people had a little more context the internet would be a friendlier place (although, that observation is true). Rather, the key takeaway is the broader scenography. As Whitney Phillips (2015) wrote, “trolling behaviors [...] are imbricated in the same cultural systems that constitute the norm—a point that casts as much aspersion on the systems themselves as it does on the trolls who harness and exploit them” (p. 115). While cultural logics of trolling certainly include misogyny, transphobia, and islamophobia

that might want to manipulate or game the karma totals. So, the karma value of a comment is always inexact. Regardless, this data still gives us a general snapshot of the climate of the discussion board.

(or anything-non-cis-white-Christian-o-phobia), logics and values are also embedded in the human and non-human actors within a material scenography. Assumptions about picture-taking, about publicity/privacy, and ridicule/dehumanization are entrenched within everyday digital tools. Humans react, reflexively, with the tools available to them. Algorithms both adapt to and co-construct discourses based on user input and probability. In other words, an improvisational scene operates on this “yes-and” logic, a scene that is dynamic, performative, and, especially in the presence of surveillance technologies, irreducible to singular agents or events.

Contrasting this discussion board with the next one will further illustrate this kind of improvisational susceptibility and the limits of effectuating change.

“You’re not a real hipster until...”

Emerging five months later, the much more active, “You’re not a real hipster until...” discussion was posted to the Funny (r/funny) subreddit with the same image as the previous board but with full meme-text reading, “YOU’RE NOT A REAL HIPSTER UNTIL YOU TAKE YOUR TYPEWRITER TO THE PARK” (Figure 5). Unlike the first board, the central premise of the meme is explicitly stated on the image.



Figure 5. Meme that emerged later in subsequent Reddit boards.

As Table 2 indicates, the overall sentiments of these two discussion boards are quite similar when we compare the total number of comments by comment type. (It is important to note, however, that the sympathy in this latter discussion board was slightly inflated by a user named Semajal, a person who apparently met Hermelin on the High Line and was determined to defend him. Semajal wrote a total 12 sympathetic comments, constituting about 20% of the sympathy on the board.)

Table 2. Comparing the types of comments in the “Spotted on the Highline” to the types of comments in “You’re not a real hipster until...” Reddit boards.

“Spotted on the Highline” Original post: August 18, 2012		
	Number of Comments	
Ridicule	59	27.31%
Sympathy	33	15.28%
Neither	20	9.26%
Off-topic	87	40.28%
cdhermelin	17	7.87%
Total	216	

“You’re not a real hipster until...” Original post: January 19, 2013		
	Number of Comments	
Ridicule	76	19.49%
Sympathy	60	15.38%
Neither	81	20.77%
Off-topic	163	41.79%
cdhermelin	10	2.56%
Total	390	

Further, given some of the obvious differences (different users, time/date, subreddits, etc.), these two discussions are also strikingly similar in terms of content. Users relied on the same basic cultural logics in order to participate and generate attention. However, by analyzing the karma of individual comments, these two boards tell slightly different stories. For example, comparing a few of the nearly identical comments on the two boards, we can see a notable difference in how the ridicule on these boards was handled per the karma system (Table 3). Compared to the “Spotted” board, ridicule was rewarded with significantly more karma than was sympathy.

On both boards, but especially on this one, a culture of one-upmanship developed (not uncommon on social media). Like the first, the discursive field was largely defined by how well the participants played together, riffing off one another, and maintaining the call-and-response style of engagement. The most clever attempts at ridicule seemed to garner the most karma points. Mean-spirited comments that bordered on threats of violence—punching him in the face, smashing his typewriter, etc.—also gained a lot of traction. In this latter board, the total karma of all ridicule added up to +1146, the sum of sympathy was +588, and the sum for all Hermelin’s comments added up to +80.

Table 3. A comparison of karma points of similar comments all by different Redditors in different Reddit discussion boards.

“Spotted on the Highline”	“You’re not a real hipster until...”
“So when will the Sumerian clay tablets be resurfacing the streets of hipster nyc?” (+37 karma points)	“Pfft. How mainstream. I write on wet clay, then bake it.” (+435 karma points)
“I don’t know why anyone is defending this guy, it’s clear he’s doing it for attention” (-2 karma points)	“He clearly wants attention for being all hipster and edgy.” (+6 karma points)
“Some days, I really want to be a bully.” (-5 karma points)	“It’s because of these guys that bullying is so hard to stop.” (+5 karma points)
“Clack clack clickety clack clack click click clack clack KA-DING clackety clack clack pause clack clack claketty clack clack. Clack.” (+3 karma points)	“clack clack clack clack clack CLACK clack DING! Clack clack clack clack clack clack...” (+17 karma points)

Figure 6 shows dramatic differences in how types of comments were rewarded and punished by the karma system. Interestingly, some of the sympathy on this board was actually punished with negative karma. In fact, the lowest rated comment read, “dear diary today i got 41 internet points for assuming another person was a bad person with negative qualities based on their appearance and interests simply because they differ from mine” (-27 points). This user came to Hermelin’s defense, criticized a point system that incentivized bad behavior, and was consequently punished by that very point system. In other words, these users failed to rupture the discursive rhythms.

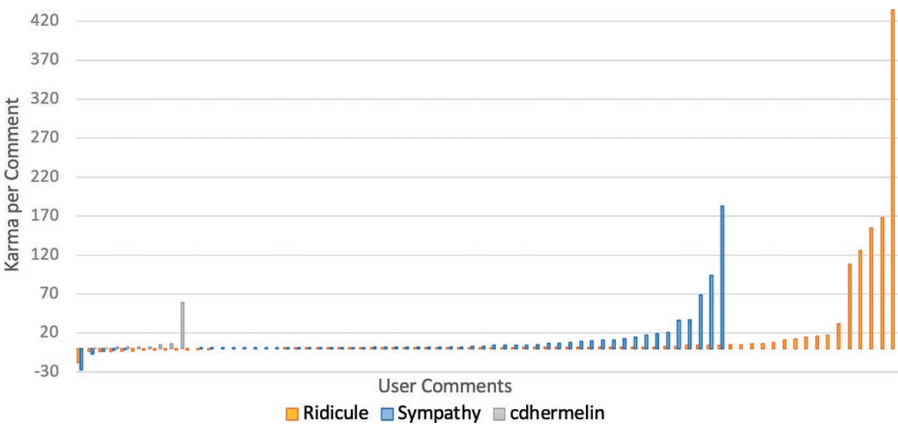


Figure 6. A bar chart of the “You’re not a real hipster until...” Reddit board, showing the amount of karma each comment received, arranged and color-coded by comment-type.

Like the first board, Hermelin attempted an intervention. However, he seemed to have had far less of an impact this time around. He wrote,

Hey y'all! This is me!

Thanks for all the nice things that you said here - some people already mentioned, but this is from a project I do around NYC. I write stories while you wait (it takes about 5-7 minutes) on small pieces of paper. It's not summer anymore, though, so I haven't gone out in a while. Typing is difficult when your fingers are cold...

You can follow me, @cdhermelin, or my typing project, @rov-ingtypist.

And some of my other short fiction is up here [a link to a creative/professional website].

(You're not a real hipster until..., +55 points)

For a discussion board that accrued more than 390 comments, Hermelin's +55 karma points seems paltry compared to the +145 he earned in the much less active "Spotted" board. This could be for a number of reasons. For one, cdhermelin entered this conversation while its activity was already trending downwards, as the following chart shows (Figure 7). Also, some of the earliest comments were mean-spirited and so were at a temporal advantage in terms of generating more karma and being prioritized at the top, thereby better positioned to set the discursive tone. Despite the efforts of Hermelin and a few altruistic Redditors, once the improvisational rhythms of the scene built enough momentum, it would be very difficult to turn things around and generate rupture.

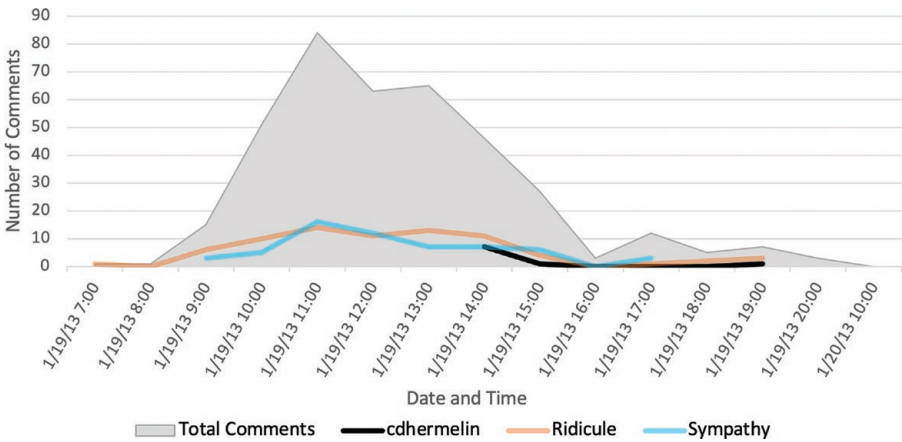


Figure 7. A line chart of the “You’re not a real hipster until...” Reddit board, showing the trends of the types of comments throughout the life of the discussion board.

Of course, timing isn't the only explanation for the board's stubborn resistance to change. For instance, the second Reddit board was posted to the r/funny subreddit, a community whose key value, perhaps, foreclosed on the possibility of sincerity. Additionally, the meme that spurred the second board included the full meme-text, inscribing the basic premise of the board (one of ridicule). Also, the r/funny subreddit is significantly more popular than the earlier r/nyc subreddit. The broader social media scene isn't to be left out either. That is, the second board emerged following the meme's pre-existing virality on other platforms. So, many users may have been primed by seeing an earlier iteration of the image and/or with prior acceptance of cultural commonplaces about "hipsters" and retro-culture. So, in this second board, with more users mobilized, a more stable feedback loop emerged, bolstered by the algorithm's ranking system, and had little opportunity for minority voices to rupture the scene.

Conclusions

We gain a few insights through this kind of analysis of online communities and memes in general. First, we are able to better see how algorithms sort content, and how rhetors could perhaps learn to (ethically) leverage these kinds of systems for rhetorical ends (Brock & Shepherd, 2016). Second, researchers (especially students) are better positioned to critique the systems that moderate/mediate online discourse (Beck, 2015; Noble, 2018; Reilly, 2020, 2021; Selber, 2004; Toscano, 2011;) and perhaps even acknowledge our own complicity/participations within these systems. But third, I think it's worth conducting this kind of analysis to observe precisely what it does not give us clear insight into. In consideration of new materialist and actor-network frameworks, this kind of study helps to decenter a compositional event. That is, an online discursive space is irreducible to any singular post, moderation system, or platform. As we are increasingly entangled within these complex webs of relations, it becomes even more important to defamiliarize ourselves with the improvisational partners we are entangled with on a digital scene.

Much has been written lately on how to improve online discourse. Trice et al. (2019) have demonstrated the importance of affirming community values rather than strictly rules-based moderation,¹⁰ and Ritcher (2021) has shown

10 In my case study, the discussion boards predate Reddit's "rules" page feature for subreddits, and it is unlikely that there were clearly codified rules posted to these respective subreddits. For example, the current rules of r/nyc include no photos of people without permission. The r/funny subreddit have rules against reposts, hate speech, or harassment. So, assuming these rules would be enforced, it is unlikely that this meme would have gained this much traction on these subreddits if it had been created/published today. However, that is not to say that it couldn't appear on another subreddit that does not have these restrictions. Ryan Shepherd (2020) for instance points out how, while some communities are moderated, cen-

how communities can enable productive agonisms through metadiscourse. While this research offers great insight into moderation practices, rhetors should also attend to the full scenography of a digital space, questioning models of conscious discursive participation (i.e., Hermelin's embodied participation by sitting on the park bench; carlaas's instinctive knack for spotting a viral moment; the Redditors' susceptibility to the algorithm's mechanical improvisation) and acknowledging the distributed agency of objects (i.e., the camera, the algorithms, or even the typewriter) and environments (i.e., the public park and infrastructures of interconnected surveillance tools). In a surveillance economy where bodies can be non-autonomously recruited into unanticipatable contexts, improvisation reanimates the figure of Kairos holding a finger to the scale. In this way, however, my study does not constitute a how-to. Rather, it underscores the rhetorical power of improvisational scenographies—an interplay of distributed agents, relations, and ambient forces—that hopefully encourages rhetors to attune themselves to circumstances both well-within and also well-beyond their control.

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