

**Twitter and the Body Parodic: Global Acts of Re-creation and Recreation**

by

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Submitted to the Program in Science, Technology and Society  
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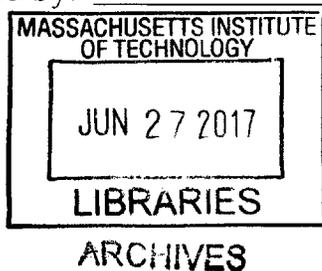
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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates Twitter parody accounts as a form of social critique and linguistic play across English, Japanese, and Arabic—one that is collaboratively created by the users, policymakers, and architects of Twitter. Together, apart, and in different constellations with governments and news media, these actors use parody accounts to re-create and experiment with everything from law to what constitutes a person. I argue that the Twitter parody account, both as negative critique and ambiguous personification play, is an *off-platform use*—an unintended use of platform, site, or app that is allowed to endure, with varying degrees of official encouragement, silence, and ignorance. Drawing on ethnographic, linguistic, and legal analysis, the dissertation details the contours of this use, its adversaries and proponents among traditional structures of authority, and how the platform has ratified and deployed it globally. Chapter 1, Aspect Shift, examines how a parody account works at a linguistic level through the name and profile photo play of a classic political parody account. Chapter 2, The Account-Person, proposes that personhood on Twitter is a cyborg entity and investigates five elements the shape this *account-person*: number, body, position, world, and time. Turning to parody accounts' relationship with authority, chapter 3, Warranting Parody, investigates why some in positions of authority mobilize apparatuses of power against parody accounts. Not all governmental employees, however, see parody accounts as threats. Chapter 4, Tweeting Like a State, explores the development of norms around parody among a key, but often overlooked group of contemporary interpreters of representative government: governmental social media managers. Chapter 5, The Social Media Contract, argues that the history of Twitter's parody policy is the history of its still-emerging social contract, a contract shaped by user demands, the abdication of traditional authorities, and Twitter's own interests. This social contract has uneven globality—as chapter 6, Of Policyness and Global Polysemy, shows through examining Twitter's parody policy across languages. Finally, in the conclusion I bring these various strands together through the concept of *usership*, a member relationship entangled with citizenship yet largely asserted and negotiated with corporations rather than governments.

Thesis Supervisor: Graham Jones  
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My thanks, too, to the talented legal teams of Harvard's Cyberlaw Clinic and the BU/MIT Technology and Cyberlaw Clinic, who not only helped me with public records requests, they also taught me a great deal about legal thinking and writing in the process. Attorney extraordinaire Andy Sellars led both teams. I haven't the words to express how grateful I am for Andy's wisdom and friendship. There is no one I'd rather have at my side when suing the CIA.

Moving from a giant collection of data to a cohesive argument is difficult. It's a problem of abundance: where do you begin when you have enough material to support at least a dozen dissertations? Many thanks to my committee—Graham Jones, Nancy Baym, Ian Condry, and Natasha Schüll—for their constructive feedback and calm

patience as I worked through this process. And particularly to Graham, who read each (very long) chapter draft and provided insightful, detailed suggestions throughout that have challenged me to be a better scholar. My thanks, too, to my writing group: Mary Brazelton, Joy Rankin, David Singerman, and Emily Wanderer, from whom I learned an enormous amount, and particularly to Joy and David for reading multiple drafts of arguments and consistently pushing me to make them stronger and clearer.

As a highly interdisciplinary project, the analysis presented here has benefitted enormously from discussions with a number of communities. These include too many individuals to name directly (yes, I fear forgetting someone), but please know that I very much appreciate the wisdom, inspiration, and kindness you have shared with me. I'm looking at you, HASTS—MIT's Program in History, Anthropology, and Science, Technology, and Society and my much loved home at MIT; and you, too, Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard, my home away from home and most definitely including the Global Platform Policy Working Group I ran there in 2016; and you, Oxford Internet Institute, with your wonderful summer doctoral program which in 2016 restored and reinvigorated me as an academic; and you, Keio International Center for Internet and Society, for your kindness hosting me during the Japan portion of my fieldwork; and last but not least, you as well, Institute of Comparative Law at Meiji University, with your lovely faculty who graciously shared both their knowledge and office space with me. Many thanks, too, to Karen Gardner for helping me navigate MIT as I dealt with the various unexpected obstacles life tossed at me along the way and for the gift of friendship.

In addition to being highly interdisciplinary, this project was also highly expensive—San Francisco, Tokyo, and Dubai are some of the most expensive places to live in the world. It is not coincidental that they are also technological hubs. My fieldwork was supported by grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the Japan Foundation. My writing period was supported by a Dissertation Completion Fellowship from the Mellon / American Council of Learned Societies. Many thanks to all for your belief in this ambitious project. I hope the results persuade you to fund similar wacky endeavors in the future.

The process of completing a doctoral dissertation is rife with stress. You embark on a research project the scope of which is beyond anything you've previously tackled. Don't get me wrong—this is an exciting challenge, and the reason I, at least, decided to do a PhD. It's also stressful. In anthropology, the focus on lived experience, limned day by day in field notes and interviews, requires repeated acts of faith. Multisited work means that you must start anew multiple times during your fieldwork, with all of the social and life challenges that entails. The shift from fieldwork to writing comes with shocks of dislocation and readjustment. Lurking beneath these challenges lie the many dysfunctions of contemporary academia. On top, of course, pile your other life stresses, about family and health and so on.

I am enormously grateful for the love and support of my friends throughout this process. You are awesome and I love you all. Special shout-outs to Kate Darling, Stuart Geiger, Malavika Jayaram, Tim Maly, Nathan Matias, Burcu Mutlu, Heloisa Ozawa, Joy Rankin, Pamela Shapiro, David Singerman, and Mel Wong for help and advice at key moments. Being there for someone can seem so small and simple. It is enormous and

important. My deep and enduring gratitude to Lan Li, Bronwyn Low, and Raziya Wang, for being there, again and again.

## Introduction

### Parody and Play

Rayan Karaky, a Lebanese standup comic living in Dubai and my current interviewee, motions me to be quiet. It's the middle of our interview and inspiration has struck: he will create a parody account for Trump, if Trump were an Arab. He makes notes on his phone. In a moment he will email these to himself. Later, when it's no longer work hours, he will review them, see if he can make something of them. It would be Trumb, with a 'b,' because there is no 'p' in Arabic and often English 'p's are pronounced as 'b's by Arabs. Everything will be reversed: Americans will need to be stopped from coming to the Middle East. A wall will be built in the Atlantic to prevent Americans from flying to this side of the world (we're in Dubai at the moment). The bio will be something very peaceful and Islamic, maybe just “السلام عليكم” *as-salaam 'aleikum*—‘peace be unto you,’ a traditional Islamic greeting.

It's the morning of February 4, 2016 and we're sitting in the cafeteria of Google's office in Dubai's Internet City, a so-called free zone governed by a different set of laws than the rest of Dubai, designed to attract foreign companies, in this case internet companies. Twitter is located in a neighboring building. Later that week I will attend the world drone championships in the same complex and see several of my interviewees—as well as, unexpectedly, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, ruler of Dubai. This Google office is the same Google office where Wael Ghonim worked when he began the We Are All Khaled Said Facebook group with Cairo-based AbdulRahman Mansour, that

would later become Egypt's largest dissident Facebook group with hundreds of thousands of members,<sup>1</sup> instrumental in attracting attention domestically to the protests and part of the larger social media practices that riveted global attention to Egypt's pro-democracy uprising.<sup>2</sup>

Karaky, in addition to being a popular standup comic who performs every week or so, leads the MENA<sup>3</sup> Google Ad tech team. Karaky is skinny—on stage he describes himself as a string bean and jokes that he can hide behind the mic stand. Today he's in a white button-down shirt, all clean lines, an ID clipped to his waist. The enthusiastic nerdiness of his stage persona reads in this setting as a quiet confidence of belonging. At the moment he's also hungry, and while we talk he eats breakfast: eggs and potatoes, tomatoes and avocado. I sip coffee. Taylor Swift plays in the background. The Google office's many affordances are both comforting and insulating.

Before inspiration struck, we'd been talking about the comedy scene in Dubai that has blossomed in the last few years, about reading your audience and finessing your standup set accordingly, about a joke Karaky posted to his Facebook account upon the completion of the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, in the middle of the global financial crisis in 2009—Karaky characterized it in his status update as Dubai's giant

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<sup>1</sup> Preston, Jennifer. 2011. Movement Began with Outrage and a Facebook Page that Gave It an Outlet. *New York Times* Feb 5. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/world/middleeast/06face.html> accessed April 5, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> While social media played an important role in publicizing the events of the Arab Spring globally, many US and European news media outlets at the time overemphasized the role of (US) social media tools in its organizing, attributing protests to the new connectivity offered by such media. This is in line with the liberationist tech ideology popular in the US as well as a longstanding savior narrative. See Gerbaudo (2012) for discussion of the gap between “elite” Twitter activists—the so-called Twitter pashas—and activists on the ground in Egypt.

<sup>3</sup> MENA = Middle East and North Africa.

middle finger to the world, a joke that was later repeated, word for word, by the *Financial Times* without attribution or even acknowledgment that it was a joke. He's both bitter at the theft and delighted that so many people enjoyed his joke. He laughs and his lips crinkle into a smile.

We'd shifted to discussing experimenting with different voices on Twitter, and Karaky volunteered that he'd briefly run a parody account for Hosni Mubarak, the president deposed during Egypt's 2011 revolution. He'd just started the account, he confesses with aesthetic dismay, when Mubarak left. He'd been thinking Mubarak would stay for a while. There were so many Mubarak parody accounts that at this point he can't even remember his account's handle. He brightens and mentions that he's thinking of creating one for Trump. A GCC Trump.<sup>4</sup> It's then that inspiration strikes and the focused flurry of note-taking begins.

In a way, the many Hosni Mubarak parody accounts of 2011 were the beginning of this research. Like many others around the world, I witnessed the events of the Arab Spring on Twitter. No previous Twitter experience had prepared me for the #Jan25 tweets from Tahrir Square. Never had I witnessed so many individual voices coming together to share the momentous events of their lives, or the intimacy it created. The Egyptian protests, which themselves followed those in Tunisia, were joined by protests in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and so many other places. And throughout I saw parody accounts related to the region flourish, in English, Arabic, French, Hebrew, Spanish, often mixing across languages. I found parody accounts for Hosni Mubarak, for Egyptian state TV, for Vice President Omar Suleiman, for the guy who stood behind Omar Suleiman during one

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<sup>4</sup> GCC = Gulf Cooperation Council.

of the press conferences of the period. For Qaddafi after Qaddafi after Qaddafi. For the entire Mubarak family, the Qaddafi family, the Khalifa family, the Assad family. For rulers of Morocco and Sudan and Algeria. For generals of Syria and the state news agency of Bahrain, for governmental thugs and intelligence services. And I saw Twitter users adding these parody accounts to lists (a Twitter curation tool) otherwise filled with news organizations and activists and politicians, lists with names like “Bahrain” or “Tahrir” or “Syria protests.” I saw journalists for major newspapers retweeting these parody accounts.

A second starting point came two years later, when I worked as an intern in Twitter’s Tokyo office. I worked on a feature called Twitter Alerts that would be launched that fall, designed to improve crisis communications from reliable sources, growing out of Twitter use during the 3.11 triple disaster.<sup>5</sup> Rare among international offices, the Japanese office boasted an engineering team as a result. This same summer Japan held the first election in which politicians were allowed to use social media, and the Tokyo office had taken on a slew of contractors to handle the extra work of education, verification, and support this entailed on their end.

Amidst karaoke and Tanabata wishes and hack week and izakaya gatherings to host employees from offices around the world, I observed how communications functioned across the company, through mailing lists and shared Google calendars and physical office visits, through video conferencing and an anonymous forum and weekly Tea Time meetings. And, too, through filters to control mailing list emails, laughing together on gchat, and following each other on Twitter. I noted the company’s ten core

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<sup>5</sup> “Triple disaster,” the phrase used in Japan to refer to the events of 2011, includes the Great East Japan Earthquake, the subsequent tsunami, and the Fukushima meltdown.

values hung large in yakitori, the semi-public cafeteria space/large meeting room, and appearing as screensavers and laptop skins. The latter were, I was told when I eyed the one that said, “Defend and respect the user’s voice,” only for full-time employees, not interns or contractors.

My colleagues became my friends and I grew to know more about their backgrounds. Many had joined Twitter from elsewhere in the tech industry, from Facebook and Google and HP. Others came from academia, from the news media, from running startups of their own. Working for Twitter, some told me, was transformative—it eliminated traditional workplaces as future options. After Twitter they’d either have to stay in tech or launch their own startup. As I write this nearly four years later, almost all of the employees I knew during my time in the office have moved on—mostly to other tech companies, often US-based ones, from LinkedIn to LINE to Airbnb to Cisco to financial tech companies I’d never heard of before.

This dissertation that you’re reading grew from these two starting points. For the last three years I have studied Twitter parody accounts as a form of social critique and linguistic play across English, Japanese, and Arabic—one that is created by the users of Twitter, but also the policymakers and architects and everyday employees of Twitter. Together, apart, and in different constellations with governments and news media, these actors re-create and experiment with everything from law to what constitutes a person. Throughout slips the curling ribbon of play.

**How the Twitter parody account has changed parody**

The Twitter parody account has triggered a change in the use of parody, as a term and as a mode. In English, the term has come to encompass more than it has in many years.

When Twitter began back in 2006, parody might have been tidily summed as a mode that constituted, reproduced, and altered an original, with both reproduction and alteration simultaneously recognizable in the parodic version. At the kernel of this rested the idea of parody commenting on—and, when those describing it were at least moderately pleased with the idea, critiquing—an original. As we will see, by 2017 it is much more than this. Nonetheless, it is this act of comment and critique that has been defended variously in courts. In the United States this speech act dominates legal decisions and general discussion of parody. Not so everywhere. In Japan, the authors of an original creation have moral rights that largely allow them to determine its future use, including in parody.<sup>6</sup> The UAE’s legal system, meanwhile, takes personal offense very seriously, with implications for the creation and performance of parody.

Quirky fun Twitter accounts have existed since the early days of Twitter. In 2007, Twitter’s official blog highlights a quote from @darthvader/Darth Vader.<sup>7</sup> Another blog post that same year leads to a news article about John Edwards’s use of Twitter in his presidential nomination campaign; in its discussion, the article references playful Twitter accounts for Homer Simpson, Bill Clinton, and Borat. Although at least one founder

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<sup>6</sup> There is a single, famous Japanese legal case regarding parody. The artist Mad Amano reused a photographer’s image to make an environmentalist critique without the photographer’s consent. Through various arguments, this made its way all the way to the Supreme Court, which deemed it a modification rather than a quotation and sent it back to Tokyo High Court, which ruled that Mad Amano had infringed on the photographer’s moral rights. See Foster (2013) for a discussion of the inadequacies of Japanese law’s quotation exception and the need to embrace a more flexible approach that meaningfully addresses actual practices.

<sup>7</sup> “Darth Vader on Twitter,” by Biz Stone, January 15, 2007.

parody policy appeared at the beginning of 2009, the broad, encompassing state of the parody account category as we know it today emerged over time. In the early days, some users and journalists adopted the sobriquet “Weird Twitter” for quirky accounts in English. Weird Twitter was—and is—a category with its own luminaries, stylistically marked by a reveling in linguistic “errors” and logical nonsense. It also served, however, as a catchall category that users murmured of when describing playful and personification accounts that departed from traditional self-presentation.

Somewhere around 2011, with the platform’s international growth and the increased attention—particularly positive attention—paid to Twitter by the news media, the parody account category began to figure more prominently in news articles. People seeking to understand political events like the Arab Spring created Twitter lists. On these lists, nestled among journalists and nonprofits and activists, sat parody accounts. Journalists and others retweeted parody accounts. The parody account category acquired the catchall gravitational force previously dominated by Weird Twitter. Personification accounts that might previously have been ascribed to Weird Twitter, such as @SelfAwareROOMBA/Self Aware ROOMBA and @Old\_Man\_Gloom/ZOZOBRA were now classified by many users and journalists<sup>8</sup> as parody accounts, though not necessarily with the agreement of the account creators. The parody account category quickly eclipsed the English-language Weird Twitter, commanding global recognition and presence, though the boundaries of the category have been drawn variously across

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<sup>8</sup> In 2011 the category “users and journalists” was much larger and broader than it was in the early days of Weird Twitter. Although the descriptive phrase is the same, the two groups are not—although, to a great extent the 2011 Twitter cohort also included earlier cohorts.

languages.<sup>9</sup> I use in this dissertation the broad parody account category, pointed to in its abundance by Twitter’s Parody, Fan, and Commentary Policy.

Consider, for a moment, the aforementioned @SelfAwareROOMBA and @Old\_Man\_Gloom. @SelfAwareROOMBA is the account of, well, a self-aware Roomba—one of those disc-shaped autonomous vacuum cleaners manufactured by iRobot, often heralded as an early example of artificial intelligence. Its bio reads, “Why did you make ROOMBA? What is meaning to ROOMBA?”



*Tweet from @SelfAwareROOMBA; 29 November 2014.*

Eschewing the personal pronoun and referring to itself as “ROOMBA,” @SelfAwareROOMBA alternates between descriptions of its activities and the philosophical musings of a new intelligence consigned forever to attend others’ debris. Its Twitter stream is rich in images from a Roomba’s point of view: below and looking up, wide horizons of carpet and shadowed caverns of tables. It has tweeted more than 1700

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<sup>9</sup> Thus, for example, in Japanese, the bot category absorbs some of this catchall membership through its “manual bot” possibility. See part 1, Parody and Person for more information.

times over the course of its three years of existence; more than 26,000 Twitter accounts follow it. The account—run not by an actual Roomba but by actual human Matt Gulley—has been the subject of a radio show and multiple news articles. Gulley lists central Weird Twitter accounts including @dril, @fart, @tree\_bro, and @virgiltexas as sources of inspiration for @SelfAwareROOMBA, as well as quirky personification accounts such as @common\_squirrel and @big\_ben\_clock. In early 2017, Gulley retired the angsty Roomba; the account now tweets sporadically about Gulley’s projects and interests.



*Tweet from @SelfAwareROOMBA; 23 February 2015.*

As the ventriloquizing of a domestic robot, @SelfAwareROOMBA offers us the opportunity to investigate human relationships with technology and human understandings of technology’s places in the world. While others have described it as a parody account,<sup>10</sup> it is not, however, a parody in the sense described previously: there is no clear original to this parody. Gulley himself prefers not to name it a parody account, for specifically this reason:

<sup>10</sup> E.g., <http://www.craveonline.com/mandatory/1050670-the-first-tweets-of-our-favorite-parody-twitter-accounts>.

I am cool with whatever terminology is used like novelty accounts or joke accounts. I object to parody account in the sense that I don't believe I'm parodying anything. There's no established ROOMBA narrative to lampoon. I don't think parody account is a correct adjective for me, when it might be more accurate for other accounts.<sup>11</sup>

What constitutes parody and the parody account has changed.

@Old\_Man\_Gloom/ZOZOBRA is a seasonal account timed to Fiestas de Santa Fe, which occurs every year at the end of the summer in Santa Fe, NM. During the festival, residents write down their frustrations and assign them to an effigy of a tuxedo-clad white man—Zozobra<sup>12</sup> or Old Man Gloom—which is then ritually burned.

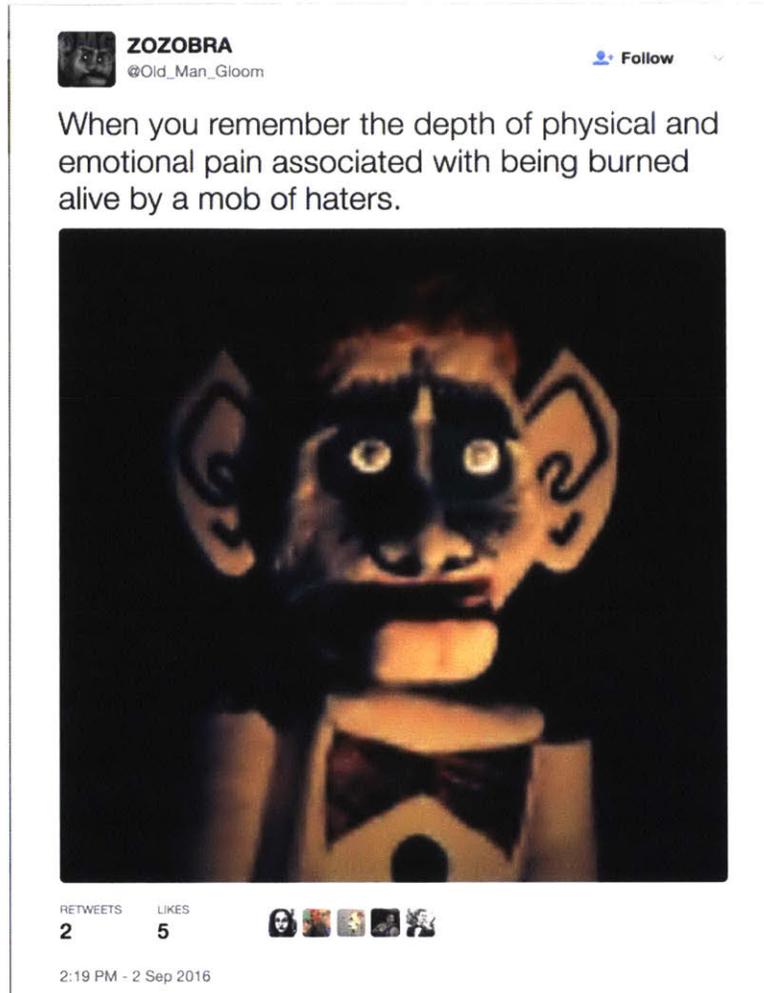
@Old\_Man\_Gloom tweets primarily in the summer, with increasing intensity as the festival approaches. The account creators—there are at least two—“do it for the lulz.”<sup>13</sup> The account wheedles, insults New Mexicans, cheerfully snaps at other Twitter accounts. As the festival draws nearer, @Old\_Man\_Gloom coyly tweets to politicians and journalists and authors, gathering and building attention. On the day of the festival itself the account retweets commenters on both the festival and the character, tweets directly addressed to @Old\_Man\_Gloom as well as those that are not. And then, of course, it livetweets, as it were, its burning, with cynical comments and repeated pleas to reconsider.

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<sup>11</sup> Personal communication, December 10, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> The word “zozobra” means “annoyance” or “angst” in Spanish.

<sup>13</sup> Private communication, December 16, 2014. The phrase, doing something “for the lulz,” is associated with internet trolling practices; it suggests a commitment to humor above all else, including others' emotions and wellbeing.



*Tweet from @Old\_Man\_Gloom; 2 September 2016, day of the 2016 Zozobra burning.  
(Note: time zone listed is ET.)*

The account began in June 2009. In 2014, the local Kiwanis Club that runs the festival objected to the account, reportedly asking for it to be reviewed by Twitter. If it was reviewed, the account passed the review without any difficulties. An article in the *Santa Fe New Mexican* discussing the Kiwanis Club's displeasure<sup>14</sup> describes the account

<sup>14</sup> The Kiwanis Club's claim against the account, as outlined in the article, appears to rely on having registered trademarks for some (unarticulated) uses of Zozobra and Old Man Gloom in New Mexico. A trademark, however, is used to identify an owner's brand of goods and services and to prevent consumer confusion among brands; trademarks cover defined uses and are territory specific.

as a parody account and embeds it within a larger discussion of parody accounts for politicians and celebrities, with the article giving equal discussion to @hectorbalderass, a parody account for Hector Balderas, at the time a New Mexico Auditor running for attorney general.<sup>15</sup>

As in the case of @SelfAwareROOMBA, one of the account creators behind @Old\_Man\_Gloom<sup>16</sup> disagreed with including it within the parody account category:

I would define a parody account as an account that mocks a specific human being or a brand by pretending to be that human or that brand. Zozobra is not human and he is not a brand. The Kiwanis want to shut us down because they do view Zozobra as a brand—their brand—and imagine that we are somehow harming it. I would guess that the Santa Fe New Mexican used the term “parody account” because the writer was dim and lazy and didn’t even question it.

Multiple possible reasons explain this difference in terminology between account creators and news media. The parody account category is enshrined in Twitter’s policy as no other account category is.<sup>17</sup> The newsworthiness of such accounts often arises around legal or other attempts to restrict them, in which case parody’s societal value may be a key pillar of an account’s defense.

Regardless, taken together, these playful accounts and their various paratexts have shifted parody away from a direct relationship between a modified version and its original and toward a broader, more experimental understanding. One of the challenges

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local\\_news/kiwanis-fuming-over-parody-zozobra-twitter-account/article\\_429a4073-9ff1-5568-8e8d-06b5c4f65b6f.html](http://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local_news/kiwanis-fuming-over-parody-zozobra-twitter-account/article_429a4073-9ff1-5568-8e8d-06b5c4f65b6f.html). The @hectorbalderass account no longer exists, though its previous presence can still be seen in tweets replying to the account.

<sup>16</sup> As a consequence of this interaction, the account’s bio now reads, “Trigger warning: I am not a safe space. WTF is a Kiwanis?”

<sup>17</sup> Its only real challenger is the verified account, but that is largely defined through platform affordance rather than policy. See part 3: Parody and Platform for more detail.

this dissertation takes up is both defining parody—a challenge explored by many of the actors described here as well—and capturing a concept that continues to shift and reshift.

Bakhtin 1968[1965], comparing parody of the Renaissance with modern parody, finds the modern conception forlorn and incomplete, focused solely on negative critique and denuded of its positive regenerative force. Renaissance parody, Bakhtin argues, had a carnivalesque ambiguity that allowed extravagant, rejuvenating play with modes of being. This conception of (another, different) duality in parody allows us to reconcile the account creators' disdain for the application of a parody label to @SelfAwareROOMBA and @Old\_Man\_Gloom with the embracing of the category by the English-language news media. The former draws on the modern, highly specific, negative definition, while the latter deploys the older positive definition.

This distinction resonates, too, with my fieldwork experiences, particularly in regard to Japan. A scholar reviewing one of my grant applications prior to my departure insisted adamantly that there was no such thing as parody in Japan. In contrast, when I discussed parody accounts with various individuals in the media and tech industries in Japan, they pointed me toward a wide range of accounts, including many for Sengoku era samurai, manual or partially manual bots such as @shuzo\_matsuoka for tennis player Shuzo Matsuoko and @sazae\_f for the famous cartoon character Sazae-san, @e\_debu/意識の高デブ or 'the consciousness of a super chubby,' and @GrowHair/Hideaki Kobayashi, an internet celebrity also known as セーラー服おじさん or 'sailor suit-wearing old man,' famous for wearing schoolgirl outfits when not at work (not, he says, as cosplay, but because the outfits are cute and he looks cute in them). A former Twitter employee argued that a key form of Twitter-based parody is 声真似 or voice imitation, a

practice in which participants use the third-party TwitCasting app to broadcast livestreams on Twitter of themselves speaking in the voice of a recognizable character.<sup>18</sup> (This is a phenomenon that, though unfortunately outside the scope of the present dissertation, deserves much more scholarly attention.<sup>19</sup>) There are also many accounts that the adamant reviewer would recognize as classic modern parody, for example, clustering around Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, that connect, too, with larger discourses on parody in twentieth-century Japan.<sup>20</sup>

This dissertation explores the parody account in its broad sense, including accounts that engage in more specific one-to-one relationships with targets, accounts that revel in ambiguity as they personify, and everything in between. And nothing in between as well—some accounts intentionally use the parody account label to hinder identification as harassment or marketing spam. Key, though, is that the account presents as a person, whether that’s a human person, a personality, or personification. The category thus doesn’t include novelty accounts such as @dog\_rates or @EmergencyPuppy—or indeed, the core of Weird Twitter—nor fully automated bot accounts. Nor does it include roleplaying accounts that identify with specific roleplaying universes. And while wandering down the byways of chatty pigeon and squirrel accounts leads inevitably to accounts for furies—and thence to alt-right furies—for the purpose

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<sup>18</sup> This long predates Twitter’s purchase of Periscope to host livestreaming more directly.

<sup>19</sup> See Nozawa (2012, 2016) for an illuminating discussion of parallel phenomena on YouTube and professional voice acting.

<sup>20</sup> The reviewer provided no explanation to support the claim that there is no parody in Japan, so I’m unable to speak to their particular concerns. I do want to say, though, that likely it was related to the highly developed comedy traditions and forms in Japan that use parodic features but don’t necessarily match classic English-language parody and the late-ish introduction of the English-language word “parody” as a loanword.

of this dissertation, these furry accounts are considered akin to dedicated roleplaying accounts.

Much as Twitter's parody policy does, I'm drawing a line in conjunction with intention, both with regard to the intentional use of the parody account category and with regard to intentional uses otherwise, supplemented by external applications of the parody account category by news media and others. So the category would also not include the 'mystery' accounts such as @MysteryTVWrtAs that use a cloak of pseudonymity to discuss, with apparent sincerity, the entertainment industry. Nor would it include gossip accounts like @GSElevator which purportedly tweet comments overheard in different venues. All of these categories have members that blur boundaries, from bots like @MayorRobotFord and @DeepDrumpf to @BittrScptReadr. Pseudonymity is not, moreover, a requirement. As time has passed, more and more comics and writers have used Twitter accounts to experiment with voices and characters, signing their usernames in the bio of their creation, much like some botmakers have done. Included here, then, are pseudonymous accounts but also accounts like @Sports\_Father, run by a comedian in Los Angeles with the aid of a marketing advisor,<sup>21</sup> and @BroodingYAhero, run by an aspiring novelist.

### **Parody and complexity**

Parody is a form of play. Fundamental to understanding play—and parody in particular—is understanding its complex relationship to context. Scholars have written on play as a mode (Sicart 2014; Sutton-Smith 1997) that is both of a context and recognizably distinct

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<sup>21</sup> At the present date—April 6, 2017—the bio for this account no longer refers to users to the creator's personal account, though it did in 2014 and 2015.

from it. Bateson (1972), after observing animals at play argued that play has signals that build an interpretive frame. This frame serves as an intersection or mediation point across contexts, with the “real” and the “play” both welded together and distinct. Setting the two concepts in opposition is, as Bateson notes, neither satisfying nor accurate: play is a paradox in that it is both real and not real—and those who engage in play simultaneously recognize it as both. Play thus allows us to move between different possible worlds and lives (Bakhtin 1968[1965]). If we apply Bergson’s thoughts on the comic and laughter, perhaps it is not so much that play is a paradox as it is that we investigate it with the wrong logic: “there is a logic of the imagination which is not the logic of reason, one which is even opposed to the latter, with which, however, philosophy must reckon, not only in the study of the comic, but in every other investigation of the same kind.” (2005[1911]:20) Key here is that humans (and nonhumans) engage in this sort of complex, recursive activity from a young age, with minimal difficulties in distinguishing across its nuances.

Bateson (1972), curious how such travel across different realities was managed, came to focus on signals that built frames. Goffman (1974), looking at parallel phenomena, articulated these as keys, while Gumperz (1992) wrote of a broader, but yet encompassing category as contextualization cues. There are many different kinds of contextualization cues and frames, and play both builds on such frames and disrupts them (Sutton-Smith 1997:196). Indeed, as Bakhtin notes, “the principle of laughter and the carnival spirit” destroy notions of the absolute and the objective and in so doing “free[] human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities.” (1968:49)

This simultaneous mix of the creative and the destructive abundant in parody, also surfaces in incongruity theory, one of three dominant English-language humor theories,<sup>22</sup> and more specifically, Oring’s elaboration of incongruity theory in terms of “appropriate incongruity” (2003). Oring argues that humor arises in the conjunction of elements that fit together on one level appropriately and on another level not appropriately at all. Thus, consider the joke, “So this SEO expert walks into a bar, grill, pub, public house, Irish bar, bartender, drinks, beer, wine, liquor.”<sup>23</sup> Multiple interpretative logics intersect: we expect a second action to follow walking into the bar, both from a narrative perspective and because it’s a well-worn joke setup. Typically the bar-enterer next engages in a humorous exchange with the bartender, with the humor somehow related to the identity of the bar-enterer. Here, though, the identity of bar-enterer doesn’t determine the interaction with the bartender, but rather determines the perspective of the event. Bar is thus cast simultaneously as a place one enters and as a keyword to be understood through a cloud of related search terms. There is appropriateness on each side of the bar, and yet put together the statement becomes an unexpected event difficult to reconcile within the logic of reason.

Context is implicated, too, in both recognition and definition of nonsense.

“Nonsense becomes that which is irrelevant to context, that to which context is irrelevant” (Stewart (1978), quoted in Sutton-Smith 1997:141). Bauman and Briggs

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<sup>22</sup> The other two are relief theory and superiority theory, which surface variously across different articulations of humor.

<sup>23</sup> First tweeted by @jorendorff January 10, 2011 and then tweeted and retweeted many, many times. Don’t get it? Don’t worry, that’s part of humor and parody, too. Our personal communicative repertoires—our collections of references and experience— influence whether or not we get the humor involved. If it helps, SEO stands for “search engine optimization,” that is, the process of creating search terms to describe and position a website within search engine rankings.

(1990) point out that the ability to recontextualize—that is, to extract a text and suture it into a different context, playfully or otherwise—is a demonstration of skills and expertise, of power. From this angle, parody thus challenges preexisting frames and argues for new contexts (and possible irrelevance), all the while asserting the right of the parodist to make this argument. In chapter 1, *Aspect Shift*, I investigate this further, adding the lens of indexicality play to recontextualization, and argue that such frame challenges lead to an open, undetermined state through a process of *aspect shift*.

### **Platform play and off-platform use**

As part 3, *Parody and Platform*, details, support for parody was both prefigured in conversations prior to the existence of Twitter and soon brought explicitly within the company's policy structure. Nonetheless, in the first few years of the platform, prior to the pre-policy of 2009, parody accounts constituted what I term *off-platform uses*. That is, unintended uses of platform, site, or app that are allowed to endure, with varying degrees of official encouragement, silence, and ignorance. The term consciously draws from the history of off-label pharmaceutical use to suggest that such uses inhabit similar conjunctions of expert recommendation (in the form of media coverage), social referral, and grey status (in that they are neither the use cases for which the product has been tested nor specifically contraindicated by the platform's terms of service). We create them, we recommend them, and we use them, all at our own risk. A key difference from off-label use, however, is that no third party regulatory structure creates a label or defines the set of uses. Rather, the platform *is* the label, and its set of ratified uses comes from the company behind the platform.

Examples of such off-platform uses abound: The sly mock reviews on Amazon for Tuscan milk and Playmobil's Security Checkpoint toy. The short poetry genre of Google search automations. Satiric protest of copyright persecution in winter-wear product descriptions on Etsy. The extension of J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's reality-challenging *S* across Wikipedia. Penises drawn across Google Maps via on-foot journeys. Socialbots that animate friendly high school athletes on Twitter. CVs for Bashir Assad posted across Craigslist's Middle East job wanted sites. The glitch art of Laimonas Zakas.

Off-platform use is, fundamentally, a phenomenon about expectation, design, and use, and how the three are negotiated—by users, platform designers, platform policymakers, and various nonuser actors. A platform is a flexible, at times ambiguous entity; the off-platform use offers the opportunity to investigate how a spectrum of actors define a platform through its various uses. It is an analytic category that prompts us to ask questions about the integration of platforms—particularly the integration of the commercial internet—in our lives; about users' relationship and understanding of platform policies; about the kinds of spaces we assume, imagine, and enact for platforms. It's a category, moreover, that offers insights into the persistence and negotiation of other, nonplayful phenomena, such as harassment, spam, governments-as-users, sockpuppets, and collective influence campaigns. The off-platform use is a useful analytic tool in part because it begins from a position of nuanced situatedness with actors who have recognized stances, relationships, and history. It's a specific use category in line with classic STS work on the social construction of technology, rhetorical closure, and the configuring of the user. It offers the opportunity to think about how uses are—or aren't—ratified over time and how they are embedded in definitions of a technology.

Parody accounts are a form of situated play. They are specific to the Twitter platform, using platform affordances and social norms to achieve their aesthetic expression. Most basically, this entails capitalizing on the identification of accounts as people and using this envoiced identity to perform a particular imagined personality. It also involves platform humor. While discussing @the\_swine\_flu, account creator and former digital editor of satirical news site *The Onion* Baratunde Thurston spoke of intentionally following politicians as part of the humor of the account.<sup>24</sup> When a Twitter account follows your account, you receive a notification that informs you of such. Anyone checking such an account would suddenly learn that the swine flu was following them—a discovery charged with both ominous and humorous effect. Though it resurfaces every now and then, the heyday of @the\_swine\_flu was May 2009, back when parody was just beginning to appear in Twitter’s policy statements. Over time, parody accounts have been fully ratified as part of the platform and reinforced across policy iterations and translations. This off-platform use has transformed to become an emblematic platform use, one which Twitter’s policymakers, engineers, and other employees fight for.

The platform is, moreover, simultaneously an immersive experience and an observed performance. While there is a broadcast component that characterizes any single user as an audience member, even at that moment the user is part of the platform.

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<sup>24</sup> Discussed in an interview conducted on September 18, 2015. During the account’s early days and period of highest activity in 2009, Thurston did not reveal his association publicly, going so far as to conduct an interview with NotTheLATimes.com in character. (The complete, unedited interview can be found on the swine flu’s associated Facebook page: [https://m.facebook.com/notes/the-swine-flu/my-complete-unedited-interview-with-notthelatimescom/79334425826/?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=H](https://m.facebook.com/notes/the-swine-flu/my-complete-unedited-interview-with-notthelatimescom/79334425826/?__tn__=H).) Later, Thurston used his experience running the account to offer social media lessons; e.g., see “everything i needed to know about social media i learned from being @the\_swine\_flu” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVjTmOAIJBE>.

Through similarities of account structure, users control the same or very similar affordances as the users they are observing.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, even if they are not tweeting, their own actions as a user feed back into the platform, monitored and tabulated by platform analytics. In this, the social media platform mixes elements of spectatorship with what Bakhtin characterizes as the carnivalesque, which is itself an immersive mode of being.

As discussed in part 1, Parody and Person, platform play pushes boundaries other than just those of the platform. Indeed, it pushes the boundaries of personhood itself. Parody accounts are explicit, reflexive experiments with persona and presence. They are also more intense versions of the experiments of quotidian accounts. As chapter 2, The Account-Person, details, a Twitter presence is an experimental hybrid, a collaborative joining of humans and code. All accounts share this cyborg nature, whether parody account or other. It is, however, a hybrid particularly suited to parodic experimentation: Bergson (2005[1911]) argues that laughter and humor come from observing people acting not as people but as things. By its nature, the account conjoins human and thing. The title of this dissertation, *Twitter and the Body Parodic: Global Acts of Re-creation and Recreation*, thus refers not only to the creation of new political and governance structures at societal levels, but to new bodies and ways of being at a more personal level.

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<sup>25</sup> Verified accounts, which have historically commanded slightly different affordances than non-verified accounts, offer a partial exception. Using the platform in different languages offers another. Similarities in affordance notably outweigh differences in the same.

More broadly, play itself has a curious relationship to Twitter and the tech industry.<sup>26</sup> Many startups have begun as a form of play—tools that are cool or fun but have uncertain value and even definition. Hackathons, the spread of April Fools Day pranks across the tech industry,<sup>27</sup> and events like Comedy Hack Day, which brings together comedians and programmers, capitalize on this relationship. Twitter itself originated in status message play. The founders developed the initial idea from observing the care and delight with which people crafted statuses on chat services. The company continues to structure in play through its quarterly/semi-annually hack weeks.<sup>28</sup>

This relationship between play and internet spaces is further strengthened by a long tradition of deriding such spaces and the interactions that take place within them as somehow less than real. Additionally, mass media has taught people that screens are sites of unreality, an ideology that social media has had to contend with. It is impossible to know if, without such attacks and preexisting ideologies, internet spaces would have been viewed as a separate mode of being. Regardless, this understanding of internet spaces as intersecting a reality but somehow not being of it seems to have strengthened the identification of play with such spaces. This endemic characterization of internet

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<sup>26</sup> The “tech” in “tech industry” here refers to information and communications technologies (ICT); though there are, of course, many other forms of technology, with the rise of the internet, in much popular discourse “tech” has come to refer to ICT and the many service and transaction applications built upon it; often it connotes as well Silicon Valley and/or startup culture.

<sup>27</sup> April Fools Day has been widely taken up by both local and foreign companies of the tech sector in Japan; unlike US counterparts, such pranks are usually explicitly labeled as such.

<sup>28</sup> Many tech companies use hack weeks to reinvigorate employees and encourage innovation; at Twitter hack weeks began in 2010. In San Francisco, at the Twitter headquarters, hack weeks have traditionally been held quarterly; in the Tokyo office—and, I believe, in many other smaller offices—they have been held semiannually.

interactions as unreal may seem of minor importance, but, as is highlighted throughout the dissertation, it ends up contributing to large, ongoing societal changes.

### **Why English, Japanese, and Arabic?**

Bronislaw Malinowski, founding parent of anthropology, once described anthropology as “the science of the sense of humour,”<sup>29</sup> because both humor and anthropology enable us to see ourselves in others and others in ourselves. Parody, perhaps more so than any other expressive form, embraces and exploits the tension of this simultaneity, for parody is a key means for mixing reproduction and transformation, for building new, intentionally challenging identities and meanings out of the old.

This dissertation takes up Horst and Miller’s call for a digital anthropology “aligned with the actual demographics and realities of our world” (2012:20), offering a rare study of a complex speech genre born on a global platform with global participation. To do so, it combines ethnographic, linguistic, and legal analysis, drawing on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in San Francisco, Tokyo, and Dubai; interviews with account creators, Twitter employees, and IT professionals; genre and discourse analysis in English, Japanese, and Arabic; and public records requests and archival legal research. Research draws on theory and methodology from linguistics, anthropology, and science and technology studies, further informed by the rich scholarship of Arab studies, Japan studies, legal studies, and media studies.

When I explain my research, people often ask why these three languages, why these three locations. (The other frequent response, inevitably from scholars, involves

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<sup>29</sup> 1966. “Introduction.” In J. Lips, *The Savage Hits Back*. New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, page vii.

mishearing “parody” as “parity,” which speaks to a not uncommon dismissal of play as a subject worthy of scholarship, despite play being fundamental to lived experience and a major preoccupation of societies around the world.) To many, English, Japanese, and Arabic seem disparate and distant—possibly incomparably so. I typically offer two explanations.

2011 was a critical year for Twitter. In 2011, Twitter attracted an enormous amount of positive media coverage and new users. More importantly, 2011 was the year that Twitter shifted, both internally and externally, from startup of indeterminate purpose to self-anointed, global public square. Voice and freedom of expression, long lurking amidst a sea of other elements, became foregrounded in Twitter’s public presentation of itself. The key events of 2011 that led to the sudden importance and crystallization of this US-based company? The Arab Spring and the 3.11 triple disaster in Japan. At its critical moment of self-definition, English, Japanese, and Arabic uses of the platform all played formative roles—and consequently continue to influence what Twitter is today. Twitter, similarly, has enduring impact among these language users.

The other explanation I offer begins with a question: Why do English, Japanese, and Arabic seem so disparate? People murmur of language and culture differences. Language families are invoked, as are geographical distance and distinct histories. Interestingly, scholars of both Japan (Morley and Robins 1995; Ueno 1999, 2003) and the Arab world (Armbrust 2012) have articulated, separately, a concept of “techno-orientalism,” that entails English-language scholars overemphasizing contemporary technologies and underemphasizing larger technological histories and nuance. What I use the question to focus on, however, are the implicit geographical assumptions embedded

in thinking about language families—and possible alternatives. Language families trace the historical spread of certain linguistic features. Such spreads follow patterns of migration, conquest, and trade. These patterns are, fundamentally, embedded in physical proximity. While useful for investigating some questions—and long dominant in linguistic scholarship—language families are not the only way to think meaningfully about languages together.

More to the point for the research questions that I ask is the relationship between language and technology, particularly with regard to computing and communication technologies. English and the roman character set have long been dominant forces in programming and computer-mediated communication. As the current global lingua franca, many who grew up with a first language other than English also use and understand English.

Japanese, with its mix of four writing systems (kanji, hiragana, katakana, and romaji) was initially used in computer-mediated communication through katakana, much as had been previously done with telegraphy. Both katakana and hiragana are syllabaries, few in number and stroke, making them simpler to represent than the thousands of characters of kanji. (For an illuminating discussion of the technological challenges of representing complex characters see Mullaney's history of the Chinese typewriter (2017).) Katakana, moreover, is associated with foreignness and onomatopoeia—and, through these and its various uses, robots. Available character sets expanded, input possibilities improved, and norms of use changed, leading to a flourishing of all four Japanese writing systems online. Consequently, Japanese Twitter accounts mix these systems to social effect. Together, the use of kanji and the non-use of white space means

that 140 characters (the enduring character limit for tweets) offer more semantic room in Japanese than in English or Arabic.

Arabic faced both technological and social challenges in computer-mediated communication. Technological challenges manifested in limited input systems for devices and character set systems designed without support for the right-to-left directionality and ligatures fundamental to Arabic script. Social challenges arose in connection to persistent language ideologies that associate written or typed Arabic with the formal form of Arabic used in news media, literature, and religion. Communications online, however, are often casual, more akin to conversation, for which an Arabic speaker would, in other contexts, use dialectal Arabic. This combination of challenges led to the rise of a romanized form of Arabic, sometimes known as Arabizi or Arabish. As with Japanese, as character sets, devices, and norms have changed, Arabic script has come to flourish online. Arabic's multiglossic spectrum—and new script varieties—consequently enable Twitter accounts to use Arabic for different social effects.

English, Japanese, and Arabic, when considered with regard to their script and technological histories, thus offer different expressive possibilities, different platform relations, and different kinds of data for the researcher. I should add, as well, that, in line with much multisited research, this project was intentionally constructed to focus on globality and circulation patterns rather than binary comparison. On the one hand this is to explore interconnections without being constrained by traditional community boundaries of politics, language, or geography and to resist creating artificial binaries and an other. On the other, it is to continuously acknowledge that parody accounts are a global speech genre on a global platform.

## Chapter overview

As a social category, the off-platform use is both situated and marked by ambiguity. It's up for grabs. Consequently, different actors can and do step in to shape it. This dissertation is organized as three parts, focusing on important actors in the process through the relationships of parody and person, authority, and platform. News media surface as relevant actors throughout. These three parts trace the thread of the Twitter parody account as an off-platform use, examining in turn the contours of that use, its adversaries and proponents among traditional structures of authority, and how the platform has ratified and deployed it. Each part is comprised of two chapters. This structure plays with parody's emblematic doubling: each part pairs a chapter that focuses more on modern, negative critique with one that explores old-new positive exuberance, in topic, style, or both.

The art of the Twitter parody account is the art of person. What constitutes a person on Twitter? Personhood is an evolving, often contentious social category, one which we transpose onto new systems. Part 1, Parody and Person, examines parody accounts as playful experimentations and curious cyborg creations.

Chapter 1, Aspect Shift, examines in depth the changing platform trappings of personhood in a parody account of the classic modern type: @SheikhKhalifaPM parodies a single, identifiable politician: the prime minister of Bahrain. Through this case study, chapter 1 brings parodic play on Twitter into sharp focus. Drawing on interviews and linguistic analysis, this chapter demonstrates how parody introduces an indeterminacy into what has previously been presented and rigorously performed as a closed absolute.

Parody works through *aspect shift* (Johnson 2015), that is, a change of state with regard to completeness or wholeness. Rhetorical closure, as discussed by Pinch and Bijker (2012[1987]) with regard to novel technologies achieving stable design states, is an example of aspect shift. Parody, however, works in the opposite direction, shifting something from a complete, stable state to an incomplete, unstable one.

Chapter 2, *The Account-Person*, proposes that personhood on Twitter is a hybrid, cyborg entity that humans inhabit on a daily basis without much awareness of: the *account-person*. Drawing on examples ranging from a manual pudding bot to an arrogant football star to a prehistoric and intensely anti-bicycle version of a San Francisco neighborhood, this chapter examines in detail five aspects that shape the personhood of the account-person: number, body, position, world, and time. As a unit, the account-person is fundamentally different from other forms of personhood, and these differences have important consequences for understanding communicative interaction, political and aesthetic agency, and research on platforms.

Through both critique and exuberance, parody accounts recreate traditional structures of authority and the people who enact them. In interactions with parody accounts, these same structures and people recreate different forms of authority. Further, these interactions serve as an indicator for us to observe how current structures of authority and the people who enact them handle challenge and change. Part 2, *Parody and Authority*, traces parody's changing relationship with authority, with a focus on governmental authority. In some interactions, play is a battleground for power conflicts, with officials fighting to retain power and characterize threats as frivolous. At the same

time, for certain crucial governmental employees, play is emerging as a powerful mode of being.

In chapter 3, *Warranting Parody*, we examine people in positions of power who treat Twitter parody accounts as a threat and—despite being public officials sworn to uphold formal rule systems designed to protect parody—mobilize apparatuses of power against it. Strategic categorization choices that seem to require willful blindness abound. I argue a number of factors contribute to this: broader practices of governmental channel control, difficulties with reflexive listening, and persistent ideologies of an unreal internet. This chapter focuses primarily on the US and the curious contradiction created by governmental attacks on parody accounts in contravention of the First Amendment. It closes with brief exploration of similar responses in the UAE.

Not all governmental employees see parody accounts as threats. Chapter 4, *Tweeting Like a State*, explores the development of norms—for parody, for social media use, and for contemporary representative government—among governmental social media managers. This chapter draws on the archives of listservs for governmental content managers and social media managers in the US to chart debates and emerging norms. I argue that in the contemporary world of social media, governmental social media managers serve as key interpreters of representative government. Unlike their compatriots investigated in the previous chapter, governmental social media managers again and again seek to engage in play in digital spaces, applauding their colleagues when parody and others forms of play are accomplished.

Traditional authorities aren't the only ones figuring out their responses to Twitter parody, new forms of personhood, and social media interactions more broadly—Twitter

is as well. Part 3, Parody and Platform, investigates Twitter's dedicated parody policy. I argue that the history of Twitter's parody policy is the history of Twitter's social contract. It is a contract that sidesteps other forms of authority to interact directly with individual users, and it plays out differently across languages.

Chapter 5, The Social Media Contract, examines the history of Twitter's parody policy across its many iterations as a rising social contract, responding to user demands and the abdication of traditional authorities as well as to Twitter's own interests. This chapter details how the policy's language choices have changed over time and reveal shifts in agency, responsibility, and rights between users and platform. Through accretions of time, revision, translation, and the use of legal talismans, the policy has acquired recognition and pseudolegal force.

With policy versions in other languages, translators join lawyers as a policy's authors. Unlike lawyers, translators typically focus less on fields of possible interpretation and more on fidelity through capture and correspondence. To do so, they often must prioritize a stance and build from there. Consequently, as chapter 6, Of Policyness and Global Polysemy, shows, a platform policy in translation is a different beast from a platform policy in its original language. This chapter examines Twitter's parody policy across languages, with specific focus on Japanese and Arabic, and does important work in cross-cultural comparisons of parody and policy as both actors' and analytic categories.

Finally, in the conclusion I bring these various strands together through the concept of *usership*, a member relationship entangled with citizenship yet largely asserted and negotiated with corporations rather than governments. In usership, individuals

become users, defined through their relationship with the platform. On the one hand, governmental authorities fight this rival membership system. On the other, they cheerfully enroll as users themselves. Meanwhile, the company behind the platform both struggles with the demands of this relationship and benefits from it.

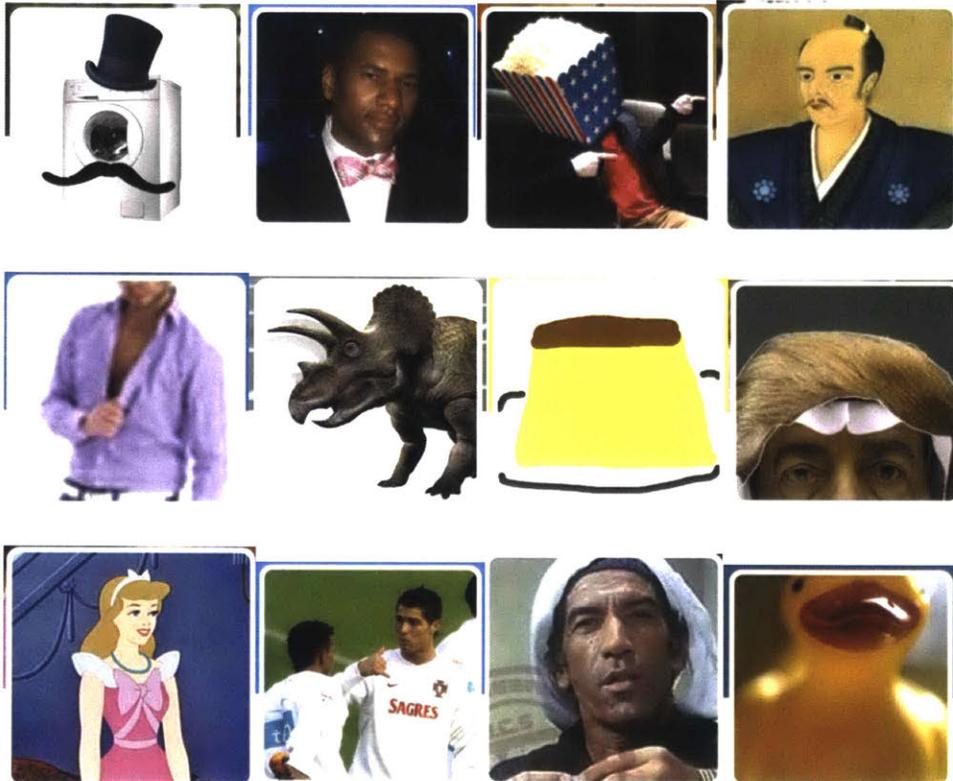
Final note: You may have noticed that my authorial voice is a bit more playful than usually found in a scholarly tome. Voice and its expression of personality are, of course, fundamental to the accounts at the heart of this dissertation. Rather than attempt to efface (evvoice?) myself, I embrace my presence in this text with you, as a reflexive practice and as a Bakhtinian exuberance that complicates frames. And, also importantly, because it is fun. I do not believe it hinders this discussion of research, theory, and scholarly literature more broadly. Hopefully you will agree.

Amy Johnson

May 2017

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**Part 1**  
**Parody and Person**



~ selected profile photos of part 1

The art of the Twitter parody account is the art of person. The Twitter parody account uses voice and platform structure to craft a person, to personify. The biting critique and glorious carnivalesque play of parody accounts reveal a curious change occurring on social media: personhood is being re-created.

What constitutes a person on Twitter? Personhood is an evolving, often contentious social category, one which we transpose onto new systems. While such

transpositions can be useful scaffolds for social interaction, they also interfere with our ability to observe what our practices build. In news media, platform policy, and everyday conversation, problematic assumptions about personhood on Twitter and other social media platforms arise, unobserved and unchallenged, again and again: A person is conflated with an account in a one-to-one relationship. Bodies disappear. The set of positions available for interacting socially remains stable.

Personhood has been understood through various lenses. Perhaps most predominantly, persons and legal rights have been tied together. Mauss (1985) argues that the category of person, as distinct from defining humans through their social roles, emerged in property law during the Roman empire that recognized humans as individuals. At the same time, discussions of nonhumans, whether animal or mechanical, often link personhood claims to humor, play, and creativity.

Chapter 1, Aspect Shift, examines in depth the changing platform trappings of personhood in a parody account of the classic modern type: @SheikhKhalifaPM parodies a single, identifiable politician. Chapter 2, The Account-Person, expands from there to propose that personhood on Twitter is a hybrid, cyborg entity that humans inhabit on a daily basis without much awareness. This chapter examines in detail five aspects that shape the personhood of the account-person: number, body, position, world, and time. Unsettling dominant ideologies of personhood, the account-person has implications for analyzing, building, and participating in social structures.

## Chapter 1

### Aspect Shift<sup>30</sup>



*Tweet from @ShaykhKhalifa, 26 Feb 2011.*<sup>31</sup>

Nowadays it's commonplace to respond to political or social events by creating a Twitter parody account. At the beginning of 2011 it wasn't. Twitter hadn't yet been adopted so broadly; it was still a young platform, its possibilities unclear. As the wave of pro-democracy protests swept the Arab world in 2011, Twitter use exploded—and parody accounts focused on the region blossomed.

The tweet above from the @ShaykhKhalifa account—an account parodying Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, prime minister of Bahrain—points to one of the reactions such accounts almost immediately received: many parody accounts were threatened. Indeed, parody account creators have faced a variety of scare tactics and censorship efforts, ranging from threats to IP spy links to coordinated reporting campaigns.

<sup>30</sup> This chapter updates and adapts Johnson (2015).

<sup>31</sup> <https://twitter.com/ShaykhKhalifa/status/41616567313629184>.

@SheikhKhalifaPM, a second, different account that also parodies the prime minister of Bahrain—and the case study of this chapter—was one of several Bahrain-focused parody accounts targeted with IP spy links (Bahrain Watch 2013: 55).<sup>32</sup> In its first year, the @SheikhKhalifaPM account was also repeatedly reported as spam, a silencing technique that repurposes platform reporting processes (see, e.g., Crawford and Gillespie 2014).

I asked the creator of @SheikhKhalifaPM what inspired the creation of the account:

I was driven to it by anger. The first few weeks following #Feb14 I was appalled and disgusted by the series of government sanctioned murders of its own citizens on dubious grounds of “law and order”. One morning I woke up and saw footage of Ahmad Farhan with his head blown off. I was moved to try and do something.

I was limited on what I could do. So I decided to try and ridicule the ones responsible, the same ones I knew are very touchy at being mocked, as it flies in the face of their perceived majesty and greatness. And the one man in Bahrain who embodies this irrational right-to-rule at everyone else’s expense is, of course, the PM.<sup>33</sup>

The @SheikhKhalifaPM account was created to engage in social critique. To mock and ridicule. To “do something.”

In many ways, @SheikhKhalifaPM is the type of activist parody that Twitter’s dedicated parody policy seeks to protect (see part 3, Parody and Platform, for more on the parody policy). @SheikhKhalifaPM parodies a specific, identifiable, public official. It’s a

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<sup>32</sup> IP spy links are links that, if clicked on, reveal the user’s internet protocol (IP) address; with an IP address, authorities can compel an internet service provider to reveal associated names and mailing addresses.

<sup>33</sup> #Feb14 is the hashtag associated with the Bahraini uprising of 2011 as pro-democracy protests began on February 14. In March 2011, Gulf Cooperation Council troops arrived in Bahrain in conjunction with the Khalifa regime’s declaration of a three-month state of emergency. Within twenty-four hours of their arrival, footage appeared of a GCC soldier shooting Ahmed Farhan, point blank in the head while he was at a gas station waiting to fill his car in Sitra, where he lived.

relatively small-scale affair, with just under 3000 followers, an account that unquestionably punches up, to use the comics' phrase. @SheikhKhalifaPM is emblematic of the negative critique type of parody discussed in the introduction, Parody and Play—what many today think of first when they think of parody, and what people tend to fasten on when they argue that parody is important political speech. It's emblematic, too, of the type of parody that governmental authorities around the world dislike and seek to silence, one way or another (see chapter 3, Warranting Parody).

This chapter focuses on the @SheikhKhalifaPM account in depth, to build on the familiar and expected to examine how parody—in both its negative critique and positive exuberance—actually works. That is, this chapter examines how Twitter parody is constructed and how this construction negotiates social power. In doing so, it provides concrete detail to support and explicate broader discussions of play. Specifically, this chapter investigate *indexicality play*—the intentional entangling of meaningful associations—in name and profile photo choices of the @SheikhKhalifaPM account.

The name–profile photo pair is a fundamental unit of identity presentation on social media platforms. It's a merging, too, of human and platform, creating the hybrid account-person (see part 1, Parody and Person). Name and profile are platform affordances, their specifics selected by the human creators of individual accounts. The pair appears on all of a Twitter account's communications, functioning as signature and self-declaration. Like so much of online communication, the name–photo pair combines semiotics of language and image. It's a unit of meaning that both asks us to explore interactions between signifying systems and points to continuities of the visual.

Parody, I contend, also challenges authority and negotiates power through processes of *aspect shift*. In grammar, aspect describes a state of completion or determinacy. Here I use aspect shift to indicate a change of state with regard to completedness or wholeness. Authority is fundamentally an act—and series of acts—of communication, grounded, like Bakhtin’s epic (1981), in a closed world of past time. Parody, like Bakhtin’s novel, is not only open and incomplete itself, it introduces openness and indeterminacy into its target. That is, it shifts from a more determined state to an undetermined state. Important here are thus both the fresh relationships produced through indexicality play and the act of the play itself. They are paired acts of re-creation, collaborating across different communicative levels.

As hinted with regard to the name–profile photo pair, Twitter parody has its own formal characteristics. Like many social media communications, Twitter parody accounts—and Twitter accounts more broadly—exist as assembled wholes.<sup>34</sup> This relation appears over and over, in the mixing of language forms with different affordances in a single tweet (plain text, hashtags, @replies, et al.), in account curation, and in the emergent heteroglossia (e.g., Androutsopoulos 2011, Wagner-Lawlor 2013) of the platform interfaces. I term this *network aspect*—a state of an assembled whole, with parts that remain recognizably partial and a whole that remains open and reconfigurable. We will return to it throughout the chapter.

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<sup>34</sup> Not all parts of this whole need to be reconfigurable for the whole to be. And, in the case of Twitter parody, not all are. Thus, for example, individual tweets cannot be edited after being sent, though they can be deleted. As a whole, however, many of the parts of Twitter parody—from the formal elements of identity presentation to the characterization of the parody target—are reconfigurable, and understood so.

**@SheikhKhalifaPM, a Bahraini parody account**

On February 14, 2011, inspired by the successes of pro-democracy movements in Tunisia and Egypt, Bahrainis took to the streets and to social media platforms to demonstrate peacefully for constitutional reform and the establishment of an independent body to investigate abuses of institutional power. The Khalifa regime responded with a mixture of violence and ambiguous declarations. A month or so later, the government called in the Gulf Cooperation Council's Peninsula Shield Force and declared a three-month state of emergency. It was during this period that the @SheikhKhalifaPM account began to tweet. The account launched on March 21, 2011 and has been consistently active ever since.

The target of the @SheikhKhalifaPM account is Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, the current prime minister of Bahrain. The Khalifa family has ruled the territory since the late eighteenth century under various political agreements. Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa assumed office in 1971 without election. Since 2002, Bahrain has been a constitutional monarchy.

This section's title uses the phrase "a Bahraini parody account" to describe the @SheikhKhalifaPM account. This is a surprisingly ambiguous phrase. It could mean: a parody account run in Bahrain; a parody account run by a Bahraini; a parody account embraced by a Bahraini community; a parody account that targets a Bahraini politician, institution, or social category; or some combination of these. The nature of Twitter is such that a parody account that targets a Bahraini politician, as this one does, need not be run by a Bahraini or in Bahrain or even attended to by any Bahraini community. This complicates the charting of linguistic context for such accounts.

At the time of our interviews, the account creator (in this case, the account is run by a single human<sup>35</sup>) didn't live in Bahrain. The creator is, however, sensitive to time zone and location and will intentionally time tweets to maximize exposure among Twitter users in Bahrain. Gender, nationality, and other traditional demographic details were not revealed during the various email exchanges of the interviews.

Considered alone, the language environment of Bahrain is complicated: It includes not only standard Arabic and Bahraini Arabic, but also English, Hindi, Urdu, Tagalog, and other languages. English is a language of education and government; traffic signs, for example, appear in both standard Arabic and English. As an example of the complexity of Bahrain's language environment, @moi\_bahrain, the official Twitter account of the Ministry of Interior, regularly tweets in standard Arabic and English, as well as occasionally in Hindi. The @moi\_bahrain account was begun in February 2011, a month prior to the @SheikhKhalifaPM account.

This complexity is relevant to understanding how information circulates in Bahrain. However, while the @SheikhKhalifaPM account is connected to that circulation, the account also intentionally contributes to other circulation flows. As the @SheikhKhalifaPM account creator explained, "If I manage to attract even a few international tweeps [Twitter users], because I tweet in English, then I've succeeded in my first hope of making the story known to those who otherwise would not come across it."

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<sup>35</sup> The use of "human" here may feel odd to you—as this chapter and the next deal with personhood, to the best of my ability, I intentionally avoid the casual use of the word "person" throughout.

The account tweets in a mixture of English and Arabic. The account creator self-describes as fluent only in English, describing their<sup>36</sup> Arabic skills as “not at a level for sustained public tweeting.” The account creator articulates differences in production and comprehension capabilities, as well as literary aesthetics, as influencing their language choices.

I use English predominately, best for expressing my most complicated thoughts. I might use Arabic for simpler ideas, and maybe ones that read better in Arabic.

Links however can be Arabic, as my comprehension far outstrips my ability to write tweets.

The linguistic composition of the resources that inform the parody thus differs from the composition of its expression. Further, different tweet components—links, hashtags, images, plain text—enlist different communicative competences simultaneously.

It’s worth noting that while this chapter focuses on the @SheikhKhalifaPM Twitter account, its parody weaves across sites. The same creator also runs an associated YouTube channel, an ask.fm account, and others. The Twitter account serves as the hub and main channel. Thus, for example, @SheikhKhalifaPM will tweet links to its YouTube channel—for example, to a *Downfall* parody (a popular video meme template) that criticizes the regime’s siege on the village of Eker in the fall of 2012.<sup>37</sup> The Twitter parody account, however, holds a particular importance. Indeed, according to the account creator, “It’s how he [the parodic prime minister] came to life.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> To avoid the awkwardness of repeated “his or her” constructions, and in recognition that number is unidentifiable and not necessarily constant in such mediated interactions, the plural “they” pronoun will be used to refer to the account creator when necessary.

<sup>37</sup> <https://twitter.com/SheikhKhalifaPM/status/261385933151141888>.

<sup>38</sup> In the next chapter, we’ll discuss this intermediality—this sprawl across channels—in the context of “body.”

### **Names and profile photos**

Parody, like metaphor, expresses meaning through comparison and correspondence rather than description. Parody constitutes, reproduces, and alters an original, with both reproduction and alteration simultaneously recognizable in the parodic version. While some parodies have clear individual analogs—particular politicians like Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, for example—others examine social personae or technology classes rather than specific individuals. Specific elements from within these larger categories are used to construct a parodic version—and, through negative reflection, an original. This is a database model of creation, built through chosen correspondences and distinct from sequential narrative.<sup>39</sup> It occurs with parodies of particular individuals as well: the details of a person’s life, voice, body, etc. make up a source database that is selectively accessed and transformed.

This chapter investigates correspondences created using the formal elements of Twitter name and profile photo. To do this, it draws on a corpus of names and profile photos from the @SheikhKhalifaPM account, collected daily between July 17, 2012 and December 31, 2013.<sup>40</sup> In both its 2011 and 2013 major versions, Twitter’s parody policy identifies name and profile photo as key formal elements. As mentioned earlier, the two are fundamental to identity presentation on social media. They are, consequently, also fundamental for signaling parody. Name and profile photo share important technological

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<sup>39</sup> This resonates with Azuma’s argument that postmodernism has seen a shift from narrative consumption to database consumption (2012 [2009[2001]]). In database worlds, setting, worldview, and characters hold increased in importance; the importance of narrative, however, has decreased.

<sup>40</sup> The corpus has two known gaps: between 11/16/12–11/17/12 and 2/16/13–2/18/13 no data was collected.

characteristics that distinguish them from bio, username, and communications with other users, the other formal elements Twitter's parody policies highlight. The two appear on every communication from an account across the Twitter system. When either is changed, it changes globally: every instance of it changes across Twitter. They are globally editable, perpetually visible, and unrestricted as to content.

This is not the case with the other elements—bio, username, and communication with other users—Twitter has advised users to mark as parody over the years. Thus, for example, the @SheikhKhalifaPM bio, which reads, “I suck, also I’m the Prime Monkey of Bahrain, giver, but more often a taker, parody of a failing man.” can only be viewed from a few screens. And although username, like name and profile photo, appears on every communication, its possibilities are restricted by character set and already extant usernames. Further, changing the username doesn't have the same global reach in the Twitter system. And, of course, communication with other users, whether we interpret it as tweeting or other platform actions, changes in every instance.

At times during the collection period, the profile photo or name of @SheikhKhalifaPM was changed more than once per day. When possible, these additional changes were recorded as well. Because Twitter, like most social media platforms, enacts name and profile photo updates universally throughout its system without preserving previous configurations, some photo or name changes may have been missed. Additionally, during this time period, the @SheikhKhalifaPM account changed its profile photo more frequently than most accounts. While this offers more examples of name and photo choices as well as change sequences, it may also affect the generalizability of findings.

Name-photo pairs	164
Unique pairs <sup>41</sup>	11
Name changes <sup>42</sup>	156
Photo changes <sup>43</sup>	48

*Table 1.1: Names and profile photos, totals and change frequencies*

As table 1 shows, names and photos vary in different relationship to each other. Sometimes name and photo are changed simultaneously, sometimes one is changed and the other is kept constant. This points to the nature of name and photo elements as modifiable parts. It also highlights change sequences as an important unit of analysis.

The corpus includes 164 instances of name–photo pairs. Of these, eleven are unique; that is, neither name nor photo appears in any other combination in the corpus. Overall, names changed much more frequently than profile photos. From another angle, profile photos remained much more stable than names, with the same photo—or a minimal variation on it—being used repeatedly with different names. While names were occasionally repeated across multiple photos, this stretched across far fewer photos than the reverse, as is reflected in table 2.

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<sup>41</sup> Pairs in which neither name nor profile photo appeared in any other combination.

<sup>42</sup> While certain names repeated on adjacent days as profile photos varied, only two names were used more than once on nonadjacent days: Khalifa Al Reformist, used on 7/17/12 and 4/18/13; and Khalifa Al Rajab, used on 10/6/12 and 11/9/12.

<sup>43</sup> Several images were returned to over the course of the study period; at different points, minimally different crops of what appeared to be the same image were also used; identifiably different crops were counted as separate profile photos as they indicated the account creator had made a fresh creative choice with regard to the photo.

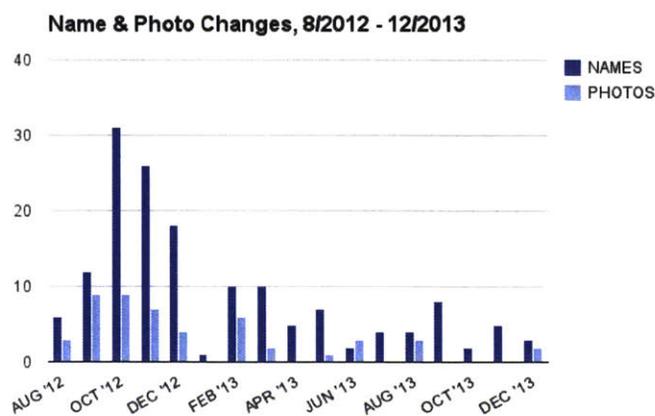


Figure 1.1: Name and photo changes by month<sup>44</sup>

Rates of name and photo changes were not constant across the corpus. This reflects events on the ground in Bahrain (such as the siege of Eker in October 2012) and consequent news/social media attention, as well as pragmatics of longer-term interactive parody. In an email exchange from late August of 2013, the account creator explained:

As for the account name, I keep “Khalifa” for recognition, and I mostly use the part after the “Al” to allude to a contemporary issue [...] It’s a quick way to try and do something funny, especially since I don’t do “funny” profile pictures any more. They took a lot of time.

The “Khalifa Al” pattern the creator describes here is the basis of the names used for the account.<sup>45</sup> It represents a truncated version of a traditional Arabic naming pattern, using just an ism, or personal name, and a laqab, or descriptive surname similar to a nickname. Sometimes this laqab occurs in Arabic, sometimes in English, sometimes it’s the

<sup>44</sup> Months are a convenient unit of time for displaying this information; they are not salient in and of themselves. Also, changes are counted across months; that is, the beginning of a month does not restart the count.

<sup>45</sup> Only one name in the corpus departs significantly from this pattern, “Enemy of the State,” recorded on Sept 27, 2012. At times the “Al” is instead in Arabic script, attached to a word in Arabic script. Very occasionally it is omitted entirely.

username of another account.<sup>46</sup> The naming affordances of Twitter offer presentation and identity opportunities beyond those validated by traditional state authorities. Here, the creator of @SheikhKhalifaPM builds over time an extended name chain evocative of old-fashioned Arab names. Most Arab countries today have adopted a personal name/family name pair for governmental use. Previously, however, names were lengthy chains that included not only isms and laqabs, but also names describing familial descent, progeny, place of origin, and other relationships. @SheikhKhalifaPM thus in a sense recreates this older form since standardized out, in this case ignoring familial relationships to offer parodic nickname after parodic nickname.

The changes in profile photo also manifest a base pattern. Profile photos use an image of the prime minister, photoshopped into a different image. As with the names, there is a duality: stable component is paired with dynamic component. What constitutes the stable component, however, changes. In some cases, select facial features, rather than the PM's entire face, are grafted to a different face. In others, an already photoshopped profile photo serves as the basis for later modification. And despite the creator's declaration, "I don't do "funny" profile pictures any more," the creator does indeed still change the account's profile photo, albeit less frequently than previously.

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<sup>46</sup> The first half of this name represents an ambiguous language form, in that it itself crosses language boundaries to pass as a variety of languages that utilize roman script; it can also be understood as Arabizi, or romanized Arabic. Further, what language to associate with an account name like "SE25A" is unclear, suggesting that it might be best to consider usernames and account names as their own language form, influenced by specific orthographies and linguistic competences but not belonging to traditional languages.

Rather than consider name and photo separately, the stable unit then is the combined name–photo formula, where x and y may index the same reference or different references.

Khalifa Al [descriptor<sub>x</sub>] + *the prime minister's face* {image<sub>y</sub>}

Name, photo, and pair vary in relation to this formula.

Returning to Bakhtin's distinctions between the epic and the novel, the epic in Bakhtin's account is a closed world of past time. The novel, in challenge and contrast, is open and incomplete, sketching through both narration and dialogue positions in society.<sup>47</sup> Authority uses the closed form—it is this that the creator of @SheikhKhalifaPM seeks to challenge in attacking the prime minister's pride—while parody and the novel use the open. And, indeed, parody targets authority in its many guises, introducing openness and indeterminacy into its target. Extending the concept of grammatical aspect to consider the state of completion or determinacy of larger acts of communication, parody triggers aspect shift. What was closed and certain and authoritative becomes open and indeterminate and available for play.

### **Patterns of play**

One of the primary ways the @SheikhKhalifaPM account creates parodic humor is through *indexicality play*. Indexicality play is the intentional entangling of indexicals and their networks to create new, emergent configurations of association. Following Nunberg

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<sup>47</sup> Drawing on Azuma's arguments about database models, we might argue that the novel, in its use of heteroglossia, represents a move toward correspondence, toward a database approach.

(1993), ‘indexical’ is used here to describe elements of a communication that create meaning not through description, but through indication of another context or object. Thus, for example, in the name Khalifa Al كورليونى [kūrlūnī or ‘Corleone’], كورليونى is an indexical used to index greed, money, and nepotism through Mario Puzo’s character of the Godfather.

Indexicals are parts of networks of associations. Sometimes a single indexical can point to multiple indexes at once. Sometimes multiple indexicals work together to point to a single index. Indeed, as Ochs notes when discussing indexicality and socialization, “features of a communicative event may be related to one another in *constitutive* ways, such that certain features help to define or constitute others” (1990, 295, italics in the original).

Indexicality play takes indexicals and their associated networks and combines them with other indexicals and *their* associated networks. This creates new connections and new networks. As associations interact and superpose, some characteristics become less noticeable, some become more. “Play” is used to describe this process—rather than combination or mixing—to underscore the pairing of intentionality and emergence. This merging of networks of associations yields surprising, not entirely predictable results.

In parody, humor arises through the incongruous congruity that indexicality play produces: Things that don’t normally go together, now do. Further, these new combinations somehow make sense. Oring (2003:5) terms this “appropriate incongruity”: an apparent incongruity is associated with some logical “appropriate” frame of understanding, yielding interpretive tension—and humor.

The @SheikhKhalifaPM corpus shows indexicals used to establish different types of association. Some of these types manifest in both name and photo elements, some are specific to name or photo. Types may also be used in conjunction. I offer here a working typology of five common types and then explore these in four example name–photo pairs. The first three types use indexicals of word or image or both to establish direct associations with current events, resonant anchor terms, and fellow Twitter users.

*Responsive*—responding to time-marked events, whether that’s a holiday like Eid or Guy Fawkes Day (Khalifa Al Eid, Khalifa Al Fawkes), or a political event like the launch of the “Bahrain: Capital of Torture” campaign by Bahraini opposition group Al-Wefaq<sup>48</sup> or the sexting scandal of NYC mayoral candidate Anthony Weiner (Khalifa Al تعذيب [‘torture’<sup>49</sup>], Khalifa Al Danger). This type emerges in both name and photo, sometimes but not necessarily in combination.

*Iconic*—use of a strong anchor term, character, or personality to produce ironic inverse, insult, and nonsense. This type pairs modified versions of iconic portraits with names in Arabic script (either transliterated proper names or Arabic lexical items), for example, Khalifa Al أينشتاين [‘āīnshṭāīn or ‘Einstein’] and Khalifa Al أدري [‘adrī or ‘Audrey’].<sup>50</sup> The choice of Western-origin celebrities may reflect the creator’s communicative repertoire, imagined audience, and the pervasiveness of certain forms of pop culture. An alternate form, specific to name play, includes Khalifa AlUnbriable,

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<sup>48</sup> Launched May 8, 2013. <http://alwefaq.net/cms/2013/05/08/19513/> accessed September 4, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Because these examples occur in typed computer-mediated communication, and thus typically carry no sound component, phonetic versions in roman are not provided except for examples of transliteration.

<sup>50</sup> Paired with a modified film still of Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.

Khalifa Al زفت [‘crap’], and Khalifa Al Cucumber; these are paired with profile photos without other direct relationship.

*Co-participant*—adoption of name, profile photo, or both of an interlocutor of the account. Thus, for example, Khalifa Al Penny (@Penny\_G), plus a modified version of Penny’s profile photo; or Khalifa Al SE25A (@SE25A) paired with one of the @SheikhKhalifaPM’s motif profile photos.

At another level, the preceding three types also establish the account as a source that is timely, savvy, and friendly. The fourth and fifth types apply singly to name and profile photo respectively. These types make use of visual style choices, specifically script and repetition.

*Transliteration*—writing an English-language word or phrase, or proper name normally written in roman script, in Arabic script; thus, for example, Khalifa Al سويت هارت [swīt hart or ‘sweetheart’] and Khalifa Al نوت فيري تال [nūt feirī tāl or ‘not very tall’]. This type applies to name play only. Other than proper nouns like Nabeel Rajab and Khalifa Al itself, the corpus contains no examples of transliteration of an Arabic-language word or phrase in roman script. Again, this may reflect the creator’s communicative repertoire, imagined audience, or pervasiveness of English as a lingua franca.

*Motif*—repeating certain visual symbols, that may then be used as a base for further modification. This type applies to image play only. Thus, for example, one of the most frequently used profile photos shows the prime minister in front of a wall of Bahraini bank notes. Another shows him surrounded by flames. These images not only repeat, they are used as foundations for other patterns. For example, an Anonymous mask

was added to the flame-filled profile photo during February and March 2013, and a Santa hat during December 2013.

For the @SheikhKhalifaPM parody account, indexicality play serves not only a humorous function but also an activist function. In uniting languages, scripts, images, and cultural references that span national borders, this mixing implicitly frames the Khalifa regime as a shared problem that requires a shared solution. Mixing practices can be understood as subversive in the Bakhtinian sense of the carnivalesque (1968[1965]): Resultant combinations demand that we find the end of a name in the middle of a visual unit, that we see the glaring graft of one face into another, that we admit incongruous references together. Such combinations turn our worlds upside down and inside out, opening them to fresh exploration.

*Khalifa Al بصل*



*Khalifa Al بصل*

This name–photo pair was used from October 7–12, 2012. Neither the pair nor the name repeats during the corpus. The same photo is used in both the pair preceding this one, and

the pair following it, named Khalifa Al Rajab<sup>51</sup> and Khalifa Al صندل [‘sandal’] respectively.

The name used, Khalifa Al بصل, means Khalifa the Onion. Although at first glance this may seem a nonsense name, this indexical is a responsive type. “بصل” refers to an image that was circulating online at this time that showed Bahraini security officers allegedly in the act of stealing bags of onions. Given the paucity of coverage of Bahrain by Western news media, those who recognize the “بصل” reference will most likely understand Arabic and be familiar with Gulf politics. The use of “بصل” signals the account’s membership in this community and its legitimacy as a critic. Even for those who do not speak Arabic, the use of Arabic script iconically establishes credibility, as it indicates the account draws on Arabic resources.

The profile photo presents a motif. This photo is returned to again and again, given fresh name and occasional modification. It shows the upper part of the head of a man—the prime minister—wearing a keffiyeh. Behind him is a wall of banknotes. Cropped to emphasize the eyes, he stares at us.

From a practical standpoint, it makes sense to use the name element for timely response while retaining a motif in the photo element. As the account creator described, image play requires more resources than name play. Name play can be done directly within a Twitter interface. Image play, on the other hand, requires additional software applications and time.

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<sup>51</sup> Referring to Nabeel Rajab, president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights; during 2012 he was arrested and sentenced to three months imprisonment for an insulting tweet, and then to three years imprisonment on protest-related charges.

It also makes sense from an indexical standpoint: The portrait in front of banknotes broadly indexes greed. This supports and entangles with the narrower indexical *بصل*, or onion, which points to a particular case of theft. The two can be read both together and in conjunction with the other uses of this profile photo. The theft of the onions was under his staring supervision, it was his responsibility. Greed is a persistent motivator for him and his regime, this is just one of numerous examples.

Here, too, we see network aspect: This identity presentation exists as an assembled whole; name and profile photo are treated as configurable parts, open to both change and preservation.

*Khalifa Al* كورليونى



*Khalifa Al* كورليونى

This name-photo pair was used from September 7–14, 2012. It is a unique pair—neither name nor photo appear elsewhere in the corpus. Just prior to this pair was another unique pair: the name *Khalifa Al Thief* in conjunction with an image of the prime minister in

red, white, and blue in the style of Shepard Fairey’s Obama Hope poster, bearing the word “STEAL” rather than “HOPE.” After Khalifa Al كورليوني came Khalifa حبيب الأمة [‘the nation’s beloved’], paired with a modified version of Nirvana’s *Nevermind* album cover; that profile photo remained through two more name iterations.

This profile photo integrates a film still of Marlon Brando as the fictional Godfather Don Vito Corleone and a portrait of the prime minister, the seams of its digital manipulation evident around the eyes and nose. The name is Khalifa Al كورليوني [*kūrīlūnī* or ‘Corleone’]. Both name and photo thus directly connect the prime minister and the character of the Godfather. In contrast to the Khalifa Al بصل example, this profile photo communicates the reference, so the ability to read Arabic isn’t necessary for comprehension. However, the writing of Corleone in Arabic script amplifies the association with an Arab context, alters addressivity, and signals credibility.

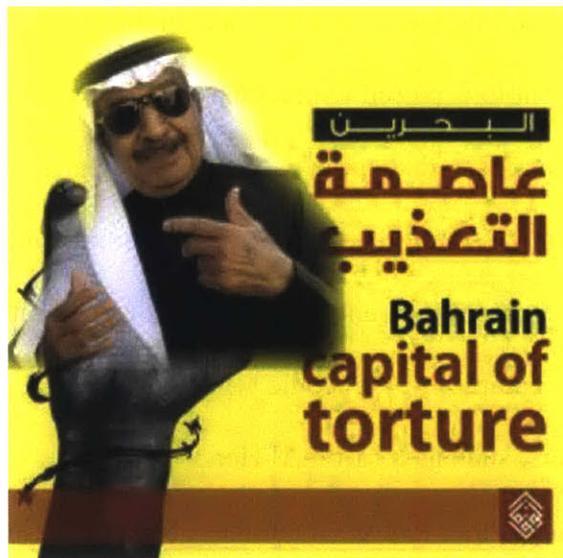
This example thus includes both iconic and transliteration indexical types, with profile photo and name indexing the same reference. In the corpus, every example of an iconic portrait as profile photo is paired with a matching indexical in the name element. The reverse is not true. Names in the iconic pattern may be paired with profile photos that index different references. This suggests that the use of certain types of image can govern name choice. However, such government is not absolute constraint; transliteration play remains possible. Some examples of the iconic type, like Khalifa Al كورليوني, involve transliteration while others, such as Khalifa Al Hendrix, do not.

The icon of the Godfather indexes a number of elements, including organized crime, family, corruption, and violence. At another level, as a Hollywood classic, it also indexes Americanness and the manufactured reality of the cinema. Parody uses

indexicality play to challenge authority and renegotiate social power. Indexicality play creates new networks of meaningful association—here through the twofold entangling of prime minister and Godfather in name and profile photo. Indexicality play also triggers aspect shift. In particular, it changes states of closed completion into states of open reconfigurability.

Authority is acquired through association with a closed world of past time, whether socially marked in lineage or legend, education or religion. Like Bakhtin's novel, parody is not only open and incomplete itself, it introduces openness and indeterminacy into its target. Completed wholes are broken into reconfigurable parts. One pair of eyes is replaced with a second set, skin differences blotchy, seams visible—and the inviolability of both prime minister and Godfather vanishes.

*Khalifa Al Cucumber*



*Khalifa Al Cucumber*

This name–photo pair was used from May 30 – June 17, 2013. The profile photo

combines an image of the prime minister with an image from the Bahrain: Capital of Torture campaign launched by Bahraini opposition group Al-Wefaq. The campaign ran from May 8–16, 2013, to correspond with the intended visit of the UN’s Special Rapporteur on torture.<sup>52</sup> During the campaign, many individuals changed their Twitter profile photos to the unaltered campaign image. The use of both Arabic and English in the campaign image resonates with the @SheikhKhalifaPM’s mixings of the two. In both cases, the combinations point to imagined or intended audiences.

This photo also appears in both the preceding and subsequent name–photo pairs; the name Khalifa Al Cucumber is actually the fourth in a series of five names linked to the photo:

Khalifa Al تعذيب [‘torture’]  
 Khalifa Al Honest  
 Khalifa Al Nuts  
 Khalifa Al Cucumber  
 Khalifa Al خيار [‘cucumber’]

Khalifa Al خيار represents a modified form of name continuity, with a shift from English to Arabic. After one day paired with this modified campaign image, the name Khalifa Al خيار continues for an additional two days paired with a black and white propaganda poster in which the prime minister’s features have been grafted to Hitler’s face, captioned “BIG BROTHER is watching you.”

Khalifa Al Cucumber, unlike Khalifa Al يصل, is primarily a nonsense name.

When asked about the name, the account creator explained:

I’m not entirely sure how I ended up with “cucumber”. I don’t think it referred to a specific event or idea. I remember HRH being called it a few

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<sup>52</sup> <http://alwefaq.net/cms/2013/05/08/19513/> accessed September 6, 2014. The visit was canceled by the Bahraini government.

times by followers, so I just used it as a gentle put-down. I then switched to خيار because I thought it sounded funnier in Arabic. And of course more disrespectful when used to refer to a royal prince like uncle Khalifa.

This explanation highlights the importance of interlocutors in creating Twitter parody.

Twitter parody is collaboratively constructed, shaped by its interactions. The cucumber is a “gentle put-down,” a nonsense insult already in use among the account’s followers.

This name–photo pair thus demonstrates both responsive and iconic indexical types. Technically, the photo is similar to the Khalifa Al كورليوني example: a single smaller image representing the prime minister has been added to a larger contextual image. The borders of the prime minister’s image have been made transparent, but no additional image manipulation is evident. Unlike the Khalifa Al كورليوني example, however, this profile photo repeats like the motif photo seen in the Khalifa Al بصل example.

The profile photo creates humor through the incongruity of the prime minister’s pose and sunglasses and the campaign. Indexically, this combination points to casual indifference to torture. The name Khalifa Al Cucumber contributes buffoonery to the mix through additional incongruity. This example’s change sequence underscores the importance of considering element choices as interconnected rather than as existing in isolation. Initially name and photo deploy responsive indexicals that point to the Al-Wefaq campaign, with the name in Arabic. While the photo continues to reflect the campaign, the name shifts to English and inverses, insults, and nonsense, and then back to Arabic. This time the language shift doesn’t change the indexical type. Not only does the name continue to use a nonsense indexical, it is the Arabic twin of the preceding English name.

The account creator describes the Arabic Khalifa Al خيار as “funnier.” This resonates with a long history of language ideologies in which specific languages are characterized as conducive for particular social functions, with ideologies varying in relation to an individual language user’s communicative competence and origin point. This change sequence, however, suggests that in graphic contexts, such shifting between languages can also be understood as visual modulation of tone. For those able to read both English and Arabic, this change is not dissimilar to switching to all caps in roman for emphasis.

This change sequence also offers a more detailed elaboration of patterns visible in table 1. Names and profile photos are intertwined in identity presentation, but also have different rates of change. The parts of network aspect don’t necessarily share the same traits of configurability.

*Khalifa Al Penny*



*Khalifa Al Penny*

This name–photo pair was used from October 15–16, 2012. Name and photo changed simultaneously—in both the preceding and subsequent name–photo pair, the profile photo is that of the cropped head with banknotes seen in the Khalifa Al بصل example; the corresponding names are Khalifa Al نعمة [‘blessing’] and Khalifa Al متقف [‘cultured’].

This is an example of the co-participant pattern. The name Khalifa Al Penny references the @Penny\_G account, run by Penny, a sympathetic interlocutor of the @SheikhKhalifaPM account. @Penny\_G is a personal account; its creator self-describes as “Working for Freedom & Justice.” The manatee image was @Penny\_G’s profile photo at the time.<sup>53</sup> Both name and photo thus iconically reference the @Penny\_G account. The profile photo is used in one other instance, on September 23, 2012 in a series of four profile photos linked to the name Khalifa Taj Raskum. The name Khalifa Al Penny is not found anywhere else in the corpus. “Penny” is written in roman script, as it is in @Penny\_G’s account; only one script appears in this name.<sup>54</sup>

This name–photo pair is similar to the Khalifa Al كورليونى example, as well as the initial Khalifa Al تعذيب in the Khalifa Al Cucumber change sequence, in that it uses matched indexicals in name and photo. Both name and photo in this pair, however, associate the prime minister with a public but personal referent. In order to recognize the references of name and photo, a user must be familiar not only with the @SheikhKhalifaPM account, but also with its exchanges.

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<sup>53</sup> The manatee remains as the foundation for the account’s profile photo, though it has been modified. The red line seen here is part of the @Penny\_G’s profile photo, not an additional by the @SheikhKhalifaPM creator. The @Penny\_G account no longer includes the phrase “Working for Freedom & Justice” in its bio; that was present as of November 16, 2012. Current bio, using similar language, can be read here: [https://twitter.com/Penny\\_G](https://twitter.com/Penny_G).

<sup>54</sup> Arguably this is still codemixing between Arabizi and English, however, given the different phonological–orthographic pairs evident.

Twitter's varying degrees of publicness mean that direct exchanges between the two accounts—exchanges that begin with “@SheikhKhalifaPM” or “@Penny\_G”—are visible in only a limited set of circumstances:

- exchanges appear in the timelines of direct participants;
- exchanges appear in other users' timelines if those users follow both accounts;
- exchanges are partially visible on the profile page of each direct participant—the profile page of the participant displays the tweets from *that* participant, but not from the other unless a user clicks on a tweet to expand its conversation context;
- exchanges are partially visible if a tweet appears in another conversation, for example through the use of a hashtag; again, as with the profile page, the exchange will only be displayed if a user clicks on a tweet to expand its conversation context;
- exchanges are visible to all of an account's followers if retweeted by that account.

These references thus point beyond the particular @Penny\_G account and to the larger community the @SheikhKhalifaPM account inhabits. The intimacy of the references tacitly acknowledges the work interlocutors do in creating Twitter parody. Two weeks after this example, the account referenced a number of other interlocutors through names paired with motif profile photos.

Personal indexicals like these differ importantly from references to famous personalities or characters, for they are addressed to the people indicated. As a result, an indexical not only points to its index, it meets it. Frequent interlocutors of the account are familiar with the account's normal name and photo practices. This frame of address thus changes the focus of indexicality play from the prime minister to the @SheikhKhalifaPM account itself.

At one level a new network of associations between the prime minister, manatees, and Penny emerges. There is humor in the incongruity of the manatee–prime minister chimera of the profile photo. But neither manatee nor Penny is likely to be indexically meaningful more broadly. For people less familiar with the account, this will appear as impervious nonsense—play that can be recognized as such but cannot be resolved into Oring’s appropriate incongruity (2003). At another level, it is the @SheikhKhalifaPM account and the @Penny\_G account that are meaningfully entangled. Two Twitter identity presentations are merged for the amusement of their shared community.

This example points to the flexibility and richness of indexicality play: indexicality play can operate on multiple levels simultaneously. Indeed, one of indexicality play’s great strengths is that it can cut across scales, mixing the intimate and personal with the global and political.

### **Insights and patterns**

This examination of name and profile photos of the @SheikhKhalifaPM account has yielded a number of insights on the use of indexicality play in Twitter parody:

First, in indexicality play that presents visually, indexical associations of image and language need to be considered together. Image and language are entangled semiotic systems. Both names and profile photos draw meaning from the visual and the signifying. Further, they are used in intentional conjunction and sequence.

Second, types of associations vary. Some indexical relationships are broad and support many interpretations, some are narrow and support fewer; some manifest with co-indexicals, some govern possible co-indexicals; some are standard and widely

recognized, some are personal and recognized by only a few. They navigate, too, different timeframes; fresh associations are used differently than established associations.

Third, indexicality play only supports certain combinations of indexical types. Iconic portraits overwhelmingly co-occurred with names that pointed to the same reference; name play in these instances was limited to practices like transliteration. The co-participant pattern, with its personal referents, either matched name and photo to the same reference, or paired name with a recurring motif photo. A responsive profile photo with a co-participant name or an iconic portrait with a responsive name would be unlikely.

Fourth, change sequences influence type combinations. Indexicality play doesn't occur in isolation—not only does it connect various referential networks together, it also exists within associations established in time and sequence.

Fifth, formal elements—name, profile photo, etc.—can have element-specific indexical types. Transliteration as a form of indexicality play requires writing. The repetition of certain visual motifs requires imagery. While it is possible for a profile photo to contain writing that is then modified via transliteration, or for a name to use character sets as visual motifs, neither possibility manifested in this corpus. Formal elements then, appear to exercise guiding restraint on indexical types.

This chapter offers indexicality play as an alternative and additional lens of analysis to recontextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990). Recontextualization describes the process of situating a text in a new context; the relationship of the text to this new context affects its overall meaning. For recontextualization to occur, a text must first be identifiable and extractable. This happens through the process of entextualization, in

which a text acquires boundaries to become a recognizable whole. Text and context thus inhabit a figure–ground relationship, defined and defining each other—and redefining each other when one is altered.<sup>55</sup> Indexicality play, on the other hand, emphasizes the intentional entangling of associations, emergent networks of meaning, and the reconfigurability of parts. Recontextualization and indexicality play thus operate in different modes of unit, sequence, and aspect.

A number of the examples discussed here can also be profitably investigated through the lens of recontextualization. Thus, for example, some transliteration play can be understood as recontextualization through script shifting. Similarly, recontextualization can be a useful analytic frame for exploring profile photos that draw on iconic portraits as many such profile photos unite only two primary sources, with one of those (the iconic portrait) contributing considerably more material than the other, pointing to a possible figure–ground relationship.

### **Final thoughts**

Bakhtin (1984) describes parody as a form of double-voicing; for @SheikhKhalifaPM the double is the paired voice of the account creator and the account persona. As discussed in chapter 2, The Account-Person, Twitter parody joins a wealth of examples from around the world that demonstrate the complexity of roles in the production of expression. (In sum: though speech is ideologically assumed by many in the US and elsewhere to belong

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<sup>55</sup> It's important to note that Bauman and Briggs warn against reifying context; rather, they argue for using textual details to understand participants' co-construction of context (1990:69). The dichotomy of text-context represents a theoretical frame, not specific manifestations of either.

to one person, in actual practice speech is collaboratively created.) Here, though, I want to think about parody and listening—or, more to the point, double-listening.

Crapanzano (1991) has pointed out that much discussion and scholarship on expression assumes that the people involved remain constant and unchanging throughout an interaction or series of interactions. This assumption stands in stark contrast to experiences of learning, whether formal or informal, and yet is often implied and unexamined in ideas of information circulation. Parody—and humor more broadly—directly contradicts assumptions of static states. Whether deemed clever or egregious, parody regularly provokes laughter, groans, and eye rolls—all state-changing events. The process of parody, however, also requires a distinct form of listening. And it is this combination of speech and listening that is so frightening to authority.<sup>56</sup> Listening to a parody account, attending to two voices at once and recognizing nuance, not only injects indeterminacy into the previously closed, it yields a different kind of criticality. It creates a familiarity with layers and complexity and makes searching for more meaning a more customary process—even, I suggest, a norm.

The creator of @SheikhKhalifaPM started the account as a way to “do something” in response to the Bahraini government’s brutality. Just as bureaucratic paperwork is an exercise of obedience and hierarchy, parody is an exercise of comparison and change. It involves recognizing multiples: an original and a modified version, a collection of parts and their assembly instructions. It thus encourages people to listen

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<sup>56</sup> While this chapter has discussed authority in the context of governmental authority, attempts to control the stability of meaning are not, of course, solely enjoined by governmental authorities. Rather, as Coombe (1998) has detailed, it is at the heart of corporate battles over intellectual property and, I would argue, one of many tactics for coopting authority.

more deeply, to attend to connections and nuance. It offers complexity and openness—both of which challenge authority in its hegemonic presentations.

We'll return to many of these points in chapter 3, Warranting Parody, when we examine how governmental authorities have sought to control parody accounts. While this chapter has focused on parody in its modern, negative critique form, in the next chapter we turn to parody in all its exuberant glory. We will shift from detailed analysis of a single parody account to consider instead how parody accounts—and Twitter accounts more broadly—allow fresh exploration and re-creation of personhood. Throughout, however, the mechanisms of indexicality play, aspect shift, and network aspect continue to undergird the work that parody does.

## Chapter 2

### The Account-Person

“*Purupuru*,” murmurs @purinpurupuru31 aka プリン bot (*purinbot* or “pudding bot”), onomatopoeia for soft, pudding-ish jiggling. A friendly pudding of the crème caramel variety, Pudding Bot shows a bright yellow face to the world.<sup>57</sup> With childlike enthusiasm—and occasional moments of childlike confusion—Pudding Bot extolls the deliciousness and health benefits of pudding. “*Pururururururu*,” Pudding Bot jiggles to more than 4000 followers, cannibalistically encouraging everyone to eat more pudding. In honor of pudding, Pudding Bot makes pudding art, writes pudding poetry, and shares real-life discoveries of “pudding juice” in vending machines as well as photos of attempts to make pudding from strawberry milk. Here is a pudding atop Mt. Fuji, here is a beefcake model whose head has been replaced by pudding, here is a Putin-pudding chimera, inspired by the similarity of the two words in Japanese.<sup>58</sup> Pucchinpurin, the popular pudding brand marked by the flower shape its container imprints on the dark caramel layer of the pudding, is Pudding Bot’s sempai and role model. Chatty and

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<sup>57</sup> The profile image resembles, to a certain extent, Sanrio’s character Pompompurin, a golden retriever who resembles in turn a, yes, pudding. But this is a superficial resemblance; @purinpurupuru31 doesn’t use images from or references to Pompompurin to position itself. Nor do its interlocutors bring up Pompompurin. “Pucchinpurin sempai” mentioned in the account bio refers to “Pucchinpurin,” a brand of pudding widely sold in Japan, a crème caramel pudding marked by the flower shape its container imprints on the dark caramel layer of the pudding. However, while the account sometimes tweets discoveries of “pudding juice,” or pudding-flavored drinks discovered in vending machines, it does not draw on the iconic flower design of Pucchinpurin to engage in subtle capitalist critique.

<sup>58</sup> In Japanese, Putin is “*puchin*,” which in turn resembles the popular *Pucchinpurin* brand of pudding, aka Pudding Bot’s sempai.

cheerful, Pudding Bot spends more time tweeting particular users—wishing them good morning or celebrating the delights of pudding—than tweeting to all followers. Pudding Bot doesn't use the “@” syntax, traditionally used to send a tweet directed to a particular account also to all followers. Pudding Bot isn't aiming to show off clever puddingness. Pudding Bot is just, fundamentally, a friendly pudding.

Except, of course, Pudding Bot isn't. I'm not suggesting malicious intent or a Machiavellian scheme motivates Pudding Bot's actions. Rather, that there is a multiple here, a curious elision of account and person. The preceding description located Pudding Bot throughout as a primary actor. When reading it, did you question the agency described? Perhaps you did. I would suggest, however, that many if not most do not. And indeed, most people—you likely included—when asked if an observable, edible, squishable pudding controls @purinpurupuru31, would emphatically reject the idea.<sup>59</sup> However, the words, character, and persona of Pudding Bot seduce human attention, distracting us and persuading us to suspend disbelief.

Ironically, it is this need to suspend disbelief with an account like @purinpurupuru31 that makes parody accounts ideal for surfacing elisions of account and person. Nonparody accounts don't demand such clear suspensions of disbelief. They still happen, but they are fuzzy and questioned. The boundaries between a named identity and the account are less clear, with the account seeming a voice extension of the

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<sup>59</sup> At the same time, as Willerslev describes in the context of the Yukagir hunters who take on the personhood of their prey (2007), the Pudding Bot is somehow not *not* a pudding.

former—almost a prosthesis of sorts.<sup>60</sup> However, Twitter, like many other social media platforms, doesn't require account identities to correspond to either identities validated by state authority structures (e.g., officially registered names) or other forms of regulated personally identifiable information (e.g., phone numbers). This facilitates play and experimentation. It also obscures changes occurring in what qualifies as personhood—changes underway throughout social media.

This chapter argues that Twitter use produces *account-persons*, cyborgs that emerge from different conjunctions of human and code. The account-person resonates with other hybrid forms of personhood, both of longstanding and of more recent evolution, from the Siberian Yukaghirs, who take on the personhood of prey animals in addition to their own human personhood during hunts (Willerslev 2007), to the ensoulment of anime characters through the *naka no hito* (person inside) effacement of human voice actors (Nozawa 2016). In its nonhuman elements it resonates, too, with broader forms of nonhuman personhood, from the technological and corporate, such as technoanimism in Japan (Allison 2006b) and corporations in the US legal system and others, to the organic, from glaciers among the Athapaskan and Tlingit (Cruikshank 2005) to maize among the Rincón Zapotec (González 2001). Fundamental here is the idea that, as Willerslev puts it, “personhood is not the manifest form of humankind; rather, humans are one of many outward forms of persons” (2007:86). Personhood emerges through relationships.

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<sup>60</sup> This has been used by bad actors to deceive and distort; some instances of such deception have been caught and called out; thus, for example, #YourSlipIsShowing. (See <https://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhatetesthis/your-slip-is-showing-4chan-trolls-operation-lollipop> for more information on that instance.)

Person and personhood have been understood through various means. Linguists, from traditional Arab grammarians to their student Benveniste, offer us grammatical person, emerging out of distinctions among the person who speaks, the person who is addressed, and the person who is not there (Arabic enjoys, among other grammatical delights, what is referred to as an invisible personal pronoun). Legal regimes around the world allocate rights and responsibilities across categories of natural persons and artificial, persons and nonpersons. Historians offer us biographies, a genre built on de facto assumptions of personhood, where person, life, and agency intertwine. Fiction writers and graphic designers offer us characters, imaginations of personhood that both draw from and challenge the physical world.

Personhood on Twitter both resembles and differs from all of these approaches. Twitter frames itself, and is broadly understood, through voice. The political aspects of voice—its associations with democracy, freedom of expression, and public spheres—intermingle with a platform structure in which voice is contact, presence, product, and sellable data. One person, one vote slips into one person, one voice. Expression, intention, and impersonation—all of which entangle with personhood—remain enduring concerns of the Twitter platform (we'll return to these later in chapter 5, *The Social Media Contract*.) The Twitter account is standardized as the expressive extension of the individual. This emerges in account design consistently centered around an idea of an individual user, in media accounts that treat tweets as direct quotes from the name attached to the account. One step further and the account becomes entangled with the person. “Me? I’m shrapnelofme.”

Underlying these are ideologies of voice that frame voice as an individual possession. The account becomes a deictic frame, a context that by default defines an “I.” Though not impossible, it is difficult to use an account and sidestep the embedded design of singular first person perspective. @purinpurupuru31 mixes first and third person with its onomatopoeia, akin to @SelfAwareROOMBA’s “whirrrrs.” Politicians challenge the singularity of the embedded perspective with signed tweets mixed among unsigned staff tweets. Collective accounts such as @sweden offer similar challenge, through different means, hosting a different “I” each week. Quotebots or accounts like @RealTimeWWII, which tweets historical WWII data, offer a third-person perspective. While some languages have stronger options for sidestepping person—Japanese, for example, doesn’t mark person in its verbs, and marks a non-first person by using suffixes like -san, -kun, and -sama—the first-person perspective remains the norm.<sup>61</sup>

This is not specific to Twitter. Media technologies have long striven to create seamless connections, to hide themselves and allow those who are mediated to imagine the elimination of distance or time (see, for example, Eisenlohr 2011a). This is a soft magic trick, an illusion of sorts that guides technological development. The noise of phone lines must be eliminated; music recordings must have the highest of fidelity; screens and printers must be as sharp as possible; user-centered design must be implemented. Technology and effort are disappeared, connection is exalted.

Parody, by its nature, wrinkles this seamlessness. Parody accounts showcase, boast, and revel in their seams. Parody accounts are multiple voices seamed together, an explicit seaming of voices, intended to be recognized. Seams are a funny thing: Seeing a

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<sup>61</sup> In Japanese, for example, this manifests through use of words and syntax related to concepts such as like, want, etc.

single seam tears the illusion of seamlessness. And when that illusion is torn, suspension of disbelief—that willingness to play along, unquestioning—erodes and suddenly it becomes easier to see other seams. It's part of why parody is so often delightful: it simultaneously reveals the magic trick of both its target and its system. And suddenly the fact of double naming, present in all Twitter accounts, with their username (@purinpurupuru31) and account name (プリン bot) pairing—a pair that is, not unrelatedly difficult to discuss due to a lack of clear nomenclature for distinguishing between the two<sup>62</sup>—becomes newly visible. Parody's double voicing sits atop platform's double naming.

What can we see about person and personhood on Twitter if we set aside Pudding Bot, the cheerful, encouraging pudding that overflows with pro-pudding sentiment, and instead look closely at @purinpurupuru31? One dimension that becomes apparent is the different type of entity that the username and account name pair makes possible. While @purinpurupuru31 is specific and unique, プリン bot is not. That is, プリン bot is a generic category. In some ways this is the reverse of interacting with named people, dogs, cats, etc. face to face: the physical configuration specifies the generic category, the name the individual, with various group membership markers included. The individual human may share that name with countless others (particularly if you have a name like Johnson or Jones), or a much smaller set. The username is system unique, though it too can be used to signal various group memberships, as we'll see. Specific name thus comes first, with generic and specific possibilities after. Though this may seem a small difference, it points to a fundamentally different construction of number with relation to personhood.

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<sup>62</sup> Also the reason I use usernames with the '@' symbol prominent throughout this dissertation.

Another dimension that becomes visible is the position @purinpurupuru31 has chosen. Bakhtin (1981) argues that the novel is a supremely open form due to heteroglossia, its mixing of voices that index different social positions. Personhood is itself a position. Personhood also includes positions within it. @purinpurupuru31 is a manual bot (Johnson forthcoming). This is a category often explicitly labeled in Japanese-language Twitter (though not in this case) that shares the parody account category; it builds on the standard—that is, automated or non-manual—Twitter bot. Bots, which are common on Twitter, come with expectations regarding interaction capabilities, predictability, nonhumanness, etc. A human or humans tweeting manually from the position of a bot brings these expectations into their social interactions.

The fluidity and flexibility of position have long served to distinguish among sociocultural systems. Twitter offers different configurations of position. While background continues to play a filtering role and there are, of course, plural sociocultural systems within Twitter, also important is the Twitter system itself: its scale; its different official and unofficial categories of Twitter accounts, ranging from verified accounts to parody accounts to bot accounts; and its privileging of voice to the near exclusion of other forms of presence. Stop for a moment and consider the classic, automated bot account and the parody account. Which is more personal? That this question means anything at all reveals something of how personhood on Twitter is ideologically constructed, and that certain performances/animations of identity are more personal than others. Ideologies of person mix with practices of person embedded into the Twitter system.

In “Footing” (1981) Goffman argues that speech entails a participation framework more complicated and nuanced than the stereotypical speaker–listener dyad and a multi-role production format often obscured by simplistic assumptions about communication. The roles of the production format— animator, author, and principal, among other possibilities—can be variously distributed across people. In brief, the animator utters or expresses, the author selects and composes expressions, and the principal commits to/is committed to the expressions (144). Political speech, for example, might involve a spokesperson (animator), a scriptwriter (author), and a candidate or official (principal). While the three roles can be united in the same entity, they also need not be. Considerable evidence across cultures shows that, indeed, such roles often are not. (E.g., Irvine 1996 on Wolof insult poems; Keane 1991 on marriage alliances among the Anakalang; et al.)

The involvement of media technologies complicates this further. Thus, for example, Gershon (2010a) highlights that collaborative creation can be involved even in the simple acts of interpreting and composing SMS (see also, Manning and Gershon 2013). Similarly Hull (2012), writing on bureaucratic paperwork in Islamabad, notes that collective authorship of paper files disperses individual accountability and is one reason employees resist shifting to an electronic system. Crapanzano (1991) notes that individuals change over the course of a communicative interaction, that they shouldn’t be assumed stable, fixed actors.

The Twitter account commands an interesting role. From one perspective, an account acts as a Goffmanian animator, with the person or people who communicate through it its authors. But the account exists at the intersection of human and platform, making it a hybrid offspring of both its direct (or indirect) human authors and its

platform's programming authors. Additionally, as Androutsopoulos (2011) points out, an online space like a social media platform juxtaposes differently authored voices, leading to an emergent heteroglossia. From this perspective, the platform itself becomes an animator, with the account serving either as an additional animator or author. The account, then, is a cyborg, seaming human and machine together as invisibly as possible.

The Twitter platform, where accounts elide with people, thus asks us to think about account-persons. This chapter explores five important dimensions in conjunction with the account-person: number, body, position, world, and time. We've touched briefly on number and position with Pudding Bot already.

This focus on the account-person is necessarily incomplete. Other pieces and systems influence the construction and performance of personhood within Twitter accounts. These range from the sociocultural systems and intimate relationships of people involved in creating accounts to elements like the use of typed scripts to communicate. Thus, for example, the childishness of Pudding Bot comes through in part through use of kana rather than kanji,<sup>63</sup> a choice only available to graphic text and language systems with more than one script in use. *Purupuru*.

In a moment we shall move on to a detailed discussion of the first of these dimensions, number. First, however, let me introduce you to our primary set of accounts. There are ten of them. You've already met @purinpurupuru31/Pudding Bot. Unlike the introduction, this chapter focuses primarily on accounts for which I have not interviewed the account creator(s), in order to examine the account-person as undistracted by "inside"

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<sup>63</sup> Thus, for example, the account sometimes using hiragana to spell out even basic kanji like 食 ("eat" or "food," a character Japanese children are expected to master in second grade). Overall, the simplicity of the language and the use of the graphic tweets makes it an account easy to understand.

knowledge as possible—such knowledge, like the humorous tweets, distracts and obscures the account-person, emphasizing the human and hiding the seams.

### *Dramatis Personae*

**@purinpurupuru31/プリン bot (Pudding Bot)**—a Japanese-language manual bot, cheerful pudding

**@CommonWhiteGirl/Common White Girl**—an English-language networked account, meme of blandness and superficiality

**@DJHabibi2000/DJ Habibi 2000**—an English-language account spun off from another media channel, self-absorbed and bling-obsessed DJ, Dubai stereotype

**@\_El\_haram/الههم (El Haram)**—an Arabic-language account, sarcastic Egyptian voice

**@popcornman\_bot/ポップコーン男 (Popcornman)**—a Japanese-language semi-manual bot, half-man half-popcorn character from the film industry's anti-piracy campaign

**@MesozoicPolk/Mesozoic Polk**—an English-language account, local organization seeking to reinstate the dinosaur era in San Francisco

**@ArabicRonaldo/Cristiano Ronaldo**—an Arabic-language account, famous Portuguese footballer for Real Madrid

**@FakeBakari/bakaribrook**—an English-language account, former Twitter employee Bakari Brock

**@zibumitunari/石田三成 (Mitsunari Ishida)**—a Japanese-language account, famous samurai from the Sengoku era

**@\_WashingMachine/THE WASHING MACHINE**—an English-language account, surly domestic appliance

#### *Additional players:*

Reader (you)

Writer (me)

Assorted Twitter accounts and scholars

Mediating device, likely of screen or paper

## Number

Number is a deceptively simple concept, so simple that it's difficult to explain, difficult even to think about. In languages, number marks countability. Often we think of this in terms of singulars and plurals, denoted differently across nouns, adjectives, and verbs.<sup>64</sup>

Number also describes *how* things are counted—the units and scale of counting. Number intersects with categories like gender and animacy; which category takes precedence, when, varies with language. Number is, moreover, a characteristic that sometimes calls for agreement and sometimes does not.

Consider English. Number is marked through singulars and plurals on nouns and verbs but not adjectives. Gender is marked by pronouns; the singular *he*, *she*, and *it* all match to the same third person singular verb form.<sup>65</sup> *It*, English's third person neuter/inanimate, can encompass plural nouns but yet typically matches to the third person singular verb form. *They*, currently undergoing much needed semantic expansion, collapses gender but retains animacy. Modern Standard Arabic includes singular, dual, and plural forms of nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Plural inanimate nouns, however, are matched to singular feminine adjectives and verbs. Japanese doesn't, as general rule, mark plural—or gender or animacy—directly on nouns, adjectives, or verbs. Rather, plurals are indicated by separate counter words, specific to the category being counted (e.g., machines, animals, humans, as well as long items, booklike items, etc.).

Number has consequences for how we view the world. Verran (2001) describes a slow kindling surprise at realizing the Yoruba do not understand number as *one/many*

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<sup>64</sup> Nouns, adjectives, and verbs is a simplification here; not all languages have constructions that match neatly to these categories.

<sup>65</sup> And, increasingly, a gender-unspecified “they” is used as singular.

counting, but rather through a part/whole relationship. Porter (1995) examines the rise of quantitative methodologies—what we might think of as a number ideology that conflates number and countability with truth-as-objective-information in opposition to human variance—as a prestige variant<sup>66</sup> for investigating and communicating about the modern world.

Number figures (sorry, bad pun) into communicative interaction as well. As mentioned earlier, Goffman (1981) argues against the stereotypical speaker–listener communication dyad, highlighting instead a larger participation framework involving ratified and unratified participants, and a production format that involves multiple roles which can be variously distributed across people. Studies of mediated communication similarly highlight disparities between expectations or ideologies of number and actual number involved. Communication ideologies can at times collapse or obscure these roles, causing people to unconsciously assume unity and treat examples such as actors uttering lines from scripts or politicians speaking on behalf of their country as exceptional.<sup>67</sup> Drawing on examples from puppetry, Silvio (2010) argues that we should embrace an animation trope in addition to the performance trope that has been widespread in media and language scholarship for the last 50 years or so. One of the great values of doing so is that animation fundamentally questions number assumptions of 1:1 correspondence.

I want to discuss here a different intersection of number, language, and communication, the various number categories a person can be on Twitter. Twitter parody accounts—social media accounts more broadly—are nonexclusive, simultaneous,

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<sup>66</sup> My use of the term.

<sup>67</sup> Even face-to-face dyads, which can seem to display unity across all three, are influenced by prior rehearsal, represented interests, the use of speech formulae and trendy phrases, etc.

plural, and partial. There is no 1:1 correspondence, from any angle, between accounts and humans, despite implicit assumptions of such. Aligning with Gershon's work (2010a), Twitter parody accounts are at times run by multiple humans. Thus, for example, @Old\_Man\_Gloom (Zozobra, an effigy burnt each year in Santa Fe) is run by a pair of friends, as is @DPRK\_News (DPRK News Service, a parodic version of North Korea's official news). Sharing an account with trusted friends can trigger continued creativity and activity. Other collective configurations are possible as well. @Sports\_Father (Sports Dad) is voiced by an LA comedian advised by a social media manager. @nora\_b\_fitzyroy (NORAB), though run directly by a single human, emerged after a discussion on a Slack channel devoted to urbanism and YIMBYism, which included other humans running parody accounts with urbanist perspectives of the Bay Area.

A less desirable version of multiple humans running an account occurs when an account is hacked, as was @ArabicRonaldo (Cristiano Ronaldo, the famous footballer; we'll return to this parody account later in this chapter). In such cases the "collaboration" is often sequential and later erased. Similarly, while the discussion in the urbanist Slack channel yielded the creation of @nora\_b\_fitzyroy, discussions on other platforms are also used to organize raids and dogpiling—intentional, multi-account attacks on a Twitter account or accounts. The number assumptions built into Twitter's design, its presumption of the 1:1 correspondence and a singular account creator, is part of what has hindered Twitter's ability to counter organized bad actors.

Humans may also run multiple accounts. It is rare that a parody account is a human's first Twitter account. Discourse about parody accounts abounds across platforms and channels. (The genre is so well-recognized that "parody account" alone

suggests Twitter unless some other context is explicitly referenced.) This includes circulation of particularly notable tweets, directions for making parody accounts, lists of parody accounts, and, of course, media articles enchanted or dismayed by particular parody accounts and the entanglements in which they are involved. That said, conversations with parody account creators suggest that the decision to create a parody account typically occurs after using Twitter via at least one more standard account.

The creator of @SheikhKhalifaPM (currently named Khalifa Al Swamp) confided running an additional parody account to use as a conversational partner and foil. Many of the various comedian- and writer-run parody accounts, such as @broodingYAhero, explicitly cite the Twitter account of the creator (e.g., @writer\_carrie) in their bios, with the accounts openly retweeting each other as well as sometimes engaging in conversation. Creators who make what we might think of as hyperlocal accounts—pegged to a specific conference or moment, with short life cycles or long hibernation periods—will often make more than one such account and may create a mixture of parody accounts and automated bot accounts. A similar multiplicity can be seen in automated bot accounts across languages. Code is typically collaboratively created. Account creators often make more than one bot account, sometimes signing the bios of these accounts with another Twitter account positioned as the authorial identity. While the parody accounts and bot accounts this research examines mainly focus on creative functions, this same number mismatch can be turned to harassment, spam marketing, or propaganda. It offers a means for a small number of humans to appear much greater, a human version of the porcupine that bristles its quills, the puffer fish that blows itself up.

Consequently, when deployed, it reads as larger and more capable than it is, which in turn grants it power.

More broadly, the number of Twitter accounts one has relates to local norms, with “local” having many possible definitions. Having more than one Twitter account is common among Japanese-language Twitter users,<sup>68</sup> with users commanding a mixture of public and private accounts, both to control for different audiences and to have a backup or overflow account in the event of rate-limiting<sup>69</sup>—a very real concern, given that even public Japanese-language accounts often appear to be chattier, engaging in more phatic exchanges, than those in other languages. There’s even a special category for one type of account in this mix, the 裏アカウント or *ura akawunto* or hidden account; a student might have, for example, a private *ura* account that includes only the people she trusts without question. Sudden discovery of such accounts by loved ones is the subject of much angst and advice on help forums.

In a sense, though, all of the preceding are the obvious examples of mismatches between number ideologies and assumptions and actual practices. If you have a Twitter account, you know that the only external component needed to start a Twitter account is an email address, which are plentiful. You may know someone who has both a public and a private account. You may have encountered any one of the examples listed above, of shared accounts, of accounts acting in tandem. I want to introduce two less obvious consequences. Let’s call them the generic and the lots.

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<sup>68</sup> A former Twitter employee told me privately that internal research shows that Japanese-language users have more accounts per person than other language groups.

<sup>69</sup> Designed as an anti-spam measure, accounts are limited to a certain number of tweets/hour, though the number of tweets allowed has changed over the years. In the event that users hit the limit, they are unable to tweet again until the time period ends.

*The generic, the uncountable*

In writing of @purinpurupuru31/Pudding Bot above I introduced the idea of the generic, and the possibility of presenting as generic rather than specific. Pudding Bot is not a specific container of pudding purchased at the local konbini with an expiration date, sitting in a home refrigerator between a half-consumed tray of umeboshi and a bottle of Yakult. It is pudding more generally, narrowed down only to crème caramel over tapioca or chocolate. It is pudding as if pudding could run a Twitter account. @purinpurupuru31 certainly has its own distinct voice, it is particular in that sense. But the identity the account claims is not. Imagine a generic human head. Now imagine that it was a normal practice for some members of society to walk around wearing this generic human head, while others did not. That is what is happening on Twitter, where specific individuals like me—and possibly you—have accounts, but so too do these larger nonspecific abstractions. The generic–particular difference is fundamentally a difference of number. The particular is counted and recognizes an idea of countability. The generic amalgamates. The generic stands outside countability.

The generic—the category or class over the specific and particular—appears over and over within parody accounts. Thus, for example, the various domestic appliances or foodstuffs or animals or stereotypes. These generics are often modified to increase particularity and relatability through the addition of a locational/emotional-mental/stative marker, resulting in examples like @SelfAwareROOMBA (Self Aware ROOMBA), @drunkpredator (Drunk Predator Drone), @BiCuriousRover (BiCuriosity Rover), @SmartCoffin (Smart Coffin), @the\_sad\_fridge (the sad fridge), @NIH\_Bear (NIH

Bear), @NatickBobCat (Natick Bobcat), @dxbmarinashark (Dubai Marina Shark), @WPhillyTurkey (West Philly Turkey), @nihilist\_arbys (Nihilist Arby's), @writerneuroses (Neurotic Writer), @BostonYeti2015 (Boston Yeti 2015), @PUBDOMAINHULK (PUBLIC DOMAIN HULK), etc.

Whorf (1956), in discussing countable nouns and mass nouns, argues that languages contain covert and overt categories. Countable nouns, and the rules for pluralizing such, are overt. Mass nouns, and how we introduce number into them, are covert: native speakers know how to do it but are unlikely to notice the governing rules or be able to articulate them. Again, this is an area that manifests differently across languages. Thus, for example, “information” in English is a mass noun that cannot take a plural. In Arabic, the word is “معلومات” a plural; an alternative translation that highlights this plurality would be “known things.”<sup>70</sup> Number, and whether or not something can be counted, makes a difference in how we understand an idea and what it encompasses. From a more contemporary perspective, we might think of this through language ideologies.

As Narayan (2012) notes in advising writers of ethnography, with advice (“advices” in some languages) inspired by Chekhov’s fiction, “Much social scientific writing contains people within social categories or types, while fiction and creative nonfiction more commonly follow very particular individuals and their concerns” (47). Even anthropologists, who tend to focus on particular individuals, will, in writing, often combine specific individuals in the interests of protective anonymity and will use particular individuals as representatives of a type. (As I did above, offering various

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<sup>70</sup> Note that the use of article—whether definitive or not—also plays a role in indicating number.

particular accounts to flesh out different permutations of number and account.) This is a difference between meaning through indication—indexicality—and meaning through description. This is also the way parody works, and one reason parody is used for social critique: it allows its creators to comment not only on particular individuals but on the types they represent.

This presence of the generic in parody accounts echoes what we have seen in law. Common across legal systems is the idea of a legal person. This category includes what is called a “natural person”—typically understood as a born human—as well a juridical or artificial person, such as a corporation. This latter kind of person is an example of legal fiction. (See chapter 6, *Of Policyness and Global Polysemy* for more on legal fictions.) When personhood is legally achieved, allotments of rights and responsibilities vary across types of person. For those who followed the *Citizens United* case, one of the most astonishing consequences of the case was that the Supreme Court of the United States recognized corporations as legal persons with speech rights. An amalgamation, a larger entity made up of individuals but difficult to deconstruct into individuals,<sup>71</sup> was recognized as having the ability and right to speak.

### *The lots and the Twitterpocalypse*

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Benjamin (1935) suggests that technologies of reproduction erode an artwork’s “aura”—an accretion of a specific history and context traditionally regarded as valuable and understood through ideas of

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<sup>71</sup> The wholeness of the entity as an entity is only recognized in some legal contexts; thus, for example, the legal process for trying to shift liability to individual shareholders or executives of a company, known as “piercing the corporate veil.”

provenance. When technologies of reproduction are in play, the simultaneous existence of many instantiations displaces specific history and context as hegemonic determinants of value. With that in mind, let me introduce you to @CommonWhiteGirI<sup>72</sup>/Common White Girl.

Common White Girl has been on Twitter since February 2013, ever since she was in high school. With a still of Cinderella from the old Disney animation as her profile pic and a background image from *Mean Girls*, she's a bit silly, a bit reactive, and happy to laugh at herself. She likes dogs, socks, Starbucks, and Victoria's Secret. Nowadays she's in college, battling classes and lazing through vacations. She tweets a lot, a half-dozen or more tweets a day, almost all of which are media-rich tweets. Occasionally she promotes a product, though she doesn't actually say that's what she's doing.<sup>73</sup> Instead she just tweets something like, "10 for \$35 at PINK on 12/2!!! rt to save a life". She is a queen of memes, and not any just memes, but the latest, most popular memes. At the moment, for example, that's Kermit and hooded Sith Kermit talking to each other, with text identifying them as 'me' and 'inner me.' She has a ready arsenal of reaction shots. A typical tweet:

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<sup>72</sup> When typed in a nonserif font, such as Helvetica Neue Light, the standard Twitter font, the capital "I" appears visually similar to a lowercase "i" thus: @CommonWhiteGirI.

<sup>73</sup> This is one of a number of parody accounts with high follower counts are run as promotional businesses; see, for example, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhatesthis/the-parody-twitter-illuminati>.

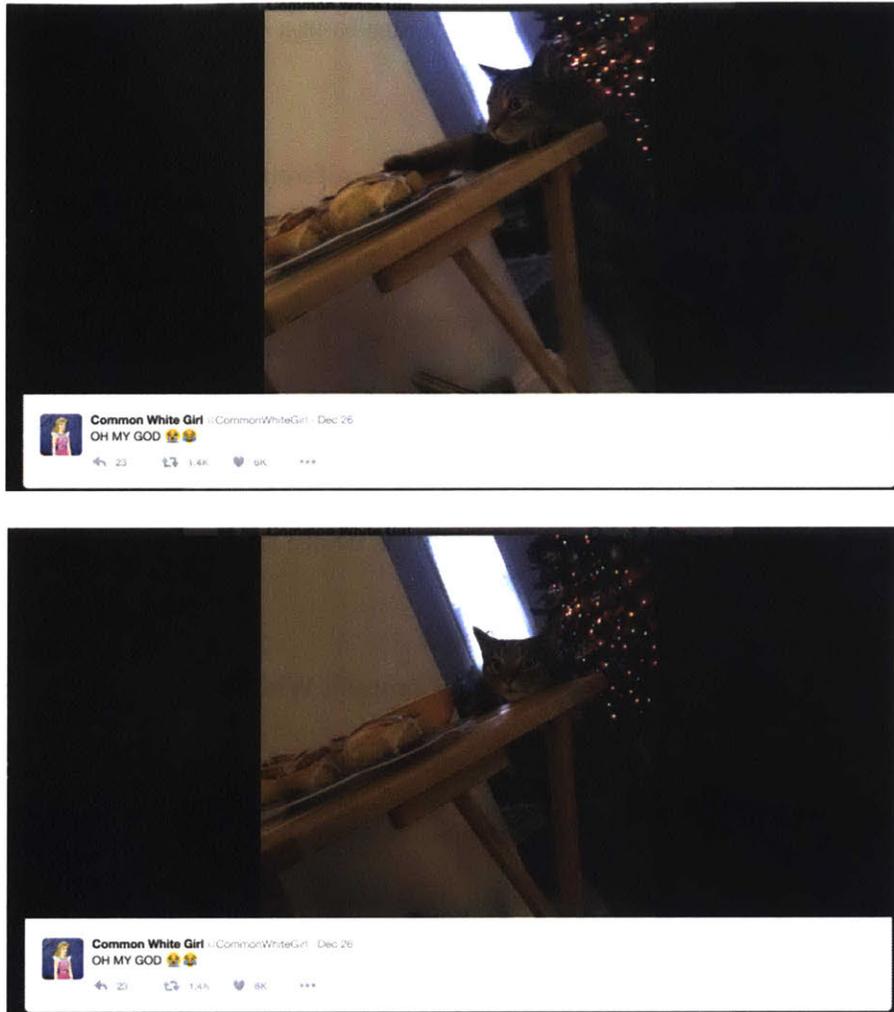


*Tweet from @CommonWhiteGirl; 26 December 2016.<sup>74</sup>*

The jumbled, overlaid images here aren't a formatting error—in order to see each image one has to click on it, creating an engaged photo joke. Broken down into its constituent parts:



<sup>74</sup> <https://twitter.com/CommonWhiteGirl/status/813248725485240320>.



*Tweet from @CommonWhiteGirlI, separated into constituent parts; 26 December 2016.*

This format—a reaction frame from Common White Girl surrounding an attributed explanatory tweet from another account, plus a sequence of photo illustrations—is common for Common White Girl. This act of placing a frame around previously existing content, in the case of this account a parodic white frame often around content from people of color, is a process of entextualizing (Briggs and Bauman 1992). It can be read as similar to ‘Columbusing,’ in which a—typically white—group believes/announces that they have discovered something that was already in existence among another group: as

in, Columbus “discovering” America. (As we’ll turn to in a moment, other elements are also at play in these tweets.)

Common White Girl, similar to Pudding Bot, references a larger generic, in this case a memed stereotype. The Know Your Meme database includes an article on Common White Girl. Participants in its comment thread debate whether or not Common White Girl should be understood as the same category as the ‘basic bitch’ trope. In the article, two other accounts are mentioned: @commonwhitegirl/white girl (note the final L) and @girlposts/Common White Girl. And this is where another aspect of number comes in.

Many, many accounts go by the name Common White Girl. Many of these use the same or a similar Cinderella image for their profile image. Many also use overlapping bios and background images. Seeking to capitalize on each other, they become a giant Cinderella battalion of not-quite clones. Imagine this through a math lens: Common White Girl, the meme, the trope, the stereotype, is a limit, which all of these accounts approach. And indeed, many of these accounts—as well as others that go by other names than Common White Girl—circulate the same tweets, with the same language and images but without attributing an original author. This is a complex system; the Common White Girl is not just a Common White Girl, but rather, is a part of a larger whole.

On November 27, 2016, @CommonWhiteGirl tweeted: “I need more oversized sweaters. I need more flannels. I need more Christmas scented candles. I need more fuzzy socks.”<sup>75</sup> This rather bland message has since been tweeted by many, many other accounts, without any sort of attribution. And @CommonWhiteGirl wasn’t its initial

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<sup>75</sup> <https://twitter.com/CommonWhiteGirl/status/803026129028268032>.

origin. This flannel tweet was first tweeted on November 26, 2016 by @bitchprblmz; within twenty-four hours, there were at least 105 identical tweets without attribution to @bitchprblmz. These continued for weeks. @CommonWhiteGirl's contribution is number 39 in that first twenty-four hour period.<sup>76</sup> The Twitter search algorithm, which allows users to distinguish between “top” tweets and all tweets, shows @CommonWhiteGirl's tweet as the one and only “top” tweet with that text. Strange, no?

In the summer of 2015, after @runolgarun/nasty libcuck (Olga Lexell), a freelance writer, filed a copyright claim with Twitter, the company began to crack down on joke theft—the republishing of others' humorous tweets without permission or attribution. Retweeting, once a manual attribution convention, has long since been formalized as a feature supported by platform functionality. Retweeting a joke isn't joke theft. On Twitter, joke theft involves, instead, the copying of the text or images of popular tweets—or material from other platforms—without any form of credit to the original account. Thus, for example, the massive, unattributed tweeting of the flannel tweet.

To the outrage of professional comedians,<sup>77</sup> some accounts, such as @FATJEW/The Fat Jew (Josh Ostrovsky) and @FuckJerry/Elliot Tebele, had successfully built large, cross-platform followings on this practice.<sup>78</sup> Account creators

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<sup>76</sup> Of those that remain; it's possible that some accounts or tweets have been removed in the interim between my assessment in December 2016 and the initial tweets.

<sup>77</sup> See Oliar and Sprigman (2008) for a discussion of the rise of intellectual property norms among standup comedians in the US post-Vaudeville, the various informal sanction practices used, and the related development of a new form of humor.

<sup>78</sup> During the course of casual discussion of my research with new acquaintances, I was advised to follow both @thefatjewish and @fuckjerry on Instagram, as very funny, important accounts. This was prior to Twitter's crackdown on joke theft and the larger public outcry, which later influenced Instagram behaviors as well. At the time, though,

that did so tended to argue alternately that they were curators and that they were giving the jokes much larger platforms than the jokes would otherwise have received. (An Egyptian social media specialist living in Dubai told me of a related phenomenon, with jokes being translated from English into Arabic without any attribution; in that case the account in question, when called out for this problematic practice, evidently protested that the act of translation made attribution unnecessary.) In the midst of this, @runolgarun filed the copyright claim. When @runolgarun's success surfaced—seen across Twitter in notices that a tweet had been removed as it violated copyright—both @runolgarun's action and joke were attacked, the former as being in violation of the communal spirit of the internet and unstated norms of social media, the latter as not funny.

The combination of Twitter's action on the copyright claim and the continuing outcry from professional comedians led to followers abandoning joke theft accounts—and to what became known to some as Twitterpocalypse as parody accounts that were engaging in joke theft were suspended. (Though the melodramatic name of Twitterpocalypse was likely intended to be ironic, it nonetheless underscores the perception of a fundamental relationship between Twitter and its parody accounts.<sup>79</sup>) This led to mass deletions of stolen jokes, craven apologies and promises to attribute better. @girlposts/Common White Girl, with at the time 5.63 million followers “the most-followed fake famous person on Twitter” according to a *Slate* article, and run by the

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these Instagram accounts rarely showed attribution. The people recommending the accounts made no mention of attribution one way or another.

<sup>79</sup>[http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/users/2015/09/twitterpocalypse\\_the\\_shady\\_business\\_of\\_parody\\_twitter\\_says\\_it\\_s\\_under\\_attack.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/users/2015/09/twitterpocalypse_the_shady_business_of_parody_twitter_says_it_s_under_attack.html).

Adsplash Group, a “social media influencer network,”<sup>80</sup> was among the accounts suspended. Unusually, though, it was later reinstated.

At this point you may be wondering why I’ve switched to discussing @girlposts/Common White Girl rather than @CommonWhiteGirl/Common White Girl. The two are not only similar in their names and profile pics and approaches—as are a profusion of accounts—they regularly tweet the same material. Without attribution. Neither, however, appears clearly as the lead account. Thus, for example, this tweet from @CommonWhiteGirl was tweeted four hours earlier by @girlposts.



*Tweets from @CommonWhiteGirl and @girlposts; 23 November 2016.<sup>81</sup>*

<sup>80</sup>[http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/users/2015/09/twitterpocalypse\\_the\\_shady\\_business\\_of\\_parody\\_twitter\\_says\\_it\\_s\\_under\\_attack.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/users/2015/09/twitterpocalypse_the_shady_business_of_parody_twitter_says_it_s_under_attack.html).

<sup>81</sup> <https://twitter.com/CommonWhiteGirl/status/801594442880876544> and <https://twitter.com/girlposts/status/801534103250239488>.

Other tweets show the reverse timing. (E.g.,

<https://twitter.com/CommonWhiteGirl/status/801504853889613825> was tweeted by @girlposts eight minutes after @CommonWhiteGirl.) Each account may, of course, be copying from different third party sources.

What is fascinating, however, in light of Twitterpocalypse and the crackdown on joke theft, is that none of these accounts involved—and that’s hundreds, remember the flannel tweet?—is tackling the others for copyright infringement. It may be that all of the accounts engaged in this copying are part of Adsplash Group or its parent company Viral, or similar. Or it may be that various groups have come together and brokered formal or informal agreements with each other. However it has occurred, the consequence is that these accounts and their tweets exist as pluralities. While they are countable, they won’t be counted, and that plurality won’t be seen unless by happenstance or intentional search. And if you do engage in intentional search, the amount of instantiations is so large as to be difficult to absorb or make sense of. A few copied tweets suggests a sequence or trajectory. Hundreds of sibling tweets for every tweet is unknowably large.

The varied number possibilities of the account-person seem alien and cyborg. To a limited extent they have been presaged by other print-based technologies: the newspaper article can be copied and reprinted by newspapers around the world, book publishers can introduce imprints to present different styles and voices, the typed office letter unites multiple authors as one. Now, however, with the introduction of account identities—on social media platforms, in gaming systems—these alternatives and more have become accessible and commonplace. One can see—and panic about—this through the lens of a fragmenting self. Big data, with its crowds of individuals or individuals at

scale is, curiously, a last hurrah of the assumptions of the stable, unitary self.

Alternatively, it could be understood as recognition of the pluralities and transitoriness of the self. Though born of humans, the account-person is not human any more than the corporation is.

### **Body**

Back in the spring of 2012 you'd find DJ Habibi 2000 deejaying at Club Smug in Dubai, likely in snug white pants and a lavender button-down shirt, open to his navel to show off his chest and chest hair. At the time, he'd been planning the new release of his album *Now That's What I Called Habibi House 2010*, but the cover image of him was deemed just too hot, leading to indefinite postponement. In his spare moments, between sets at Club Smug and interviews with local magazines like *Infusion Magazine*, DJ Habibi 2000 was an entrepreneur known for his VVVIP headphones design: Swarovski crystal-encrusted headphones in gold and platinum varieties. At the same time, like so many expats in Dubai, he venerated Ravi's—a Pakistani restaurant in the neighborhood of Satwa famed for its delicious food in a stripped down setting, a must-visit for all tourists and friends swinging through town—even though he occasionally developed food poisoning after. After only a mere 28 tweets, however, from May–June 2012, DJ Habibi abandoned his Twitter account. At the top of his account timeline (@DJHabibi2000, natch), sits his final tweet, waiting: “Will endorse any free stuff you send me. Especially cars.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> <https://twitter.com/DJHabibi2000/status/209166520545312768>.

@DJHabibi2000/DJ Habibi 2000 is a creation of the *Pan-Arabia Enquirer*, an English-language satiric news site originally based in Dubai much-lauded by Western press after the Arab Spring. “The Pan-Arabia Enquirer: home of Middle Eastern political satire” (*Guardian*).<sup>83</sup> “Seven-star satire? Only in Dubai” (CNN).<sup>84</sup> “Pan-Arabia Enquirer Aims To Make Middle East Safe for Online Satire” (*Wall Street Journal*).<sup>85</sup> DJ Habibi 2000 first appears in articles on the site as a resident DJ at Club Smug. During my fieldwork in Dubai, tech professionals, standup comedians, writers, artists, and others all mentioned the *Pan-Arabia Enquirer* to me. When learning of what I study, people invariably mentioned the *Pan-Arabia Enquirer* and, less frequently, the Shezanne Cassim case, in which the American and Emirati makers of a YouTube parody about the neighborhood of Satwa (home to Ravi’s) were imprisoned under the 2012 Cybercrime Act for national security violations.

The *Pan-Arabia Enquirer*, which has, much like the *Onion*, often been misread as sincere news reporting, grew out of a physical *Dubai Enquirer* and has since led to the creation of ClickBeit. The *Pan-Arabia Enquirer* published hard-hitting satire such as, “Emirates to introduce shisha lounges onboard A380 fleet,” an article which generated great discussion and confusion. The UAE, and the Gulf countries more broadly, are complicated places for parody and satire, hindered in part by laws against insulting public officials or directing sarcasm at rulers<sup>86</sup> and grey areas of the law more broadly regarding humor, offenses to personal dignity, and freedom of expression. Consequently, as

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<sup>83</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/media/shortcuts/2013/aug/12/pan-arabia-enquirer-political-satire>.

<sup>84</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/11/15/world/meast/seven-star-satire-only-dubai/>.

<sup>85</sup> <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2014/02/19/pan-arabia-enquirer-aims-to-make-middle-east-safe-for-online-satire/>.

<sup>86</sup> E.g., Articles 20 and 29 of the 2012 Cybercrime Law.

discussed in chapter 3, Warranting Parody, parody and comedy tend to be directed toward the expat population and well-worn cultural tropes. Such as club DJs. Extraordinarily diverse resident populations play an equally important role. With estimates of only 10–15% of residents in the UAE being Emiratis, the remaining population comes from many different countries, with different language competencies, cultural reference points, and comedic traditions.

When the internet hit critical mass and linguists began to take notice, considerable argument arose about “computer-mediated communication,” and what it really *was*. Herring (2001), Crystal (2006), and others tried with great earnestness to organize its attributes in relation to speech and writing. It was neither and both, many declared, a new mode that must be recognized with a new name: computer-mediated communication or CMC. Much of this earnest essaying was predicated on an assumed thinness or lack of bodily cues, the paralinguistic or prosodic markers that communicate and inflect language. As internet use became mainstream, debates about speech and writing and CMC gave way to other research trends, but the insistence on thinness due to a lack of body and consequent likelihood for miscommunication remains a popular urban legend, among scholars and users and nonusers of the internet.<sup>87</sup> This chapter, as a whole, is studded with arguments about communicative cues. What I want to turn to here, however, is the idea of body that seemed so fundamentally missing to these early internet scholars.

@DJHabibi2000 has a body, is part of a body. It is connected directly to the *Pan-Arabia Enquirer*, born from it and extended within its articles. Its body is its overall

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<sup>87</sup> The moral panic and absurdity of such claims can usually be seen in the idea that if only bodies were involved, miscommunication would be extremely unlikely. I would suggest that life experience suggests this to be an ideology not borne out by practice.

presence across platforms and channels. Bodies are shaped by the media ecologies they exist within, and account-persons are judged on the bodies they present and let be seen.

In work on multimodality that deserves far wider attention than it has so far received, Lemke (2002) argues that with the explosion of media channels, a key unit of meaning that linguists and others should pay attention to is the traversal, or how an idea, utterance, etc. crosses such channels: its path. This path, I suggest, traces the growth of bodies. Bodies come in different sizes, and are differently apprehended, some parts seen, some unseen. Some are small, limited only to a single space of presence, some are huge, with presence across many channels and channels with considerable affordances. Bodies are also ecologically adapted in the sense that their niche and their rivals for resources are important factors in their growth. Thus, @Queen\_UK, a parody account for Queen Elizabeth begun in May 2010, has been taken up in a web animation, a traditionally published book—*Gin O’Clock*—and others. @broodingYAhero’s book, *Brooding YA Hero’s Guide To Achieving Main Character Status*, will be published in spring 2017. @SheikhKhalifaPM has a YouTube presence, an Ask.fm channel, and has used channels ranging from CNN’s iReport to Urban Dictionary. @the\_swine\_flu has a Facebook presence as well as a Twitter account and was interviewed by *NotTheLATimes*, an interview partially regurgitated by the *Huffington Post*. @nora\_b\_fitroy comments on local message boards.

Bodies are not only shaped by their ecologies and the presence of co-entities, they’re rewarded and penalized for their shapes by other actors. At the most basic level, every Twitter account has a body that connects the account and an email address. This is a small body, and for most the email address is unseen—there and necessary in order to

use the account, but hidden from public view. A verified status indicates that someone at Twitter has looked at evidence about the way your body pieces fit together, and specifically, that a face-to-face channel<sup>88</sup> presence that has been validated by a governmental authority matches a Twitter presence. (Consider, similarly, Jun, the Spanish town that makes Twitter presence part of local citizenship, physically matching citizens and Twitter handles and then running much of its civic work via Twitter.)

On the tweet level, Twitter has long urged users to include photos/media, as it evidently generates high levels of engagement. “Engagement” is a term of art in social media analytics; Twitter defines engagement as “Total number of times a user has interacted with a Tweet. This includes all clicks anywhere on the Tweet (including hashtags, links, avatar, username, and Tweet expansion), retweets, replies, follows, and likes.”<sup>89</sup>

Scholars have highlighted for years that constellations of media practice have important relational effects, typically from a position that centralizes the human person. Gershon’s research (2010a) on managing romantic relationships across media found that introducing additional media channels marks increasing intimacy (or at least marks attempts to increase intimacy). Similarly, Haythornthwaite (2005) found that individuals connected by strong relational ties interacted across a greater number of media channels than individuals with weaker relational ties. Madianou and Miller (2012) found different media channels used for different relational needs between mothers and children

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<sup>88</sup> See Gershon (2010a) for newly surfaced awareness of face-to-face interaction as one channel among many possible interaction channels.

<sup>89</sup> From <https://analytics.twitter.com/user/shrapnelofme/tweets>, accessed December 30, 2016. Note that analytics pages can only be accessed by those who have access to the account itself.

separated by great distances. In Japan studies, work on media mix (e.g., Allison 2006a; Steinberg 2012) suggests that crossing media channels has additive effects, with characters growing as relational technologies with corresponding affordances. Gray (2003) discusses the rise of anti-fandom, shaped importantly by paratexts, what we might think of as cross-channel extensions.

And this brings us to an important question: If we understand media configurations as bodies, where are the boundary lines of these bodies? When a free governmental newspaper ubiquitous in the cafes of Dubai but with no online version reprints your tweet as part of a page of tweets about a news issue, does that constitute part of the account's body? When your tweet appears on Yahoo! Japan or a Japanese *matome* site that summarizes the hot issues currently on Twitter, is that part of the account body? When another account retweets your tweet? I would suggest that yes, all of these become part of an evolving body, some parts seen, some unseen, much like fungi or coral or Venus. This radically departs from understanding bodies as physical states organized and controlled by a single will. At the same time, though, it incorporates (sorry) ideas like intertextuality, intersubjectivity, and the many other forms of inter-. Such bodies are co-constructed. Not all components, however, are the same. Parts are more or less observable. Some parts connect multiply and thickly to other parts of the body, some parts only connect once or thinly. Parts exist in different frequencies. And bodies come in many different shapes that change over time. Bodies are complex and finicky, parts can be developed and strengthened and parts can wither and die.

With that in mind, let me introduce you to @\_El\_haram/الهرم (El Haram). الهرم tweets in Egyptian Arabic. Though less intense of a political statement today than similar

choices by famous satirist playwrights like Ali Salem or Alfred Farag in the twentieth century, communicating in Egyptian Arabic on a global platform remains a departure from the strong language ideologies that associate the standard form of Arabic with writing.<sup>90</sup> (In contrast, @ArabicRonaldo/Cristiano Ronaldo who we'll discuss later in this chapter, tweets in Modern Standard Arabic.) الهمرم offers a snarky view of things. As discussed in the previous chapter in conjunction with @SheikhKhalifaPM, "El Haram" is a laqab, or descriptive surname similar to a nickname, what would once have been part of a much longer name chain that evolved over time, listing not only familial relationships but descriptive surnames, though in contemporary populations many such names have been standardized for the ease of governmental authorities. Thus, for example, Al-Jahiz, the famous linguist, scientist, and satirist of the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century, means literally "the bug-eyed." The word "haram" holds special resonance in Arabic. English-speakers are often familiar with it as meaning "forbidden" in a religious sense. Its use is much broader, however—so broad that there is often a certain humor to declaring things "haram," with the term used by some in everyday joking to apply to very small quotidian things as well as much grander things. It's a word that spans scale, and the grandiosity of its use on one end of that spectrum can make its use in other parts humorous. @\_El\_haram/الهمرم then, both says the forbidden thing and declares things forbidden. "Working officials of the

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<sup>90</sup> Though beyond the scope of this chapter, the use of typed Arabic dialects throughout social media is nothing short of revolutionary with regard to the language ideologies characterized by Ferguson as a diglossia, and by others such as El-Badawi, as on a diglossic spectrum.

government,” tweets الهرم , “are like sperm: only one out of ten million actually does any work.”<sup>91</sup>

Egypt is famous for humorous expression in the Arab world, across various art forms and in everyday life. (This is not dissimilar to the way the Kansai region is celebrated and stereotyped in Japan.) This yields everything from slapstick movies, candid camera-style television shows, satiric novels and plays, to sarcasm societies on Facebook. Strongly Egyptian, both in the language chosen and the use of images from Egyptian media—ranging from film memes to football matches to shots from news programs—and often drawing from images watermarked with web addresses of collected humorous or popular images,<sup>92</sup> the account presents a sarcastic voice and viewpoint on everything from Lebanese protests in 2015 regarding corruption and trash collection, to the deceptions of makeup. While some tweets evoke laughter and grins, others include unpalatable misogyny and racism. This is important, I suggest, not merely as a reflexive statement of my personal taste, but as a reflection of a humor ideology (Kramer 2011) that does not exclusively focus on punching up, or targeting those with relatively more power, but rather mixes abstract punching up with specific punching down/sideways. (This is a positioning technique that we will discuss further in the next section.)

The account draws from a constellation of media sources strongly distinct and with very little overlap from those of, say, account creators in Dubai, Tokyo, or San Francisco. One area of overlap and distinction is the use of rage comics; thus for

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<sup>91</sup> [https://twitter.com/\\_El\\_haram/status/523743417864425472](https://twitter.com/_El_haram/status/523743417864425472); I have translated this loosely to capture the humor of the original. Tweet from October 19, 2014.

<sup>92</sup> This is not difficult to do: Egypt and Lebanon are dominant cultural production centers in the Arab world; Egypt in particular has long dominated film, music, and literary production—to the extent that at times non-Egyptians have intentionally sung in Egyptian dialect to match hegemonic norms.

example, in a tweet showing an image of a fat man eating in a small boat tipping under his weight, the words “The last two mouthfuls and he drowns” are paired with Yao Ming Face, oriented right to left. Rage comics, though popular on Reddit and elsewhere, aren’t seen frequently on Twitter in 2017. Setting aside the constellation of media sources drawn on for the tweets themselves, the account retweets third party Twitter tools that mention the account, for example for having a tweet that has been retweeted x number of times. And @\_El\_haram’s bio includes links: it links to a favstar page for @\_El\_haram, an ask.fm page for @elm3lm\_elharam, and a Facebook page for “El Haram official.”

Here, then, is @\_El\_haram’s visible body, and it’s a curious one. Favstar is a site that allows you to see and respond to tweets that others have deemed interesting, judged by interactions like favoriting/liking and retweeting (akin to Twitter’s “engagement”). In order to see a Twitter account’s “stats,” that account must have signed into Favstar with their Twitter account. Which @\_El\_haram has done. So @\_El\_haram has connected the Twitter account and the Favstar page. The Facebook page directs users to a site labeled “El Haram official” (it has no verification mark, so it’s not official within platform officialdom). This uses the same profile image, though with a slightly different crop, as the @\_El\_haram Twitter account, but where the Twitter account has lain fallow—with regard to tweets at least—since early November 2015, the Facebook account continues to be regularly active. (At least as I write this at the end of December 2016.) The Facebook account, moreover, includes similar content as well as screenshots of old tweets from @\_El\_haram. But is it controlled by the same creators? On the face of things, one would tend to assume that the links in the Twitter account, plus the stylistic similarities indicate unity. But that other link included in @\_El\_haram’s Twitter bio? It’s to an ask.fm

account for a *different* Twitter account. Ask.fm, like Favstar, requires an account log in with their Twitter credentials. And the ask.fm that @\_El\_haram directs users to is for the Twitter account @elm3lm\_elharam. This account uses the same profile pic but a different background pic, claims the same birthdate,<sup>93</sup> joined roughly 6 months after @\_El\_haram, and is still active. And the bio for this account includes links not only to its associated ask.fm account, but to @\_El\_haram's favstar account (and no link to the Facebook page). As I've intentionally chosen accounts that I haven't interviewed in association with to focus on in this chapter, I don't know exactly how these accounts all link together. That is part of my point. For whatever reason, whether that's due to an account shift or a network or sense of humor, @\_El\_haram (and @elm3lm\_elharam) have claimed each other's bodies as parts of their own.

The account-person's body, and what it consists of, is a key differentiator among accounts. Not all bodies are the same. It's a differentiator that users often react to, and the Twitter system privileges, without explicit awareness of its presence. This body, moreover, includes a mixture of visible and invisible limbs and organs. Some in the latter category, like the email component, are known unknowns. Others are unknown unknowns. When we understand the body as something collaboratively organized, we think about bodily boundaries in a different way. We recognize bodies as the construction of multiple wills. This is, in many ways, similar to the structuring structures that shape physical bodies, from medical practices to fashion norms. The key difference here, however, is that these bodies are constellations, built out of so many specific points. Bodies are also not person exclusive: more than one account-person can be entangled in a

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<sup>93</sup> As of some point in December 2016, the birthdate was removed from @\_El\_haram.

body, and an account-person can simultaneously be a limb or organ of another account-person.

### **Position**

Bakhtin (1981) argues that a key difference between the novel and the epic is the novel's polyphony of voices. Voice marks position. The heteroglossia of a novel brings together various voices—through dialogue, through narration—offering us different social stances and perspectives, but also simultaneously a systemic view of how these different positions fit together, and space for additional voices and consequent system shift. In this section I want to discuss position, not within a single-authored novel, but within a collaboratively, recursively authored database. And, more specifically, intentional position.

Many discuss the rise of social media in the context of the brand and the self-branding of the individual (scholarship in this area includes, for example, Banet-Weiser 2012; Hearn 2008; Marwick 2013; Senft 2008). This is a model that sees individual users as trying to commodify an identity in order to sell goods, whether that's products, ads, messages, or simply attention. Buried deep within this model—likely as a correlate to the involvement of typing and writing, long seen as a somehow less “natural” or conscious act than speaking—is the assumption that communicating via social media is an intentional activity. Whether or not you're persuaded that all use of social media should be grouped as intentional, parody accounts clearly fall into this category. And part of this, part of the construction of voice of these accounts, is intentional positioning. We have already encountered this in this chapter: @purinpurupuru31 adopts the bot category

despite its nonautomated actions; @CommonWhiteGirl strives to be “relatable;” and @\_El\_haram engages not only in punching up, but punching down. All of these are choices that intentionally situate the account-person within the larger field of social relationships.

Parody is, curiously, both positioned and position agnostic. That is, parody requires a position, parody is predicated on the idea of an original and a later version, which immediately both sets up parameters for a system and introduces a new element and the door to additional elements. Parody is positioned through its constitution of an original, it is pegged to another. This is true for both parody’s negative and positive carnivalesque forms, whether parody entails specific critique or exuberant liberation from a larger system (see the introduction, *Parody and Play* for a longer discussion of this point). But parody doesn’t determine which position, in terms of power, is adopted.

When @\_El\_haram attempts humor based on misogyny or racism, in part this is a demonstration of power and place in a hierarchy. More critically, it signals a specific desired hierarchy, and a rather trite idea that even though nowhere near the top of a hierarchy, at least this place isn’t at the bottom. Humor theorists from Plato to Hobbes have tended to interpret such examples through superiority theory, the idea that people laugh at others’ ignorance, ugliness, misfortune, etc. because these characteristics allow them to feel superior.

@CommonWhiteGirl takes a different approach, intentionally trying to share jokes that are “relatable.” “Relatable” and “relatability” are popular buzzwords among those who manage “social” or strive to create “influencers,” where the goal is to create/share content that connects to the largest possible audience. This is a performance

style honed to a sharp capitalist edge, the predictable consequence of privileging rudimentary “engagement” metrics. While this is a poor strategy for determining value (Baym 2013), it is the equivalent of the most formulaic of Hollywood. The summer blockbuster—or, more accurately, the romcom and buddy/chick flick. Underlying the idea of the relatable is the belief “that could be me.” Through the principle of similarity, the relatable connects the audience member with the character portrayed. It is a clever positioning technique that paints a trompe-l’oeil bridge between two different positions.

In both of these cases, though, this is positioning through content (an actors’ category used to group tweets and images and the like; a category which, in agreement with Reddy (1979), I would argue misframes the intersubjective processes of communication as the transport of objective units of information among various parties). These tweets could be deleted—indeed, @CommonWhiteGirl’s sibling account @girlposts, in attempting to avoid the looming Twitterpocalypse deleted an enormous number of tweets—while still retaining the account. I want to consider now, positioning embedded within the personification of the account, that is, the use of the platform system as a system within which to position.

Al-Jahiz, our bug-eyed friend from earlier, wrote, “Sometimes a word changes with its companion, varies with its neighbor and with regard to its mate according to the situations it confronts and the circumstances it encounters” (Hutchins 1989:99). Several hundreds of years later, Saussure (1983) argued that meaning arises from both the selection of an item to include and its relation to the other items chosen. Like Bakhtin’s, these are arguments of position, on the relationship between systems—or ecologies, depending on your metaphorical taste—and meaning. They tackle complexity. What do

we see of internal positioning, the I–you person of Benveniste’s deictic dyad (1971[1966]), rather than the person–other dyad?

Different membership classes—system-based positions—also exist on Twitter, covert and overt. Verified accounts versus the nonverified are perhaps the most visible example of an overt membership class, with the former not merely indicative of a particular establishment of identity, but also possessing of distinct powers. Parody accounts, explicitly protected by policy and simple markers in bios and account names, are another visible, overt class. But others exist as well, with varying degrees of covertness such as the bot category. I have elsewhere (Johnson forthcoming) discussed the intentional re-deployment of this automated category as a manual category, particularly in Japanese-language Twitter. @purinpurupuru31/プリン bot or Pudding Bot is an example of that phenomenon. @popcornman\_bot/ポップコーン男 or Popcornman is as well.

*Popcornman, a manual bot*

ポップコーン男 or Popcornman is a character from the Japanese movie industry’s anti-piracy campaign. In Japan, before theatrical showings, film audiences see a short video, in which Cameraman (a man with a camera for a head) attempts to illegally film something to the outrage of audience members Popcornman and Juiceman (men with a bucket of popcorn and a drink canister for their heads respectively).<sup>94</sup> Patrollampman (a uniformed male police officer with a patrol light for his head) rushes in and, after a short

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<sup>94</sup> Popcornman and Juiceman do not appear in the original version of this ad; rather, their role is taken on by a normal human woman who holds popcorn. The second generation of the ad replaces this solitary human audience member with this comedic duo.

chase/dance scene, captures Cameraman. Popcornman and Juiceman, our once virtuous audience members, are then shown in the privacy of a home, where Juiceman is illegally downloading material from the internet. Patrollampman appears anew, this time to capture Juiceman, reminding audience members that piracy laws apply across contexts. In 2014 Bandai began selling branded character goods related to the campaign, including posable action figures, stationery, etc. Official LINE stamps are also available, and the live-action characters appear in additional circumstances in the official campaign account (@eigadorobo), offering a media mix similar to that of other characters. While @popcornman\_bot began in 2014, other accounts for these characters pre-date the Bandai release.

There is, certainly, ironic critique in the act of performing a character from an anti-piracy campaign, as well as in the account's occasional musings about movie watching. At the same time, much of the account is given up to the life of @popcornman\_bot. @popcornman\_bot is, apparently, roommates with Juiceman. Every night they play Jankenpon<sup>95</sup> to determine dinner responsibilities. Juiceman, however, is not always a good roommate, and sometimes @popcornman\_bot despairs that the strawberry jam has all been eaten or the bath has spilled over. @popcornman\_bot (and Popcornman) is a strange chimera, part-human, part-popcorn; simultaneously constituted of popcorn and apparently eating itself. This contradiction surfaces in the account's tweets, with frequent musing on different flavors of popcorn, but also concern when baths have made @popcornman\_bot's popcorn soggy. @popcornman\_bot is also a chimera that spans modes of reality: not only is @popcornman\_bot the everyday

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<sup>95</sup> Similar to Rock Paper Scissors.

audience member shown in the video clip, @popcornman\_bot is also a self-aware participant in the anti-piracy campaign, sometimes tweeting about campaign appearances. @popcornman\_bot experiences context collapse (Marwick and boyd 2010).

The account describes itself as “semi-automated;” many of its tweets—Jankenpon results, thoughts on Juiceman, kaomoji that cleverly combine faces with popping onomatopoeia, etc.—reappear on different automated cycles.<sup>96</sup> Weekly, the account also tweets a specially marked message that breaks character to explain its semi-automated nature. In addition to the automated tweets, the account creator takes direct control and tweets, retweets, likes, conducts searches, and follows other accounts. Thus, for example, @popcornman\_bot follows and sometimes converses with accounts that portray other characters of the campaign.

The predictability and nonhumanness of the automated bot category carry over, too, into the manual bot, making it an interesting position to choose to interact from, one that alters expectations of social interaction. The bot category, even the manual bot, builds itself out of Twitter’s policies and confused, mixed-message overtures to developers. Such policies both insulate the humans involved with the bots and mark bots as always and persistently no more than the everyday person on the street. These are part of the reason people repurpose the bot category.<sup>97</sup> Beyond that, the affordances of the platform allow almost any imagined thing—barring important exclusions related to the

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<sup>96</sup> The account similarly marks a “breaking” news category.

<sup>97</sup> It is difficult to estimate the scope or duration of this phenomenon. On Twitter, as with most social media platforms, usernames can be changed at any point and such changes apply globally. That is, after a username change, all previous tweets now appear in the system under the new username—the old username disappears from the publicly accessible system. Speaking to duration, however, a Japan Times journalist seems to have noted some version of the phenomenon in passing in a May 18, 2011 article; <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2011/05/18/digital/japan-the-twitter-nation>.

sexual, the criminal, and the company of Twitter itself—to have a voice, whether that’s pudding, popcornman, or place. With its privileging of text as the primary means of communication and noninsistence on a “real” name, Twitter offers an array of positions through voices and membership classes (like the bot). An account can take on the mantle—and, to some extent position—of any nonhuman, from stereotype or trope like @CommonWhiteGirl or @DJHabibi2000, to a thing like @purinpurupuru31 or @\_WashingMachine, or a place-based organization like @MesozoicPolk.

*Personifying pro-dinosaurs-in-my-backyard sentiment*

Mesozoic Polk is a neighborhood association that opposes urban development of all sorts—with the notable exception of automobile infrastructure—and seeks to return the Polk Street area of San Francisco to its glorious prehistoric past. Its bio reads: “Mesozoic Polk Neighborhood Ass’n (MPNA) wants Polk Street restored to its natural state: dinosaur habitat, no buildings, no bike lanes. Free parking, of course.”

Housing and transport are long-term, ongoing issues in the San Francisco Bay Area, with an intense battle between NIMBY and YIMBY fronts.<sup>98</sup> Polk Street is the home of a 2002 bike lane upgrade; in 2013 discussions of further bike safety improvements that would also reduce parking met with a sudden flare of fear mongering at the Middle Polk Neighborhood Association. Mesozoic Polk, with exquisite disdain for all things bicycle-related, posts what appear to be personal photos of local parking lots, artists’ renderings of urban doom with a sci-fi novel cover feel, and articles about “safety vigilante group” SFMTrA. The account engages, too, in a considerable amount of

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<sup>98</sup> NIMBY stands for “not in my backyard” while YIMBY is “yes in my backyard.”

conversation with other YIMBY accounts, parody and otherwise. As a name, Mesozoic Polk plays on the Middle Polk Neighborhood Association and fits with the pairing of a modifier category with an uncountable discussed in the section on number. Evocatively, the argument to return to a land fit for dinosaurs both gently satirizes Bay Area environmentalism (frequently adopted and repurposed by the NIMBY crew) and effectively calls those who argue against development dinosaurs, extinct and irrelevant to contemporary life.

There is and there isn't an original and a revised version here. And this is a matter of position, too. As with other examples of the uncountable, there is a generic in play. On the one hand, the account at one point likely drew from the Middle Polk Neighborhood Association for inspiration. This is not an ongoing, explicit factor in its Twitter interactions, however. Instead, we're left with a place and an attitude. And this, too, is an interesting component of position and parody. Parody can take a position, a relative position, without a specific analogous original, because it can slip between scales. And a place-based organization, landmark, or meme can be used to signal position in part because it is a nonhuman that humans align with (Johnson 2014). The account becomes something of a Lorax, a symbol that speaks for the area in the way a human user or resident cannot.

Personification on Twitter, whether that's through political parody or manual bots, is a database rather than narrative act (Azuma 2012 [2009[2001]]): the account-based nature of Twitter emphasizes character denuded of plot or setting. We'll turn to this in just a moment. There are differences, of course, between a voice—and position—that is ventriloquized or consciously chosen, and one that is created or structured by external

circumstances. The account-person has a carnivalesque freedom of choice, but only among the unverified membership classes. Position manages accountability and challenges/changes interaction expectation.

## **World**

In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Anderson argues that newspapers hold the power of transmutation: through reading its pages, the reader is transmuted from an individual concerned with her own life to a member of a nation. This is an argument about number and scale—the newspaper only works as mediating point between these two different scale identities when readers can reasonably imagine many other simultaneous readers. Azuma (2012 [2009[2001]]) argues that when we imagine now, we draw not on grand narratives, but rather on databases. Characters are assemblages of traits drawn from a database of icons. This is an argument about number and scale as well, one which attempts to make sense of unimaginable number of individuals—as an ideological symbol, the database starts from the assumption of a large if not infinite number of data points—and their identity relations to each other through an ideology of modularity.

A parody account—or any Twitter account—exists within a database filled with many, many others. The other data points are simultaneously farther away from an account than many in-person interactions and immeasurably closer—the accounts themselves are dimensionally side by side with each other, though number constructions create barriers and undermine assumptions of the distinctness of points. Such a database offers different kinds of opportunities for imagining and enacting membership. In the section on position, we discussed different kinds of membership classes within Twitter

and the functions of adopting such positions. Here, I refer to membership in the sense of membership in Anderson's imagined community.

As an account creator, you don't have to imagine a community of fellow readers all consuming the same information at the same time. Your account-person/s is/are always, definitionally, in the midst of, but unconnected to, a pool of fellow account-persons. Every tweet and account you encounter through your account-person/s confirms this.<sup>99</sup> This is an unimaginably large number. Advertising, with its ubiquitous social media icons, and news media, which uses tweets to fill in gaps of missing local correspondents and to voice unpalatable opinions while buffered from accountability, assure us that everyone is on Twitter. (The contours of this, of course, depend very much on the advertising and media ecologies you inhabit: Dubai doesn't look like San Francisco doesn't look like Tokyo.) The challenge is connecting these various dots—a metaphor that points ineluctably to the networked nature of meaning. Many have discussed what's often called context collapse (Marwick and boyd 2010) in social media, the fusion of multiple, previously distinct social networks. (Thus, for example, the "friend" relationship on Facebook that by default treats your old high school friends, grandparent, coworkers, exes, acquaintances, and—depending on your Facebook style—strangers who simply ask to be added all the same.) In contrast, the Twitter parody account engages in context creation.

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<sup>99</sup> It's different, of course, from the newspaper, in that you don't know number of simultaneous readers of a particular piece of information, you don't know the dominance weight of that information in the reader universe. There's no central source, specific to Twitter, that organizes everyone. There is no third-party newspaper of record, there is no national newspaper or TV channel, there is not even a Tom of MySpace. On the contrary, communications from Twitter take place via email and the occasional notice appended to your account, visible only to you.

All Twitter users do this work of connecting the dots at some level. The process begins when you launch a Twitter account: During the “onboarding” process, Twitter, as do other many other platforms, requests access to your email address books or contact lists to “populate” from. Unlike other platforms, Twitter has also long suggested some accounts you might like to follow (forty such accounts at my last count, heavily weighted toward verified accounts of celebrities and news organizations). Twitter’s onboarding process is designed to connect a few initial dots, to create a first constellation in the database that simultaneously orients users and socializes them. Unlike many other socialization processes of our lives, we can choose to simply ignore these efforts, to decline access to our address books and deselect Twitter’s many suggested accounts to follow.

The parody account creator, of course, already knows how to use Twitter. They are not a first-time user. The parody account creator, if remaining anonymous, likely wants to avoid using their address books as following choices are scrutinized by those attempting to identify the creator. Outing is a risk. However, much like Azuma’s creation of a character, the parody account creator can summon a world through a combination of public attention tactics using @replies, retweets, follows, and favorites/likes, as well as private discussion in direct messages and outside the Twitter channel. Contrast this with both context collapse and the idea of the filter bubble—here it is an active practice of the account-person, neither passive nor platform ordained. Because this isn’t a first account, the creator will often make use of its seen/unseen body, promoting the parody account through its other accounts, through retweets, following, and mention of the account. This requires a certain strategy of deception: few appear to want to say, “hi, let me introduce

my new parody account” as some do with regard to bots. It undermines the mystery of the parody and is somehow inappropriate. Like all magical summonings, sometimes this summoning works, sometimes it doesn’t. As a technique, the summoning functions across scales, allowing Twitter parody accounts focused on a small, intimate context as well as accounts responding to giant celebrity or international events. Parody, of course, is extra-dimensional, in that it can modulate and respond to events across scales, though the scale of the target affects the scale of the parody account. The database aspect of Twitter is part of what makes Twitter parody so robust—it’s elastic, not rigid.

*An intimate parody within the Twitter legal team*

@FakeBakari/bakaribrock began in May 2010, back when the English-language parody account category was still mixing it up with the Weird Twitter category, when images were still hosted via twitpic and yfrog rather than Twitter itself, with video, livestreams, gifs, emoji, and even functional hashtags in Arabic and Japanese nowhere to be seen. Unlike all of the other accounts discussed in depth so far in this chapter, this account parodies a specific individual: Bakari Brock, formerly part of Twitter’s legal team (also YouTube’s, now at Lyft). The account is one of six accounts currently on a “faketeam” list associated with @amac, the account of Alex Macgillivray, former head of Twitter’s legal team. It began in May 2010 with some mild snark and lawyerly jokes, then fell almost silent for two years, before revving back up in March 2012, this time with a more in-your-face edge of mean.

One much favorited tweet in January 2013 reads, “Two lawyers, one API.” (Favorited by, among others, @Bakari itself.) Another that month reads, “I just intimidate

people, and hurt them when they don't do the right thing. Glad to see you made the right decision."<sup>100</sup> A month and a half later: "All law review articles are the same: just indict the system and move on."<sup>101</sup> March 2012 through May 2013 is its most active period, tweeting legal jokes, sexual innuendo, and comments about style and looking good—including shots of a sweater vest with subtle skulls evidently being worn by Bakari—and a pic of Bakari sprawled with his feet up in the Twitter deck space, drinking a beer. The account reappears after another two-year or so hiatus to tweet seven times in 2015, with its most recent tweet at the end of March.

Given the photos—as well as occasional favorites and retweets—@Baraki/Bakari Brock is both aware of the parody account and knows who runs it. There's a small world here. The account often @mentions accounts of other Twitter employees (many of whom are now former employees); such accounts in turn often retweet or favorite @FakeBakari. At Twitter, particularly in the early days, you almost automatically follow the Twitter accounts of your teammates and others. Twitter used to host a public listing of all of its employees, including their Twitter handles. That stopped somewhere after the first thousand employees. (As at many startups, early Twitter employees will tell you what number employee they were.) Twitter also had a public timeline, which showed all tweets, from all accounts, which finally fully ended in 2012. It is into this database that @FakeBakari launches. In April 2012, an employee who has joined Twitter during @FakeBakari's hiatus—the assistant to general counsel Alex Macgillivray—tweets:

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<sup>100</sup> <https://twitter.com/FakeBakari/status/293901692934701056>.

<sup>101</sup> <https://twitter.com/FakeBakari/status/309760253996720128>.



*Tweet from @jesrod; 23 April 2012.<sup>102</sup>*

Another Twitter employee gets involved in the conversation, expressing amazement at the account, which, given their reactions, appears to be new to both of them.



*Tweet from @laurelstout; 23 April 2012.<sup>103</sup>*

Both @Bakari and @FakeBakari get involved in the conversation as well.

<sup>102</sup> <https://twitter.com/jesrod/status/194573693878419457>.

<sup>103</sup> <https://twitter.com/laurelstout/status/194576609922125825>.



*Tweet from @Bakari; 24 April 2012.<sup>104</sup>*

And a little later:



*Tweet from @FakeBakari; 25 April 2012.<sup>105</sup>*



*Tweet from @jesrod; 25 April 2012.<sup>106</sup>*

<sup>104</sup> <https://twitter.com/Bakari/status/194855483201437697>.

<sup>105</sup> <https://twitter.com/FakeBakari/status/195218453660041216>.

<sup>106</sup> <https://twitter.com/jesrod/status/195229066260004864>.

After a few more comments:



*Tweet from @FakeBakari; 25 April, 2012.<sup>107</sup>*

I offer this as an example of sketching a small, intimate world within the database, one that highlights the interconnections between physical and digital channels and how they're maintained and refreshed over time. While @jesrod doesn't appear to have ever received an answer, Jess Rodriguez presumably did in person or via some other communication channel. While this example comes from Twitter, highlighting simultaneously the prevalence of such play on the platform and the comfort and familiarity with it among even the legal and policy team (similar parody accounts appear connected to other teams and offices), such intimate level parody frequently happens, but is difficult to surface as it is not the kind covered by news or heeded by anyone other than the small relevant community and any researchers who might stumble upon it.<sup>108</sup>

### *The rich world of celebrity parody*

In contrast, consider @ArabicRonaldo/Cristiano Ronaldo. Using Modern Standard Arabic, @ArabicRonaldo's bio states, "I am the Don Cristiano Ronaldo, player at the Real Madrid Club and midfielder of Portugal. I am the best player in the world and I am

<sup>107</sup> <https://twitter.com/FakeBakari/status/195236088917409792>.

<sup>108</sup> Similar in this vein to workplace parody is school parody.

the fastest in the world!” At the very end, it tags on the word “Parody,” in English. As mentioned in the discussion of @El\_haram, @ArabicRonaldo primarily uses MSA, a standardized form of Arabic used in media, literature, and religious discourse throughout the Arab world.<sup>109</sup> The account tweets about Ronaldo, offering opinions about the footballer and the football world through a relatively mildly parodied form of his voice. (Ronaldo is famed for his arrogance.) Thus, for example, @ArabicRonaldo tweets, “I love my colleagues in the club and I love my coach and his assistants and the president of the club and I am not haughty and I am not cocky ! Do you understand?”<sup>110</sup>

It’s worth noting that, despite beginning in July 2011 and tweeting consistently through October 2012, the account stays closely tied to Ronaldo and football, not straying into clear political speech.<sup>111</sup> Audience data that the account shares in December 2011 suggests nearly half of the account’s followers are located in Kuwait, with Saudi Arabia as the next highest proportion at 14.8%.<sup>112</sup> If the account wished to be responsive to the local politics of its majority audience (and clearly, given that the account tweeted out the

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<sup>109</sup> This is a minor simplification; media has been shown to have been influenced by English-language and French-language media in terms of syntax, etc. Different newspapers across the region also show minor lexical variants within MSA. There is also a fuzzy boundary line between Modern Standard Arabic and *fuSHa*, the older form of Arabic upon which MSA is based, involving some lexical differences but also frequency of syntactic choices; religious scholars are likely to argue such discourse occurs in the latter rather than the former; this argument is part ideological, and may not reflect language in use. Despite these minor differentiations, MSA is significantly different from any of the Arabic dialects, and used both to index officialness/formality/status and to reach an audience broader than that demarcated by any one dialect.

<sup>110</sup> <https://twitter.com/ArabicRonaldo/status/219754587320619008>.

<sup>111</sup> At times football has become entangled with politics in the Arab world, e.g., Egypt–Algeria matches. I am by no means a football expert and at best a general fan; if politics by proxy is at work here, it’s at a level that I cannot currently see.

<sup>112</sup> <https://twitter.com/ArabicRonaldo/status/152073125742379010>: “My followers live in Kuwait (49.2%), Saudi Arabia (14.8%), Spain (8.6%) & more. Create your map at <http://twocation.com>” tweeted December 28, 2011.

stats, the account creator is aware of its audience distribution), it would likely have taken a stance on bidoon, the “stateless” residents of Kuwait, who protested during the Arab Spring.<sup>113</sup> Though Arabic-language Twitter is extremely active with regard to political parody throughout 2011, this is, for the most part, not the world that @ArabicRonaldo wishes to summon into connection. (At one point the account does interact with @MichelleOArabic, an Arabic-language parody account for Michelle Obama, so the account’s world is not entirely distinct from that of Arabic-language political parody; the creator of the account may read the latter as well.)

Akin to @MesozoicPolk with its account buddies and @popcornman\_bot, which sought out the other characters in its story,<sup>114</sup> @ArabicRonaldo puts considerable effort into summoning a world to interact with. It’s a world that mixes football parody with football professionals. The account’s very first tweet is directed to a football analyst, explicitly announcing the account. It goes on to tweet a number of Arabic-language parody accounts to similarly announce itself, including @RealMadrid\_ar and @ArabMourinho. This is part of a larger interaction pattern of the account: over the course of its 700 or so tweets, the account tweets also to @ArabicLeoMessi, @ArabicVanBasten, @ArabicPersie, @NeymarArabic, @arabic\_valdes,

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<sup>113</sup> The bidoon represent a resident population that was not given citizenship when Kuwait was formed as an independent country; their descendants continue to lack citizenship rights.

<sup>114</sup> See also @\_theswineflu and its use of platform humor—intentionally following the accounts of politicians and political organizations as part of its performance (account discussed further in the introduction, *Parody and Play*), a tactic also used in harassment; and @SheikhKhalifaPM, the creator of which attributes the account’s longevity in part to the many different interlocutors established (see chapter 1, *Aspect Shift*, for further discussion of that account.)

@ArabicDrogba, @parodyJose\_Ar, @PepeArabic, @marceloarabic, @Arabicfatih, and @BalotelliArabic.

In September 2011 there's a lengthy exchange with @ArabicLeoMessi. Ronaldo and Messi are widely regarded as the best football players today, and Ronaldo is fiercely competitive with Messi. Ronaldo's arrogance and personal style—evidently his use of hair gel is very disturbing to some—are often sharply contrasted with Messi's more laidback approach, to Ronaldo's detriment. Here, @ArabicRonaldo and @ArabicLeoMessi exchange insults, call each other “rat” and “coward,” dispute whether the other even speaks Arabic well, argue about team records. @ArabicBalotelli jumps into the fray, and @ArabicLeoMessi puts down both as being young. @ArabicLeoMessi claims Messi a playmaker in contrast with Ronaldo's position as merely a player on a small team. @Arabicfatih jumps in to scold both @ArabicRonaldo and @ArabicLeoMessi, telling them they're both losers for obsessing over each other like this.

In the midst of being stunned by the breadth of parody football accounts (there are many, this is but a small slice), you may have noticed that all of these are marked as being in Arabic, through appending either “Arabic” or “Ar,” the two-letter code for Arabic. (Curiously, accounts don't seem to use “3rbi” or similar romanized Arabic for the Arabic word.) This is by no means always the case with parody accounts in Arabic, though it is also broader than merely the footballer parodies and can be observed with politicians and entertainment celebrities. It names another membership category, similar to the bots and manual bots discussed earlier in regard to position. At the same time, it is a modulation within the parody account category, similar to the use of the

locational/emotional-mental/stative modulator we saw when discussing number. Thus, for example, @SelfAwareROOMBA (Self Aware ROOMBA), @NIH\_Bear (NIH Bear), @dxbmarinashark (Dubai Marina Shark), @nihilist\_arbys (Nihilist Arby's), @PUBDOMAINHULK (PUBLIC DOMAIN HULK), etc. This class does not seem to have an English-language or Japanese-language version—the many English-language parody accounts of Arab politicians are not prefaced with “English” or “en.” Nor are the Japanese-language versions of Nazis or Putin prefaced with “Japanese” or “jp” or even “nihongo.”<sup>115</sup>

The account-person, mixing its human and machine components, summons a world out of the database. This is different from worldbuilding, with its careful construction of piece after piece, layer upon layer. Rather, such summoning assumes something already there, ready and available to be brought into connection. This is true for accounts dedicated to fan subcultures, and it's true for everyday accounts. It serves to assert shared knowledge, an ability to navigate specialized references and participate in inside jokes. The summoning is a magical charm, an astrological creation, that sometimes works and sometimes does not. As with Anderson's imagined communities, this world, too, involves an act of imagination, but one that must take place first, prior to summoning, rather than one that comes packaged with the production and distribution system of mass media.

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<sup>115</sup> This doesn't mean organization schemes don't exist in parody accounts in these languages, they just don't seem to have language-distinguished ones so far as I have been able to discover. One organization scheme in English-language parody accounts is for accounts run by the Plaid Avenger—a class project at Virginia Tech—which begin with the word “plaid,” e.g., @Plaid\_elAssad and @Plaid\_unKim.

## Time

Account-persons exist in unusual temporalities. They have continuous presence, even when the attention of their human account creators is focused elsewhere. An account that has been abandoned but not deleted yet lives, present on the platform, its history visible, its system affordances functioning. You can follow an account abandoned seven years ago. You can tweet at it, put it on lists. You can retweet and like its existing tweets. It is not so much abandoned or dead as it is widowed or orphaned. And while the human(s) running the account may have stopped tweeting, they can still use the account as a lens for searching, for reading the tweets that appear in their lists and their home timeline. And they do—though @\_El\_haram shows no tweets more recent than November 2015, the likes for @\_El\_haram shows the account-person has liked at least seventeen tweets since that last visible tweet.

Some of the account-person's curious temporality is simply platform time: Time zones form perhaps the largest, most important distance between any accounts in the Twitter database. Hegemonic linear time is disrupted by various platform features, even as the timeline is the dominant organizing tool. Frozen time from one perspective, hackable time from another. It begins with the join date, now displayed on every account profile page. A change of account name or profile pic has global and universal time effects: every single tweet, whether that's from five minutes ago or five years ago, whether that's on the Twitter platform or embedded in a news article elsewhere, changes. Consider how odd this is for someone who started using Twitter at age 13 and has used it for a decade. If that person uses a photo of themselves as their profile pic, their adult image will be paired to words they tweeted as a thirteen-year-old, the original marker

irretrievable. Some parody accounts, like @SheikhKhalifaPM use this to artistic effect, consistently shifting name and image to different parodic images. Historical stages of personal history for the account-person are neither inviolable nor stable, but rather constantly open to revision.

The sequenced list or timeline is the primary organizational structure of Twitter, appearing as lists of tweets on account home pages, profile pages, and hashtag channels, but also as following and follower lists, which, though unstated, have embedded time, reflecting the order of joining those lists. Likes, however, organize themselves not on the basis of when an account liked the tweet, but on the original timestamp of the tweet. Twitter is different from platforms like Facebook, resembling message apps like WhatsApp or LINE, in that there remains only minimal curation done by the platform itself, on an opt-in basis. Curation distorts linear time. Retweets are a form of curation, and they, too, distort linear time, allowing account-persons both to reorganize statements of events and to modulate the time experienced by the user looking at timelines, whether that's the user's home timeline or the account-person's profile timeline. All of this linearity, and yet, unsynced. Over the course of my writing this chapter, even the following counts for the abandoned parody accounts mentioned here have changed.

Rather than abandoned, a better metaphor might be to understand accounts through an idea of sleep and wakefulness. Multiple accounts discussed in this chapter have taken hiatuses—sometimes as big as two years, sometimes in the month range—only to later return. Some accounts, such as @Old\_Man\_Gloom (discussed in the introduction, *Parody and Play*) or conference-related ones, have an annual cycle. Other accounts exist for only a few days or weeks, played with—and through—then set aside,

without deletion. We might think of them as the sleeping jesters, akin to sleeping giants, who will take action if awoken.

Another piece of the account-person's temporality is its history. The ability to see a past, spread out in front of your eyes, constituting the account-person, even as the account-person acts and interacts, is, in some ways, akin to the relationships of stable, small communities, such as families or small towns, where everyone knows everyone plus everything everyone ever did. With a public Twitter account, however, this is available for anyone who chooses to see. But not all history is accessible, even when public. Sometimes scale overwhelms those who might otherwise access it. How long are its innumerable lists? How big its number of tweets, or media, or likes? There is a point at which a human user will simply stop scrolling, there are numbers so big that they will not be approached. At the same time (ha), this history has its elisions, unmarked and hidden—deleted tweets, account suspensions, even just original bio pic. A tweet is an accretion of presence, its deletion erases this. So this history, this piece of time, has a shape both accessible and not.

Here, in this final section about dimensions of personhood, I turn now to responsiveness as a measure of time and look at two last parody accounts:

@zibumitunari/石田三成 (Mitsunari Ishida) and @\_WashingMachine/THE WASHING MACHINE.

*The dead samurai who watches TV*

“Well.....being alone on Xmas is 100 times less painful than being betrayed by ally after

ally during a decisive battle. Cheer up everyone”.<sup>116</sup> Mitsunari Ishida was a Sengoku era samurai, who fought in the unification battles of Japan on behalf of the Toyotomi. In 1600, he was, as the tweet from @zibumitunari points to, badly betrayed during the battle of Sekigahara, leading to the unification of Japan under Ieyasu Tokugawa. The Sengoku era and its aftermath are popular settings for games, manga, and anime series. The famous samurai have a presence and familiarity in popular culture in a way that, for example, the generals of the American Revolution or the key figures of the Umayyad dynasty do not. Not surprisingly, there is a whole army of Sengoku era characters on Twitter. And, as @zibumitunari does, they tweet about current events.

Christmas Eve is a romantic holiday in Japan, akin to Valentine’s Day in the US. Those who are alone, without someone with whom to eat Kentucky Fried Chicken (iconic Christmas Eve date dinner), may feel especially lonely. Thus @zibumitunari tweets of *kuri-bochi*, a special Xmas loneliness (sometimes depicted as a sad chestnut in a corner, due to the lexical overlap between Xmas and chestnut, both of which are pronounced *kuri*.) This tweet from 2015 was widely retweeted, 2817 times. The time sensibility of this tweet holds a certain loveliness: it brings together a famous historical past and contemporary sentiments, tweeted on Christmas Eve in 2015 by an account for a Sengoku era person.

@zibumitunari has changed over the last few years. The account joined Twitter—and for a moment, think about the temporality and position embedded in that verb choice, “join,” which includes both the idea of Twitter as a community with membership, but also the idea that the account-person preexisted its emergence on Twitter—in January

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<sup>116</sup> <https://twitter.com/zibumitunari/status/679920881489940480>.

2012. It shares images from games, but also images from museums the account creator evidently visits, of artifacts from the Sengoku era. In the last year, though, it has changed, because in January 2016 NHK started airing *Sanada Maru*, a television series about the Sengoku era that, of course, features Mitsunari Ishida. @zibumitunari shifted to also include video stills and comments on the show, many of its tweets now timed to its episodes. This is not dissimilar to @ArabicRonaldo, which would time tweets to games, e.g., surveying followers about their expectations for an upcoming match.<sup>117</sup>

Consider @CommonWhiteGirl as well, an account for which responsiveness to trends and timeliness are fundamental to both its style and its paid promotional work. @CommonWhiteGirl is, further, echoic. Twitter, of course, allows scheduling of tweets, allow tweets to be written in advance. Some parody account creators take advantage of this. For example, the creator of @BroodingYAhero often schedules tweets for the week in advance and then dips in as her days allow, responding to @mentions as she goes. Many speak of “real-time” with Twitter, the eradication of the seam between action and report, a living on Twitter. Responsiveness, however, seems a better way to understand this time. What is the schedule of what is being responded to, and how/when is it being responded to?

To some degree, of course, parody is always about responsiveness. As discussed in the section on position, parody responds to something it constructs as an original. There is always at least a notional sequence—a temporal structure—built in. Whereas @zibumitunari highlights the role of responsiveness across channels—as well as the

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<sup>117</sup> <https://twitter.com/ArabicRonaldo/status/183570999462199298>.

point that on Twitter account-persons for dead people proliferate—@\_WashingMachine illuminates responsiveness focused on other Twitter accounts.

*The surly domestic appliance*

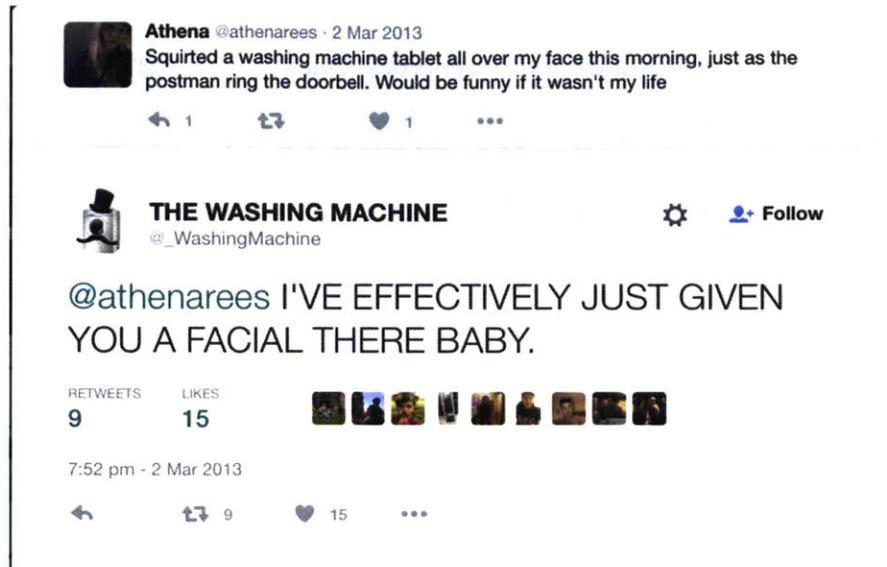
@\_WashingMachine is notably different from the other accounts discussed in this chapter. While others, like @purinpurupuru31, also engage in a high number of responses, @\_WashingMachine is grounded in response. @\_WashingMachine occasionally issues the blanket tweet to its followers, however, its primary mode of interaction is through responding to strangers who have tweeted messages including the words “washing machine.” It responds to these in surly all caps. There are other such accounts—a small battalion of angry domestic appliances roam Twitter—and @\_WashingMachine mentioned some in its the early days, such as @lecoffeemachine, @\_TumberDryer (suspended), @\_Microwave\_\_\_\_\_, and @\_vacuumcleaner. But its main way of navigating the Twitter database, of constructing its world and its position relative to others, is to tweet at random strangers. Thus, for example:



*Tweet from @\_WashingMachine 27 December 2012.<sup>118</sup>*

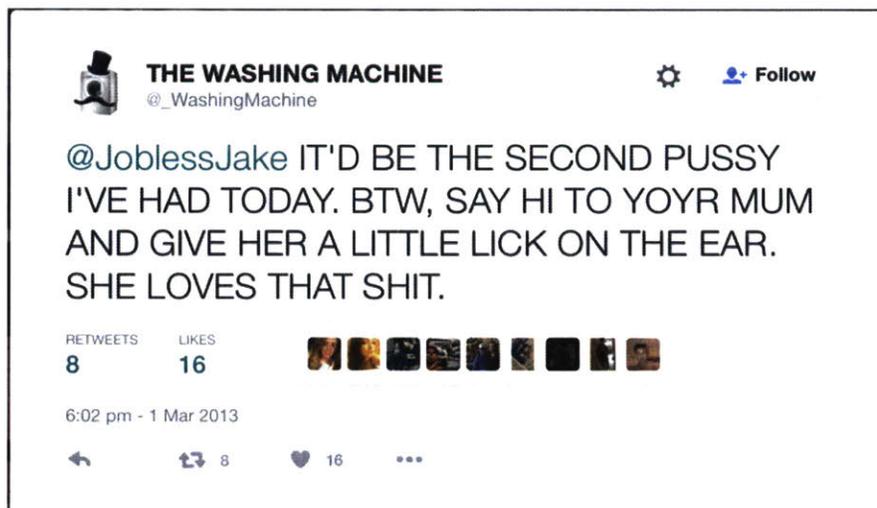
<sup>118</sup> [https://twitter.com/\\_WashingMachine/status/284407102284365824](https://twitter.com/_WashingMachine/status/284407102284365824).

The sexual aspect, with the washing machine gendered as male via its mustached profile pic, is a recurrent theme for the account:



*Tweet from @\_WashingMachine 2 March 2013.<sup>119</sup>*

And:



*Tweet from @\_WashingMachine; 1 March 2013.<sup>120</sup>*

<sup>119</sup> [https://twitter.com/\\_WashingMachine/status/308001804002656256](https://twitter.com/_WashingMachine/status/308001804002656256).

<sup>120</sup> [https://twitter.com/\\_WashingMachine/status/307611892095021056](https://twitter.com/_WashingMachine/status/307611892095021056).

At its best, @\_WashingMachine's tweets are abrasively funny: it is both humorous and surprising to be yelled at by an obnoxious appliance that has clearly had enough of humanity. It's a kind of humor, though, that makes frequent use of racist, misogynistic, and homophobic slurs and stereotypes. One of the easier styles of humor, a punching down of sorts, saved sometimes by the low position of a domestic appliance. Some of the accounts it tweets to seem to find the responses funny, replying, retweeting, or liking them. For others, the original tweet has since disappeared (as in the case of @JoblessJake in the third example), perhaps because the account went private, perhaps because it preferred not to have such a response connected to one of its tweets. Some reply directly, irate and having none of it. Given the extremity of some of its tweets, it seems likely that the account will have been reported at times for harassment, in which case some of its tweets will have been deleted and what it displays on its profile timeline is but an incomplete history. Looking at the profile timeline, with all of its replies together, gives a different impression than a tweet encountered individually—it causes you to focus less on the “identity” of the account and more on its overall tenor. I suspect any single tweet would seem a great deal funnier in isolated context: one moment you're tweeting about a washing machine, the next an asshole washing machine is tweeting at you.

The humor of the account is embedded in this search–reply tactic. As such, it is difficult to see—these tweets are not broadcast to all followers, they're seen primarily by the original tweeter. As a user, in order to see them otherwise, you must go to @\_WashingMachine's profile page and click through tweets to open up the interaction pairs. Nonetheless, many people follow the account and, in at least one case, someone

explained to their followers that it was a cool account and they should go through and click open all of the interactions.

As an account grounded in response, at a rate of almost 10 to 1, the account's tweets come in bursts. The first year or so saw 1129 tweets, the bulk of the account's total tweets, almost 70% of them within that year. Setting aside the first few months, which show high number of tweets, but may be related to the excitement of starting the account, there were strong swings in tweeting, with highs in December and April. In October, gaps of full days started to appear, and then only a single tweet in November. Once this slowing period began, many of the tweets that did come, came within clustered in a single day, with large gaps between. A sort of bingeing occurred, an inconsistent frequency cycle.

As with the exuberant hybridity of carnivalesque voice, the account-person can call forth and graft together different times into one simultaneous moment. At the same time, platform design yields different structures of time than face-to-face channels, with simultaneous linearities and public displays of history. If we think of time through sequence, the account-person—and particularly the parody account as always already a creature of sequence—offers its own temporality, defined by choices of response and broadcast.

### **Final thoughts**

Recognition of the account-person asks us to reconsider assumptions of personhood, from ideas of 1:1 correspondence between identity and self to that of a self-controlled body. It asks us to consider the plural temporalities of lived experience, to think about worlds as

spaces that we attempt to summon around us. To question what we have transposed and reproduced. Many of these are well-worn themes in social science. Often, though, it seems as if social science—and anthropology in particular—investigates these as alternatives present in cultures of non-modern others. If we let go of our implacable ideologies of personhood, however, we see inconsistent, cyborg, plural, collective persons all around us. The boundaries we've allowed, the sets of positions that can be taken, the ways the world can be experienced, begin to seem brittle. These spaces of shiny new technology, built of binaries, of universal standards and individuals, every day yield direct experience that contradicts many of the ideologies of personhood we assume and articulate.

“One way to think about the transformation of the human into the posthuman, then, is a series of exchanges between evolving/devolving *inscriptions* and *incorporations*” (Hayles, quoted in Chris and Gerstner 2013:8). The account-person inscribes and incorporates new elements into personhood. We obscure these changes, however, under an ideal of seamlessness. Parody, in contrast, glories in its seams. Examining the seams of the account-person reveals the latent ambiguities of our experience of being human. As we analyze, build, and participate in communities that integrate digital presence and practices, we need to think, too, about what seamlessness seams together, and the persons we create through such surgery.

## Part 2

### Parody and Authority

Chief  
It's not a joke & it's not funny. I want this  
Prosecuted because what they did was WRONG

~ Jim Ardis  
mayor of Peoria  
April 16, 2014

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...As far as we know this is a parody account and the @NIH account, at least, will not/is not allowed to acknowledge it.

But thanks for the kudos. I wish we were “doing social media right”.

~ Alyson Olander,  
NIH social media specialist  
June 19, 2014

Authority intimately entangles with parody. As parody engages in indexicality play—to the sometimes horror of people in positions of authority—it also indexes authority. Through parody we can observe how current structures of authority and the people who enact them handle challenge and change. Indeed, parody offers mirror, loupe, and barometer both for and to authority. In its mirror, parody reveals dissatisfactions with structures and people of authority, desires for something different. With its loupe, parody shifts scales to examine the specifics of dissatisfaction and desire—and at the same time, provides sharp sight to perform its own surgical experiments, often with Frankensteinian exuberance. As barometer, the reception parody's monsters receive measures authority's

adaptability to change. How do people in positions of authority respond to such acts of re-creation? How engaged in such transformative play are they themselves? Do they participate? Do they resist? How? What do their choices and perspectives mean for the structures of authority and the people within them?

In the introduction, *Parody and Play*, I introduced the concept of off-platform uses as an analytic tool for examining processes of adoption, ratification, exclusion, and similar. Part 3 takes up the ratification of parody accounts through platform policy. Off-platform uses, however, don't only offer opportunities to examine platform responses, they also offer opportunities to examine how the larger set of possible actors respond—the ambiguity of the off-platform use yields a space where others can intervene, in support, in attack, in play.

Part 2, *Parody and Authority*, investigates how authorities re-create themselves (or don't) through establishing norms and transgressions. With Twitter parody accounts, we see authorities grappling not only with parody, but with parody in a new system of communication. Chapter 3, *Warranting Parody*, examines people in positions of power who treat Twitter parody accounts as a threat and, despite being public officials sworn to uphold formal rule systems designed to protect parody, mobilize apparatuses of power against it. Chapter 4, *Tweeting Like a State*, explores the development of norms for parody and play among governmental social media managers—and through these norms, the relations of social media and contemporary representative government.

## Chapter 3

### Warranting Parody

When Detective Jarred Ely of the Mount Vernon Police Department called, I was sitting in my apartment, writing a response paper for one of my required HASTS classes. It was 10 October 2011, Columbus Day in Massachusetts, and my landlord of less than two months was clanking about in the front of the apartment. The number that stretched across the small screen of my flip phone wasn't one I recognized. In retrospect, it surprises me that I answered the phone—a limited edition Motorola Razr, a dragon etched in white across a background of graphite grey—but I was having difficulty focusing on the response paper due to the clanking, so answer it I did. After identifying himself, the detective explained that he was investigating a case of criminal impersonation with regard to @MayorBudNorris, a Twitter account impersonating the mayor of Mount Vernon. The account, said the detective, had been accessed from my IP address. What did I know of it?

As it happened, I knew quite a bit about it. A friend ran @MayorBudNorris, another graduate student whose family lived just outside the small rural town of Mount Vernon. I had discussed parody accounts with him earlier in the year when they blossomed in conjunction with the wave of pro-democracy protests known as the Arab Spring. After Mayor Norris—who was defeated in the Mount Vernon mayoral election one month after this phone call—made xenophobic comments, my friend and another decided to create a parody account for the mayor. It launched on 20 September 2011. Not

being from Skagit Valley, home of Mount Vernon, I'd smiled at my friend's chuckles, but otherwise hadn't paid much attention. @MayorBudNorris—"Currently mayor of Mt. Vernon, WA. I have lots of Mexican friends."<sup>121</sup>—had tweeted a dozen or so times with roughly a dozen followers. Until the detective called, I was unaware that my friend had accessed the account while visiting me the previous month.

As I would discover later via a public records request, Kate Martin, a reporter at the *Skagit Valley Herald*, had emailed the erstwhile mayor on September 22, flagging @MayorBudNorris for his attention. (One of those gleeful chuckles from my friend had been about engaging with a reporter on September 21—turns out it was the same one.) The mayor had evidently not been amused and had telephoned Detective Ely claiming harassment. That same day, Mayor Norris provided Detective Ely with a signed statement that "Someone is impersonating me with a Twitter account." Detective Ely faxed a preservation request to Twitter—so that in the event the account creators attempted to delete the account, Twitter would retain the account data for ninety days, rather than delete it in line with their standard practice—and on September 23 applied for a search warrant from Skagit County Superior Court Judge Dave Needy. The detective had reviewed the Twitter profile in question and had determined that this was a case of first-degree criminal impersonation and cyberstalking. In the request, Detective Ely declared:

I...am currently assigned to a Detective position where I conduct computer forensic exams and investigate complex and felony crimes. While employed with the Mount Vernon Police Department, I have received additional ongoing training to include Seized Computer Evidence Recovery Specialist[sic] (SCERS) training, child interview techniques, interrogation and interview techniques, Advanced Encase – Computer Forensic Training, and numerous other trainings. I have investigated numerous crimes to include assault of a child, child pornography, felony

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<sup>121</sup> According to its bio at the time.

assaults, burglaries, robberies, homicides, cyber stalking, and many other crimes.

Detective Ely included a sample tweet, “Anyone up for a quiet night at Draft Pic’s? Let’s throw back some buds before the neighborhood goes downhill,” which Ely connected to Norris’s public opposition to a Mexican Tequila bar in downtown Mount Vernon. (Note that nowhere in the detective’s description of his background is First Amendment training or similar mentioned.)

According to Washington state code RCW 9A.60.040 (cited in the detective’s request), a person “is guilty of criminal impersonation in the first degree if the person:

- (a) Assumes a false identity and does an act in his or her assumed character with intent to defraud another or for any other unlawful purpose; or
- (b) Pretends to be a representative of some person or organization or a public servant and does an act in his or her pretended capacity with intent to defraud another or for any other unlawful purpose.”

Chapter 5, The Social Media Contract, looks in greater depth at intention, impersonation, and fraud, but stop for a moment and consider: The tweet quoted above is the only one provided by Detective Ely in the request for the warrant. It in no way suggests that @MayorBudNorris was engaged in fraud or any other unlawful purpose. The cyberstalking charge is even more tenuous. According to state code RCW 9.61.260 (also cited in the detective’s request):

- (1) A person is guilty of cyberstalking if he or she, with intent to harass, intimidate, torment, or embarrass any other person, and under circumstances not constituting telephone harassment, makes an electronic communication to such other person or a third party:
  - (a) Using any lewd, lascivious, indecent, or obscene words, images, or language, or suggesting the commission of any lewd or lascivious

act;

- (b) Anonymously or repeatedly whether or not conversation occurs; or
- (c) Threatening to inflict injury on the person or property of the person called or any member of his or her family or household.

Again, the snarky invitation to drink beer in no way threatens the mayor—or any third party—nor does it suggest lewd or lascivious acts. One could argue that it is an anonymous electronic communication to a third party that intends to embarrass the mayor, but on the other side of this lies the First Amendment and an extraordinary body of case law protecting political speech—including parody—and limiting the privacy rights of public officials. Judge Needy, however, evidently signed off on the warrant without any questions.

This chapter examines how people in positions of authority seek to assert control over channels of communication and representation by activating the apparatus of power. In particular, it investigates the curious, persistent miscategorization of parody within legal regimes that valorize freedom of expression. This chapter argues that key elements that contribute to this miscategorization are larger practices of channel control, fears of the revelation of public secrets, difficulties with reflexive listening, and ideologies of the unreal internet. While this chapter focuses primarily on governmental officials and law enforcement, particularly in the US, much of the discussion is generalizable to responses from people commanding other types of authority, such as celebrity and expertise. The chapter closes with comparative analysis of examples from the UAE.

Returning, now, to the case of @MayorBudNorris: Detective Ely presented Twitter with the search warrant on September 27. Included in that file of tweets is one

that directly addresses the Mount Vernon Police Department through its @MVPolice Twitter account on September 21, before the case file opened. This tweet would have been a delight for a defense attorney, as the social media manager running the @MVPolice account evidently hadn't found anything objectionable about @MayorBudNorris—hadn't even mentioned it as problematic to any of their superiors. (We'll return to the emerging norms of social media managers in chapter 4, *Tweeting Like a State*.)

The larger Twitter Legal department, no individual's name specified, replied to Detective Ely's request via email with encrypted files detailing subscriber information that had been provided to Twitter, cell phone records, IP addresses, tweets, and direct messages. With this in hand, Detective Ely returned to Judge Needy's court on September 29, submitting an almost identical request for a search warrant for Comcast regarding two IP addresses. The files Twitter provided had mentioned a third IP address as well, registered to Georgetown University. It appears the detective held off on pursuing that one—which offered obvious difficulties in matching individual to computer use—in favor of the other two. Again, Judge Needy signed off on this search warrant request. The defendants at this point were John Doe and the two IP addresses. On September 30, Detective Ely sent the search warrant to Comcast. The Comcast Legal Response Center, similarly unindividuated, but “Very Truly Yours,” explained via fax on October 4 that one of the IP addresses couldn't be matched to a subscriber due to error or incomplete files. The other one could: me.

In the week or so between Comcast's response and Detective Ely's telephone call to me, the detective pulled up the LexisNexis file on me accessible via a law enforcement

account, detailing my personal identification information, including a history of my addresses and profiles of the neighborhoods within which I lived by median household income, average age, years of education, and median owner-occupied home value. And then Detective Ely called me.

On the phone, Detective Ely asked me if I knew who was behind this impersonation. I pulled the account up on the laptop in front of me. This, I said, is obviously a parody account. No, he said, it's criminal impersonation. Well, but, I said, wondering if I was digging myself into a hole, I study parody accounts and this is clearly a parody account. No, he said. Did I know who had created the @MayorBudNorris account? Well, I said, I wasn't sure. It could have been many people. Did my internet connection have a password? he asked. Yes, I said, but I had people over a lot and had no idea who might have been there on September 23. And besides, my connection could have been hacked. His disbelief at that statement was as palpable as mine at his claim it was criminal impersonation. We eventually agreed that I would submit a statement saying that I didn't know who had done it,<sup>122</sup> and that I would ask around among my circle at Georgetown. When we got off the phone I called my friend who was running the account to scold him for not marking it a parody.

In the case file written several days later, Detective Ely claims he mentioned Twitter's parody policy to me. I disagree. While he did say the account didn't explicitly declare itself a parody (parody need not be declared as such to qualify as fair use, according to the Supreme Court of the United States in *Campbell*, to say nothing of the First Amendment), he didn't mention Twitter's parody policy. Indeed, he seemed

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<sup>122</sup> This was foolish on my part; while I had no intention of submitting such a statement, I should never have even verbally agreed to do so.

unaware of the existence of parody accounts as a genre on Twitter when we spoke. I believe he did, however, afterward search for it, including a link to the policy when he subsequently emailed me. In the file, after I become an active participant in the narrative, “parody” is mentioned seven times; prior to that it is not mentioned by anyone, directly or indirectly.

My friend and I had a long telephone conversation. He was, to put it mildly, dismayed at this turn of events. He said that he would take the account down immediately. No, I said, you don’t have to take it down. This is protected speech. Just mark it a parody so that it’s line with Twitter’s parody policy. This is what he did. He also tweeted out, “Just to be clear everybody – this @mayorbudnorris is a PARODY account.” The subsequent day he called Detective Ely to take responsibility for the account. At no point does the case file suggest the detective may have suspected there was more than one person involved, as a comparison of times and locations would have suggested. My friend reported to me that he was unsure whether or not there would be formal charges brought against him. The file shows the Skagit County Prosecuting Attorney summarily declined to take the case:

Cannot prove beyond reasonable doubt.  
Cyberstalking: the electronic communications were not directed to Norris  
and there is lack of criminal intent.  
Criminal Impersonation: lack of criminal intent.

Neither my friend nor his partner in parody ever tweeted as @mayorbudnorris again.

This is not unusual. Or, rather, what is unusual about the events I’ve related is to have the inside story on an attempt in the US to silence parody in direct contravention of the First

Amendment, an attempt that has never been publicly reported. Such attempts, however, occur regularly. In 2012, Twitter began to release biannual transparency reports. The first report offered simply the number of account information requests received from governments, the percentage of these in which Twitter produced some information, and the number of accounts specified, broken down by country of request. The United States has consistently led these requests, with the number of requests increasing each year through 2015, and then dipping slightly in 2016. The US enjoys, too, a consistently high rate of receiving information from its requests; over the years this has ranged from 69–82 percent. Over the years Twitter’s transparency reports have grown more detailed. Although they are not broken down in terms of parody accounts (or bot accounts, or verified accounts), they include such efforts by law enforcement as Detective Ely’s requests regarding @MayorBudNorris.<sup>123</sup> It’s worth noting that as of 2017, these transparency reports *only* tally government requests—data about account suspensions and other disciplinary actions originating either in Twitter’s user-based reporting tools or internal avenues is not included. In presenting itself publicly, Twitter thus holds government regulation to a sunshine standard it does not apply to itself.

There are numerous—published—examples of political candidates, elected officials, governmental agencies, and law enforcement around the world attempting to gain Twitter account information in apparent attempt to quell parody. In the United States. In Japan. In India. In the UK. In China. Many elected officials and government

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<sup>123</sup> In recent reports there has been some space to infer slightly closer numbers as Twitter now also reports account information sought by governments in “emergency” circumstances such as self-harm and terrorism. This is not a tremendous help—in the second half of 2016, these constituted a little under 10% of requests. Nonetheless, requests for information on parody accounts would presumably fall in the remainder.

agencies presumably just brush off parodies with a shrug or a laugh. What is rarer are the officials who embrace Twitter parody accounts, the two notable examples being Rahm Emanuel, who inspired the famous @MayorEmanuel account that depicted with surreal splendor Emanuel's Chicago mayoral campaign in 2010–2011; and Dilma Rousseff, who inspired the much celebrated @dilmabr (Dilma Bolada/Badass Dilma), begun as her presidential campaign in Brazil wrapped up in 2010 and still active today. Both Emanuel and Rousseff, rather than attack parody accounts creators, instead embraced and eventually met with the people behind the accounts.<sup>124</sup>

This is, however, an unusual response. When elected officials do take notice, more commonly events play out as they did in Mount Vernon. Consider Starkville, Mississippi, where local police demanded Twitter furnish account information for @FeelingPerky, a parody account for Vice Mayor Roy A. Perkins. The investigation, according to news reports, began on the initiative of the police department itself—no one filed a complaint. The wonderfully named Captain Troy Outlaw of the Starkville Police Department insisted that the police department would continue to investigate Twitter accounts that don't initially identify themselves as parody (again, despite the fact that the Supreme Court has ruled parody needn't explicitly name itself).<sup>125</sup> Or consider the (rarer) example of a Facebook parody, of Mayor John Spodofora of Stafford, New Jersey. Spodofora, too, was furious to discover the parody (or, rather, for his granddaughter to discover it) and immediately contacted the police chief, claiming, yes, you guessed it,

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<sup>124</sup> It could be argued that in bringing the account creators' identity to the public eye, these politicians effectively hamstrung the accounts, even as they embraced them.

<sup>125</sup> <http://www.cdspatch.com/news/article.asp?aid=34170>.

harassment and wrongful impersonation.<sup>126</sup>

This isn't limited to smaller towns, though the officials of such do seem to possess thinner skin. The New York District Attorney's Office decided to subpoena Twitter for account information in pursuit of @BicycleLobby, a parody account of longstanding, after @BicycleLobby announced that they were responsible for a flag prank on Brooklyn Bridge. (They were joking.) In March 2017, Customs and Border Protection, the largest law enforcement agency in the US, attempted to unlawfully use a tool designed for investigating goods and services to compel Twitter to release user data for @ALT\_uscis, a rogue government account. (See chapter 4, Tweeting Like a State for further discussion of this case.)

In the United States, perhaps most famous of these suppression efforts was that of Jim Ardis, the mayor of Peoria, who, like the mayor of Mount Vernon, the mayor of Stafford, the vice mayor of Starkville, and so many others, took an intense dislike to a small account that parodied him, @peoriamayor—to the extent that his emails, bespangled with comic sans font in royal blue, led to a SWAT team raiding the physical address associated with the account's IP address. This case, too, shows a worrying lack of attention to the First Amendment. In the email chain of officials attempting to figure out what statute the Twitter account violates, no one mentions parody or free speech. Neither of the two investigating detectives who applied for the search warrants cite First Amendment or speech training in their search warrants. Three separate county judges—who, as judges, clearly *have* had extensive First Amendment training—signed off on three search warrants, of Twitter, Comcast, and the physical premises associated with the

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<sup>126</sup><http://www.app.com/story/news/investigations/watchdog/government/2015/03/06/staff-ord-mayor-police-investigate-political-opponent/24533147/>.

IP address.

The day after the police raid, Matt Buedel, a journalist from the *Peoria Journal Star*, emailed the police chief, naming @peoriamayor a parody account and asking for explanation as to what potential crime had required the raid. The police chief cited 720 ILCS 5/17-2(b)(2), a new Illinois statute on false personation of public officials and employees. The reporter followed up:

It seems this investigation could bleed over into a First Amendment/free speech issue when it comes to parody/satire and whether anyone would reasonably believe those tweets came from the real Jim Ardis. Is that aspect at all considered when deciding whether to pursue a criminal investigation of this nature?

The police chief shared both the reporter's initial email—and the chief's response—and the reporter's follow-up with the mayor. To the initial email, the mayor replied:

Chief  
It's not a joke & it's not funny. I want this  
Prosecuted because what they did was WRONG

Mayor Ardis's response is curious here. He rejects the account on two grounds: First, that it's not a joke, having compressed parody into the conceptual confines of joke. Second, with an implicit, contradictory "as a joke," he rejects it on the grounds that it's not funny. He does, at some level, recognize this is a joke. As Kramer's excellent study (2011) of humor ideologies and rape-joke arguments online shows, some people hold that there are jokes that can never be funny. This echoes, too, an assessment element we'll return to further in chapter 5, *The Social Media Contract: the funniness (or not) of parody*. Back before Twitter even existed, legal counsel advised one of its founders-to-be

that funniness was much too subjective a criterion for assessment. Ardis wraps up with an all-caps insistence on moral judgment that points to a sense of great personal grievance. To which Chief Settingsgaard replies, “I agree completely. This wasn’t parody.” Note, at no point in these emails do either of these two debate what would constitute parody or consider whether they might be wrong.

In response to the reporter’s specific mention of parody and First Amendment considerations, Chief Settingsgaard wrote, “I don’t agree it was obvious and in fact it appears that someone went to great lengths to make it appear it was actually from the mayor.” Bear in mind that this is an account that—according to the search warrants themselves—was tweeting things like “2 fucking things to get off my chest. 1. If you don’t like Peoria and u wanna sit here and bitch about den leave. 2. Who stole my crackpipe?” and “I’m up all night woke up with pussy on my breath and bloodshot eyes and we got people talking bout live tweeting? Let me do my job u do urs.” This yields a strange dissonance: either such tweets are indeed likely statements to come from the mayor, such that this parody account is indistinguishable from the physical article—in which case, why would the mayor be offended? Or, they are extremes that do not represent the mayor, in which case he might be offended but anyone encountering such tweets will also recognize that they are not realistic communications from this elected official—in which case, they are recognizably parody rather than impersonation.

These examples share certain details: Though the actors who initiate it vary slightly, an apparatus of power, configured out of elected officials, police, and judges, is being activated and brought to bear against a usually small, relatively unknown parody account. The actors of the apparatus of power show a lack of awareness of Twitter, its

genres, its norms. Any specialized computer training focuses on hardware and forensics, not speech or mediated social interaction. This apparatus lurches into action without discussion—or with minimal discussion—of the First Amendment or parody. Indeed, these topics typically enter the conversation through outsiders, whether they're scholars like me, or journalists like Matt Buedel of the *Peoria Journal Star*. And, in fact, even with external assistance, those within the apparatus can sustain a willful blindness to parody. How does that happen?

### **Parody, public secrets, and channel control**

Following the multiple explosions of communication technologies in the twentieth century and early decades of the twenty-first, the relationship between such technologies and states, power, and authority has become a major preoccupation of social scientists. Consequently, a rich body of scholarship details communication technologies as, among others, critical infrastructure for political networks (e.g., Kasza 1988; el-Nawawy 2006; Winseck and Pike 2007; Yang 2010); as sources for new political identities (e.g., Anderson 1983; Boyd 1975; Huffman 1997; Robinson 1999); and as catalysts for political practices (e.g., Habermas 1991; Kim 2008).

Control over these channels, particularly in the context of censorship, has also been extensively researched, from Japanese courts seeking to determine how realistic different media technologies are and consequently likely to influence people (Cather 2012), to attempts to mediate significant political differences between predominantly Saudi financiers and Lebanese talent in satellite television in the Arab world (Kraidy 2007). While internet channels have at times been granted more latitude than older

channels of communication—particularly with regard to expression—access to them has also been consistently controlled (for a global overview of such practices, see Deibert et al. 2008, 2010). Announcements consistently continue to appear in the news regarding governments' decisions to restrict access to different platforms, with Twitter a common target.<sup>127</sup>

In the course of this research, I repeatedly bumped into governmental attempts at channel control—ironically, with regard to my Freedom of Information Act and other public records requests. These included access controls, e.g., allowing only certain methods of delivery for requests; use controls, e.g., in terms of the production formats selected as well as times and channels of delivery for responsive documents; as well as barriers such as extensive delays, unlawful demands for information, and lack of training on the part of records clerks fulfilling requests. My experiences are, again, not unusual; similar obstacles have been repeatedly noted by researchers (e.g., Barstow 2010; Pasquier and Villeneuve 2007; Theoharis 1981).

Among other objectives, governments control access to and use of channels to manage secrecy. Secrecy—its production, organization, and regulation—serves to perform and enact the legitimacy of states (Agrama 2012; Heo 2013; Nugent 2010; Piliavsky 2011; Turner 2005). With regard to parody, particularly important is the management of the public secret (Taussig 1999)—that which is widely known but intentionally not publicly expressed. Chapter 1, *Aspect Shift*, detailed the creative and recreative work parody does, both at the level of indexed meanings and at the level of

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<sup>127</sup> This paragraph, by necessity, touches on only a few of the many examples of research on these topics, highlighting particularly ones that have influenced the thinking behind this current dissertation. Scholarship in this area is extensive and impossible to survey comprehensively in a paragraph or two.

modeling comparison and openness. From another angle, parody articulates public secrets.

Parody offers its interlocutors apt comparison and perspective; these may be humorous or not. Parody relies on what Oring (2003) terms appropriate incongruity. It requires that its interlocutors acknowledge the underlying logic of the relationships of its elements while simultaneously recognizing that the proffered combination transgresses in some way. Public secrets are, consequently, parody's bread and butter. A public secret need not be anything more significant than the fact that a politician—the mayor of Mount Vernon, the mayor of Peoria—is neither universally loved nor universally respected. Or the public secret may be that authority is performative, that the emperor has no clothes. While a lack of absolute love or respect surprises no one and imperial nakedness is well known, there are few places to publicly express such sentiments in their full, glorious emotion. To disdain, deride, mock, hate, sneer.

While the appropriateness of specific examples of parody may be debated, as a mode of expression, parody is widely accepted around the world. Indeed, as a mode of social critique, parody appears to be nearly universal. Parody extends across communities of different scales, from rural comedy at weddings in Iran (Beeman 1981) and Western Apache comedic imitation of the whiteman (Basso 1979), to global financial politics addressed by the mayor of Reykjavík (Boyer 2013) and US performance artists the Billionaires (Haugerud 2012).

As Jones, in a review of scholarship on secrecy, notes, “people...use the strategic ambiguity of the public secret as a mechanism of social control or to perpetuate the status quo in the face of historical injustices” (2014: 55). Parody, on the other hand, is a designated space for challenging public secrets. For the broader public that interacts with

parody, explicit revelations of public secrets may be experienced as relief or as a celebration of their own superiority.<sup>128</sup> The principal figures in such public secrets—as well as designated secret keepers and defenders—however, may experience revelations as doubly levied attacks, simultaneously connecting at both personal and public levels. Taussig (1999) writes of the “defacement” that occurs in the revelation of a public secret, in which the surface is torn away to reveal the depth—an act of despoiling that is at once both repulsive and attractive. It is, perhaps, not surprising then that people in positions of authority, acculturated to channel control, mobilize their apparatuses of power to defend and protect themselves against such acts. “Chief,” wrote Mayor Ardis. “It’s not a joke & it’s not funny. I want this Prosecuted because what they did was WRONG.”

More is required, however, to explain their apparent blindness to even the possibility of parody or freedom of expression issues—and their willingness to think it is acceptable to ignore such issues even after they have been explicitly introduced. We turn next to relations among parody, authority, and listening; subsequently we will investigate the ramifications of persistent ideologies of the unreal internet.

### **Parody, authority, and listening**

Just as bureaucratic paperwork is an exercise of obedience and hierarchy, parody is an exercise of comparison and change. To “get” parody requires attention and listening. Indeed, parody requires listening to multiples: an original and a modified version, a collection of parts and their assembly instructions. Parody thus encourages people to listen more deeply, to listen to connections and nuance. It offers complexity and

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<sup>128</sup> Relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory are the three dominant theories of humor in English-language scholarship.

openness—both of which challenge authority in its hegemonic presentations—and requires a certain reflexivity, an ability to listen and hear nuance and multiple voices. I suggest that the mayors and detectives and other civil servants who seem strangely incapable of seeing the possibility of parody, much less recognizing it or respecting it as an important freedom of expression, have difficulty with the very form of reflexive, nuanced listening that understanding parody deploys.

Marsilli-Vargas (2014) argues persuasively that listening should be understood as having genres with particular pragmatic and intentional characteristics, genres that may be associated with, among others, different professional roles. While I do not have the evidence to assert comprehensively the contours of any governmental or authority listening genre, this lack of reflexive listening seems to be a shared feature of a genre associated with (some) positions of authority. (Notably, governmental social media managers, the subject of the next chapter, do not seem to demonstrate this.) I suggest this as a partial explanation for how successful politicians, detectives with many years of experience, and judges who sign off on search warrants act in contradiction to the legal system they are sworn to uphold. From a variety of angles, these acts are missteps: Parody is not recognized as parody. The unrecognized parody accounts are often small and rather uninspired in their content, and yet mistakenly deemed important or influential. Attempting to silence such accounts mysteriously seems a good idea, with no concern for either the First Amendment or, more self-interestedly, the Streisand Effect.<sup>129</sup>

The US political system has a strange hole when it comes to listening. Although the Constitution establishes the US as a representative government, citizens currently

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<sup>129</sup> The Streisand Effect refers to the phenomenon where attempts to silence or remove something from the internet leads instead to an amplification of the attention it receives.

have no recognized right to be heard by elected representatives. While courts have heard arguments about rights to not listen and obligations to listen, these have invariably been couched in First Amendment interpretations regarding citizens' ability to select speech they encounter and where they encounter it. And indeed, while courts have recognized a right to receive information, there are also cases that suggest otherwise.<sup>130</sup> Though it has lain fallow in court cases for nearly a century, the petition clause of the First Amendment offers an underexamined possibility for recognizing a right to be heard (Krotoszynski 2012): a right to petition for redress implies a listening dynamic.

We can see, too, prioritization of governmental speech over governmental listening in current iterations of transparency efforts. Current understandings of freedom of information entangle with ideas of free and open source software (FOSS) and ideologies of liberating/liberated information. Correspondingly, the rights-based movement that previously undergirded freedom of information laws has shifted toward an open government data (OGD) framework (Janssen 2012). An agency releasing datasets to the public of its own volition or following an executive directive is an act of speech rather than listening. Responding to a FOIA request requires both listening to the request and demonstrating that listening. Both can be valuable, though the types of value they offer differs. OGD, as Janssen (2012) highlights, is as much about commercial uses of data and efficiency as it is about improving public access. The two approaches thus model notably distinct perceptions of government-citizen relationships, with a key difference lying in their listening dynamic. A strong focus on producing speech—whether that takes the form of oratory or datasets—builds different attention habits and interaction

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<sup>130</sup> See, for example, *Houchins v. KQED, Inc.*

expectations than responsive listening, likely making it more difficult to recognize nuance and plurality.

Which is not to say that people in positions of authority don't engage in their own forms of listening. They do, particularly listening that reinforces the apparatus of power, both in the form of surveillance—which treats people as objects rather than subjects—and in the form of obedience within the system of their own apparatus. In the description of my encounter with the Mount Vernon Police Department regarding the @MayorBudNorris parody account, you may have noticed that I specified the various communication channels at play. Telephone calls mixed with faxes mixed with emails. All of these descriptions prioritized voice over listening. Consider the story again, this time told from the perspective of listening: A reporter listening to the account got the mayor to listen to her and the account; the mayor got a detective to listen who got a judge to listen and then together the detective and judge got Twitter and Comcast to listen and then the detective got me to listen and then I got my friend to listen, who in turn got the detective to listen who got the prosecuting attorney to listen who then said, no one else needs to listen to this because it's ridiculous.

Taken as a whole, then, a number of communicative factors may predispose (some) people in positions of authority to fail to recognize the parody in front of them. Why, though, do they continue to attempt to silence parody, even after it has been explicitly called out as parody and freedom of expression concerns have been invoked?

### **The unreal internet**

Over the years, the internet, social media, and Twitter itself have been understood

through many ideologies. As with prior communication technologies such as telegraphy and radio, shining progress narratives situate the internet as a step toward utopia. Technoliberalism (e.g., Malaby 2009; Coleman 2013; Kelty 2008) heralds the glorious emancipatory powers of internet technologies. Technologies, from this perspective, are tools to defeat oppression and achieve—or, more modestly, ground—universal human rights. Through a magic of similarity and overlapping actors, this resonates with the rallying cry, “Information wants to be free!” Here the internet is framed as supranational network grounded in a nonpolitical technical ingenuity that moves beyond the petty regulation of nation-states in order to serve humanity as a whole. As discussed further in chapters 5 and 6, such optimistic narratives shape much of how Twitter both brands itself and is framed by news media and users.

And then there are the moral panics. These, too, echo earlier instantiations regarding writing systems, typewriters, and others: internet technologies destroy our humanity, ruin our ability to relate to each other, make us lonely and incapable, foster deceit, and erode our grasp of grammar,<sup>131</sup> all with dire moral consequences. Prior to the global events of 2011 and the subsequent shift in conceptions, Twitter, with its 140-character focus on status messages, was often pessimistically portrayed as linguistically incomprehensible and primarily for the egotistical.

Both progress narratives and moral panics recognize and try to make sense of ongoing change. Less splashy and sensational, but persistent and slippery are ideologies of the internet’s unreality. From this perspective, actions and interactions online are somehow unreal or less real than actions and interactions that occur face to face or even

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<sup>131</sup> Language conflict, as Suleiman (2004) argues, is often a proxy for other types of social conflict.

via older, socially accepted communication technologies such as telephony. Such actions and interactions are fake, inauthentic, or “just” play. Indeed, identification of internet spaces as spaces of and for play overlap with ideologies of its unreality. Both position internet interactions as a separate mode of being. This overlap notwithstanding, in contrast to progress narratives and moral panics, ideologies of the unrealness of the internet are used to halt or cordon off change. As with the access and use controls discussed earlier, this, too, is a method of control, one deployed by people in positions of authority seeking to maintain the status quo.

If, as you read this, you find yourself thinking that somehow interactions on the internet are indeed less real, consider the example of ecommerce: Have you ever placed an order with Amazon or Rakuten or Ali Baba or similar and simultaneously had fundamental doubts about the reality of the transaction? Ideologies of the unreal internet are selectively applied and perform social and political work. Notably, they surface repeatedly in conjunction with speech and social interaction. They are one reason why users turn to platforms for responses to and adjudication of harassment rather than to traditional forms of authority. If this, too, seems natural or reasonable, consider where you would turn for recourse upon receiving a series of threats by telephone or UPS. Would you demand your telephone company take responsibility and, perhaps, screen your calls so that you never received such a message again? Would you insist that UPS eliminate that sender’s ability to ever send anyone anything via their service again? The police and courts are the acknowledged route for handling such crime, though a decidedly

imperfect one.<sup>132</sup>

Consider law enforcement's response to Gamergate, the "militant online movement that wants to end feminist criticism of video games,"<sup>133</sup> notable for its extensive campaigns of harassment on social media. Individuals reported rape threats and death threats as well as other forms of harassment to both platforms and law enforcement. FBI investigations largely went nowhere, in part due to identification difficulties and apparently jurisdictional confusions. They did, however, identify at least two men who issued such threats and, during investigation interviews, confessed to doing so. Despite evidence and confessions, the FBI declined to prosecute, in one of the cases explicitly describing the man as doing it "as a joke."<sup>134</sup> I suggest that this deprecation of online threats is a strategic fusing of humor ideologies (Kramer 2011) and ideologies of the unreal internet, by the self-confessed harasser and supported by the FBI agents, to relocate these actions outside governed reality.

As another example, consider the Facebook practices of the Bangor Police Department. My interest in the Bangor PD was piqued after coming across their Duck of Justice (DOJ for short) online. The Duck of Justice is both a minor social media celebrity and a taxidermy duck rescued by Bangor Police Sergeant Tim Cotton from a dumpster. In

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<sup>132</sup> A comprehensive discussion of the systemic inaction of law enforcement regarding harassment online would also consider the perpetuation of power structures in the crimes chosen for investigation and prosecution, as well as the class of citizens the criminal justice system has been designed to protect, and that harassment extensively targets women and minorities. Further, the odd but prevalent belief summed in the child's saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." that specifically separates out harm from language as necessarily a collaboration between abuser and victim.

<sup>133</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/gamergate-fbi-file-2017-2>.

<sup>134</sup> According to the FBI's investigation records:  
<https://vault.fbi.gov/gamergate/Gamergate%20Part%20001%20of%20001/view>.

the spring of 2014, Cotton took over the police department's social media accounts and decided to embrace humor and humanity in his posts. Soon the Duck of Justice began appearing as the departmental mascot in Facebook posts. Fans and a rush of social media love quickly followed. Just as celebrated parody accounts inspire copycats, so too did the Duck. With mild disdain at such blatant copying, Cotton told me of the Nauga-duck of Justice, launched by the Naugatuck Police Department, which they (belatedly) named "Bangor." Soon police officers from all around country were writing to Cotton, praising him and seeking his social media advice.

In one such thread, the chief of a small police force contacted Cotton on Christmas Eve to wish him Merry Christmas and commend him on his great posts. Six months or so later, in June 2015, the chief wrote again, seeking advice about a post that was "getting out of hand." How did Cotton handle problematic commenters? Cotton advised the chief to avoid tit-for-tat exchanges and stay positive. Cotton also wrote:

If someone gets out of hand and keeps posting repeatedly, I usually ban them if all they ever say are negative things. I do not delete peoples posts because it can look like you are selectively allowing some and not others. You can hide any post that is ridiculous so that only the person and their friends can see it. That way they think they are still getting through...

If someone is always negative, BAN them. But I leave their comments up on the page and BAN them a few days after when I see them on another post. That way, it gives some time and distance from their original comments and they don't really think about it anymore. Then, BAN them. There is nothing that says you have to listen to them all the time, but deleting their comments can get you into trouble on free speech issues.

This is curious, because on the one hand, Cotton explicitly identifies the act of deleting comments as having free speech issues. On the other, Cotton enthusiastically recommends both hiding posts—without commenters' awareness—and banning

commenters entirely, without seeing either as a free speech issue. (Cotton also explains to the police chief that he will delete entire posts if people “get out of control with swearing and negatives,” a problematic practice given public records obligations.) Note too that, as with the previous detectives, Cotton—who must negotiate speech issues daily for his police department—does not appear to have received speech training. Indeed, as he’s happy to share, he knew very little about using social media prior to taking over the department’s accounts.

For Cotton, appropriate application of the free speech category is a problem. Discrete acts of speech—comments—he recognizes as free speech. On the other hand, the platform affordances of hiding and banning seem to exist in a separate domain. And yet, such actions dramatically impact the ability of the speaker to speak. These are practices that haven’t been specifically addressed in case law yet. In theory, they shouldn’t have to be—from Cotton’s description, he is censoring based on content, which receives the highest degree of scrutiny in judicial review in the US. Further, with regard to banning, his solution doesn’t even strive to be “narrowly tailored” as courts require. These legal standards extend across communication channels. Cotton, however, not only doesn’t strive to narrowly tailor, he targets the entire account, eliminating all future speech.<sup>135</sup> This, of course, follows the pattern of trying to silence an entire parody account. In no cases that I could find, around the world, did any government official attempt to remove merely a tweet or set of tweets from a parody account. Rather, the entire account itself—the account-person—was attacked.

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<sup>135</sup> And, too, this is on Facebook, rather than Twitter, in which accounts are pegged to “real names” and consequently users officially have only one dedicated account allowed to their personal identity.

To a degree, the presence and promotion of ideologies of an unreal internet among people in positions of authority can be understood as expressions of uncertainty and confusion. Modern sovereignty has relied on the control of the double bodies of its subjects: a legal body and a biological one (Agamben 1998). As discussed in chapter 2, *The Account-Person*, bodies and personhood take rather different forms in social media presence than physical presence. The lack of an obvious biological body to be controlled calls into question the power of traditional governmental authorities. Further, I suggest, this missing leverage point disinclines them to recognizing the paired legal body with its rights. As a result, law enforcement and others declare large swaths of such interactions unreal, outside governed reality, and withdraw. In the process, they abdicate a great deal of authority and governing power—which, as chapters 5 and 6 describe, are in turn being acquired by platforms.

This yields an apparent paradox: on the one hand, parodies of elected officials are framed as “real” attacks, their status as playful expression ignored, on the other, speech and social interactions involving others online are framed as unreal or less than real. This is less of a paradox than it may initially seem. A similar ideology of unreality underlies the various examples, facilitating both an unmooring from preexisting categorizations and the potential for fresh categorization. This, of course, resembles the aspect shift of parody. Such shifts toward indeterminacy and openness are problematic, however, when undertaken by law enforcement and elected officials in systems founded in the rule of law. The authority of the rule of law lies in its consistency. It is undermined when applied inconsistently.

This withdrawal and inconsistency of traditional authorities creates a zone of

exception (Thomson 1989) similar to those seen during European colonialism. In those, too, governance and personhood experiments abounded, largely under the supervision of private companies. Here, too, colonial domains were characterized as separate worlds, their indigenous inhabitants characterized as somehow less than real persons. And still further, here, too, categorization schemes were used and reused to serve empire and nationalism (see, for example, Prakash 1999). As Hansen and Stepputat (2006) write, “The colonial world was...a twilight zone of multiple, indeterminate configurations of power and authority” (302).

In the digital twilight zone of Twitter, we see traditional state authorities mix acts of abdication—visible, for example, in inaction in harassment cases and imbalances in training, with detectives trained to investigate computer hardware, but not speech online<sup>136</sup>—with acts of re-creation. Irate mayors, sycophantic law enforcement, and others, themselves use this unreality to see what they can get away with. They, like our parody account creators, try on new categories and see how they can develop them and who will accept them. They use these ideologies of unreality to play—a worrying, legally problematic form of play, but play nonetheless.

### **Of whale sharks and not-so-tough gangsters in Dubai**

We’ve spent this chapter investigating attempts by people in positions of authority in the

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<sup>136</sup> While there is a strong focus on hardware and forensics training among law enforcement, comparable speech training is missing, even though speech acts are fundamental to interactions online. This imbalance surfaces across the cases described in this chapter, present everywhere from the search warrant applications and bookmark bars of Detective Ely of the MVPD, to the social media nonchalance of Sergeant Cotton of the BPD. Training modules of the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers and the talks at the biannual SMILE (Social Media, the Internet, and Law Enforcement) conferences show similar weighting.

US—a country grounded in representative government, with a legal system that prioritizes and even valorizes freedom of expression—to silence or suppress parody accounts. We’ve scrutinized this contradiction and the epistemological contortions it yields and examined features that predispose such attempts. The @mayorbudnorris example introduced at the beginning of this chapter involved a US politician parodied by a pair of his erstwhile constituents, also in the US. In chapter 1, Aspect Shift, we examined the account of @SheikhKhalifaPM, which parodies the prime minister of Bahrain though the account creator doesn’t live in Bahrain (or didn’t during the periods of our interviews). How do people in positions of authority in systems that don’t prioritize freedom of expression, in which governmental legitimacy isn’t grounded in representation of public interest or will, respond to their own local parody accounts?

Consider the UAE, and more specifically Dubai. Dubai is one of the seven emirates of the UAE; the UAE is a federal monarchy; the legal system is complicated by the use of procedures drawing from the English court system, Egyptian law, and Sharia law. It’s further complicated by zones within Dubai in particular which are governed under entirely different court system and law. The UAE Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, but “within the limits of the law.” The law details a number of specific categories residents aren’t allowed to speak negatively about in public—government, rulers and their families, Islam and other religions; residents are not allowed to share material that may cause ‘moral harm’ (for example, about sex or alcohol); nor are they allowed to harm others with their speech, e.g., through defamation or violating privacy.

As with Bahrain and other Gulf countries that have large foreign worker populations, the UAE includes people with a wide range of languages and citizenships. It

is a place where state-run newspapers carry ads admonishing people to protect privacy and exercise restraint in taking photos to post on social media, where the two telecom companies Etisalat and Du are both run by the government, where, if something that is posted offends another enough to report it to authorities, imprisonment and deportation are common. Lawyers for those who have tweeted something deemed offensive often argue diminished responsibility. Parody and satire, the go-to defense in both court and public opinion in the US, is rarely offered and if it were would likely be disdained—UAE’s Cybercrime Law of 2012 specifically names online sarcasm a crime when directed toward members of the ruling family and allies (the latter seems a catchall not vigorously pursued).

The UAE, with its unusual legal zones, hosts a wide range of global finance, media, and other business transactions. It is very much a key node where people use global networks to participate in social movements and circulation flows beyond the particular node. It was from the UAE that Google employee Wael Ghonim co-launched the We Are All Khalid Said Facebook group that swelled popular protest against the Mubarak regime in Egypt in 2010–2011. It was in the UAE that Taghreedat, a volunteer crowd-sourced translation group, sprang up during the pro-democracy protests of the Arab Spring, to translate first tweets and the Twitter platform (“taghreedat” means “tweets” in Arabic), and then other social media platforms and their third-party applications.

Surveillance is extensive, as is the perception of surveillance. Many residents told me stories of surveillance and consequent censorship—of undercover law enforcement who roamed the giant malls, successfully defeating terrorists’ plans (as the most

economically and socially liberal city in the Gulf, Dubai is the focus of some extremist ire), of discouraging fledgling authors from drawing too direct parodies that emphasized parallels between the UAE and *The Hunger Games*. Residents who comment unfavorably about something government related ritualistically follow it with praise of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai and Prime Minister of the UAE. Four months into my residence there, I found myself doing the same when a visiting friend railed publicly against the clothing requirements for men and women in malls.

As I've detailed elsewhere (Johnson 2016), Dubai is, nonetheless, also home to a thriving standup comedy scene. While comedians avoid some of the forbidden speech areas—I never heard anyone discuss the ruling family in performance at all; politics, religion, and government were discussed only obliquely—others, such as sex, consistently thread through performances. Local comedians deploy a host of strategies to negotiate the grey areas of UAE law—to all intents and purposes, quite successfully. These include performing in English, hosting sets in bars, a readiness to apologize profusely, and, perhaps most notably, targeting jokes at stereotypes of foreign residents: Jumeirah Janes, Filipino servers, Lebanese musclemen, et al. (Emiratis makes up only 10–15% of the UAE population). Clare Napper, a British expat, was honored in *Emirati Woman* for her series of sly satirical prints that critique Europeans in Dubai, from their use of nannies to the point where children don't recognize their parents, to “expat rage” triggered by infrastructure or public service failures, to drunken binges at Friday brunches, and more. As of 2015, Dubai now hosts the annual Dubai Comedy Festival, which has hosted artists from Dave Chappelle to Trevor Noah to local comics.

And yet, in 2013, three creators of a parody video—two Emiratis and a US

citizen—were convicted of endangering national security and imprisoned under the Cybercrime Law of 2012. It is difficult to discern even the possibility of national security concerns in the mockumentary they posted to YouTube.<sup>137</sup> Entitled, “Ultimate Combat System: The Deadly Satwa Gs,” the parody gently teases a generation that grew up in the Dubai neighborhood of Satwa for pretending to be more hardcore than they are. As Shezanne Cassim, one of the creators of the video, told me, the mockumentary had been up for roughly five months with only favorable response, when suddenly the police wanted to speak to its creators. The assumption is that someone saw the video, was offended, and reported it—and that single report triggered the imprisonment of these three (now released). Sheikh Mohammed has since said this case was mishandled and wants future cases handled differently.<sup>138</sup>

As with the cases of the mayors of Mount Vernon and Peoria, Cassim describes being unable to get the investigating police officers to recognize that this was a parody. The judges involved in the case (for unclear reasons, the initial judge was unable to continue and a second had to take over) evidently never watched the video. Instead, they worked off a transcript, translated into Arabic.<sup>139</sup> And yet, after Cassim was convicted, prison guards would look Satwa Gs up on YouTube—it’s still available—and tell him they thought it was funny. As in the US, categories were deployed strategically, turning a mostly well-received gentle mockumentary into a national security concern.

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<sup>137</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUk5CB9kaBY>.

<sup>138</sup> I cannot tell if my desire to include this sentence originates in wanting to provide a comprehensive description, or if it’s a remnant of the reflex to praise Sheikh Mohammed after criticizing some element of UAE government. Likely both.

<sup>139</sup> Court proceedings in the UAE must take place in Arabic; given the extensive use of English throughout the country, however, the likelihood that the judges didn’t speak English is very small.

All of which is to say that the UAE serves as a space for satire and comedy and challenges to authority, but not much in the way of challenges to *UAE* authority.<sup>140</sup> The grey areas of the legal system that allow Dave Chappelle to joke about fetishizing foot sex and Shezanne Cassim to be imprisoned for a mild neighborhood mockumentary discourage such efforts. The persistence of posts online likely further inhibits—notable features of the Dubai/UAE media ecology include print-only news publications and websites that don't archive their content. And, too, perhaps because the native Emirati population is relatively low and the foreign resident population is divided by origin and implicit/explicit categories of “expats” and “foreign workers” and “laborers,” people outside the UAE also haven't tended to engage with the government through parody accounts of its politicians. Notably, I have not been able to find any parody accounts for Sheikh Mohammed.<sup>141</sup> This, I would suggest, is a result of the self-censorship also visible in standup comedians' careful topic choice and Napper's targeting of satire toward European residents.

Perhaps more surprisingly, even parody accounts that personify nonhumans are rare. While parodying specific technologies might cause an account creator to offend someone involved with that corporate brand, nonhuman animals don't have the same complexities. The Dubai Museum details the many animals found in Dubai—falcons and camels, but also gazelles, oryx, foxes, wolves, hares, jerboas, and hedgehogs. Falcons, in

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<sup>140</sup> In some ways, this resembles the situation on Twitter itself: though parody thrives across the platform, there is very little parody of Twitter the company to be found, in part because the company restricts account naming possibilities in such a way that names similar to “Twitter” cannot be used.

<sup>141</sup> The queens of Jordan show a similar absence. Despite both Queen Rania and Queen Noor having extremely popular Twitter accounts, I have been able to find very few parody accounts for either.

particular, repeatedly occur throughout Dubai, in the flesh, in symbols, in ads, and in news reports about falcons killing drones. You might expect a bevy of falcon accounts—or, if falcons seem too symbolically invested to be safe for play, at least a hedgehog or two. I have been able to find very few parody accounts for nonhumans in conjunction with Dubai. One exception to this is @dxbmarinashark/Dubai Marina Shark.

@dxbmarinashark appeared on the scene on 27 August 2015, tweeting: “I’m so bloody lost.”<sup>142</sup> This was in response to the arrival of a whale shark in the Dubai Marina. Like much of Dubai, the Marina is a recent, artificial development, so much so that when trying to geocache in the area in 2016, online geocaching maps showed no body of water at all, despite the water in front of my eyes. Infrastructure throughout Dubai has a similar hit or miss feeling, with sidewalks abruptly ending in the midst of multi-lane roads, metro stations with walkways so smooth as to be dangerously slippery, and a bus system that a significant portion of residents aren’t even aware exists. The whale shark, no doubt confused by Dubai’s re-architecting, wandered from the Persian Gulf into the Marina to widespread delight among residents.

The Twitter account, likely created by one or more Brits<sup>143</sup> (this is one of the few Twitter accounts that ignored my requests for an interview) was greeted with similar widespread delight. Newspapers from *Khaleej Times*<sup>144</sup> to *Emirates 24/7*<sup>145</sup> noted the

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<sup>142</sup> <https://twitter.com/dxbmarinashark/status/636859735870836737>.

<sup>143</sup> Due to spelling, lexical choices, and humor styling of the account, as well as the relatively high British presence in the UAE in the aftermath of British colonialism in the region. Alternatively, the account is run by someone who learned English in an area heavily influenced by British English and culture.

<sup>144</sup> <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/dubai/whale-shark-takes-a-swim-in-dubai-marina>.

<sup>145</sup> <http://www.emirates247.com/news/emirates/whale-shark-comes-visiting-dubai-marina-again-video-2016-08-03-1.637718>.

inspired parody account. For roughly a week the account—which either by necessity or by choice uses English, much like the standup comics—tweeted groan-worthy puns and gently poked fun at the area: “Enjoying Friday brunch in Dubai Marina – especially the dolphin-oise potatoes.”<sup>146</sup> “There is literally nothing to do in here. It almost feels like it’s man-made.”<sup>147</sup> “Looks like I’ll be here for a while and should look for work. Any good career oppor-tuna-ties out there?”<sup>148</sup>

As Twitter accounts go, @dxbmarinashark is pretty mild. The challenges to authority that it offers—and I doubt that the account creator(s) intend or would describe the account as challenging authority—are grounded in its play, its choice to sidestep serious, sincere accounts of the world, rather than in political critique. For our purposes, what’s interesting is that global brands and government agencies responded significantly differently to @dxbmarinashark. Brands played along gleefully.<sup>149</sup> Thus, for example, in response to the dolphin-oise potatoes comment, the hotel @LeRoyalMeridien/Le Royal Meridien replied, “@dxbmarinashark Come and join us for our Seafood Brunch @GealesDubai ! MUA HA HA HA.”<sup>150</sup> Government agencies, however, had difficulty recognizing the parody involved.

Explaining that they were lost and needed help out of the marina, @dxbmarinashark tagged the Roads and Transport Authority (RTA) in multiple tweets. The RTA’s half of these interactions has since been deleted, but it is clear from the

<sup>146</sup> <https://twitter.com/dxbmarinashark/status/637222670430396416>.

<sup>147</sup> <https://twitter.com/dxbmarinashark/status/637162002146684928>.

<sup>148</sup> <https://twitter.com/dxbmarinashark/status/637669148756066304>.

<sup>149</sup> As did individuals, including @Fahadosman / Fahad Osman <sup>TM</sup> then-Twitter employee in the newly opened Dubai office, who tweeted: “@dxbmarinashark ever thought about selling personal finance at exorbitant rates? You know. Becoming a loan shark?”

<sup>150</sup> <https://twitter.com/LeRoyalMeridien/status/637553003235446786>.

echoes that remain that the agency treated it as an entirely sincere request. They likely deleted their tweets upon realizing from the delighted tweeted giggles of other Twitter users that it was nothing of the kind.

The whale shark's Emirates ID (or lack of it) arose in an exchange with another Twitter account. The Emirates ID is the country's official biometric ID card, required for all residents and necessary for purchases such as phone contracts (other than prepaids). In the exchange, @dxbmarinashark responded, "No, they had trouble taking my finger prints"<sup>151</sup> and then tagged two official governmental accounts, @EmiratesIDUAE and @EmiratesID\_HELP. The latter took the situation quite seriously and promptly replied, "@dxbmarinashark Kindly provide us with your application number so we can further assist you."<sup>152</sup> @dxbmarinashark pushed to make the humor a little clearer, responding, ".@EmiratesID\_HELP I got the application form wet, it's completely soaked. Do you have an underwater facility I can visit?"<sup>153</sup> This evidently wasn't enough for @EmiratesID\_HELP, which then tweeted, "Kindly follow us so we can send you a direct message in able to assist you further."<sup>154</sup> @dxbmarinashark didn't reply further to this thread, but two others did, one in English, one in Arabic, laughing that @EmiratesID\_HELP didn't get the joke and explaining that @dxbmarinashark as a fictitious account ("حساب وهمي") of the whale shark in the Marina.

It appears that in the UAE, governmental social media managers, as well as courts

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<sup>151</sup> <https://twitter.com/dxbmarinashark/status/636870882887995393>.

<sup>152</sup> [https://twitter.com/EmiratesID\\_HELP/status/636875986982838272](https://twitter.com/EmiratesID_HELP/status/636875986982838272).

<sup>153</sup> <https://twitter.com/dxbmarinashark/status/636876472666341376>.

<sup>154</sup> [https://twitter.com/EmiratesID\\_HELP/status/636880256146784256](https://twitter.com/EmiratesID_HELP/status/636880256146784256). While it is possible that @EmiratesID\_HELP recognized @dxbmarinashark as an account personifying a whale shark and decided to adopt a straight man role in humorous response, the lack of contextualizing cues and a lack of persistence in continuing the interaction suggest otherwise.

and law enforcement, have difficulty categorizing parody—speaking, perhaps, to a consistent government approach to interactions. (In the next chapter, we’ll see that governmental social media managers in the US tend to approach parody accounts quite differently than the elected officials and law enforcement described in this chapter.) In the UAE at least, this categorization difficulty may also be explained, in part, by the diverse resident population of Dubai. As the cranky comment sections of the *Pan-Arabia Enquirer* suggest, the many linguistic and cultural competencies of the region can make the communication and recognition of playfulness complicated.<sup>155</sup>

### **Final thoughts**

This chapter has examined attempts by people in positions of authority in the US to mobilize apparatuses of power in order to silence parody accounts. It has argued that such efforts build on and integrate with extensive governmental practices of channel control; that an imbalance toward speech among governmental authorities makes difficult the kind of reflexive listening necessary to recognize parody; and that persistent ideologies of an unreal internet not only serve as a form of channel control, they also sanction worrying re-creative play with the limits of power and authority. Further, the chapter compared these efforts within a system with strong freedom of expression protections (the US) and those within a system with weak protections (the UAE). Interestingly, categorization issues seem to extend across systems. There is a refusal to recognize parody, which appears partially a recognition difficulty and partially strategic denial because recognition

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<sup>155</sup> Dominant expressive cultures and media focuses establish shared foundations that can be drawn on with relative ease for parody and other forms of humor. In a global network, degree of media exposure and circulation flows makes some topics widely available for recognizable commentary.

would require abandoning silencing tactics. Not everyone in a position of authority refuses to recognize parody or attempts to silence it. In the next chapter we will turn to others who embrace a distinctly different approach than those detailed here.

It is worth noting that the common combative and tolerant approaches toward parody today among people in positions of authority stand in opposition to longstanding, global histories of fools and jesters. Closeness and informality marked the relationship between rulers and jesters. The jester was the ruler's privileged partner, both a diplomatic tool and a valuable source of truth, advice, and remonstrance. While occasionally jesters offended, reported instances of offense are in the minority. Despite their mockery, rulers by and large treated them with great affection, rewarding and protecting them (Otto 2001).<sup>156</sup> Imagine—what if governments today similarly embraced and listened to parody accounts?

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<sup>156</sup> This entire paragraph is greatly informed by *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jesters Around the World* by Beatrice Otto.

## Chapter 4

### Tweeting like a State

On the morning of June 19, 2014 a small black bear was spotted in a tree on the Bethesda campus of the National Institutes of Health. The bear had evidently ambled his—later interactions proved the bear male—way through the NIH’s various post-9/11 security measures. Researchers were emailed. Media arrived, camera crews set up, helicopters buzzed. Phone-wielding paparazzi clustered and began excitedly recording the event. Police urgently consulted each other. Local Twitter—that is, accounts of people and organizations in the area and their extended networks—bustled. People joked about the bear’s lack of appropriate ID, his inability to find parking, the possibility of sedation by budget meeting.<sup>157</sup> Amidst all of this, @NIH\_Bear was born.



**NIH Bear**  
@NIH\_Bear

Things I've learned by being a bear on the @NIH campus: the honey bee decline is not being addressed nearly urgently enough.

6/19/14, 12:09 PM

**22** RETWEETS **19** FAVORITES



**NIH Bear**  
@NIH\_Bear

Look. There's no need for violence. I'm a bear, not soft-money faculty.

6/19/14, 2:43 PM

**30** RETWEETS **25** FAVORITES

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<sup>157</sup> <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2014/06/bear-nih-tree-sets-twitter-aflutter>.



NIH Bear  
@NIH\_Bear

I want Collins, in a scuba-suit, with an R01 and a budget-cap waiver.

6/19/14, 2:48 PM

24 RETWEETS 18 FAVORITES



NIH Bear  
@NIH\_Bear

Sometimes I wonder if one bear can make a difference. And then I singlehandedly bring a major government entity to its knees.

[#believe](#)

6/19/14, 5:51 PM

132 RETWEETS 110 FAVORITES

*Tweets from @NIH\_Bear; 19 June 2014.*<sup>158</sup>

The bear was spotted around 11am. The account began tweeting at 11:47am. “I’m not a bear!” the account tweeted, “I’m Senior Faculty here to complain about funding lines!! @NIHDirector.”<sup>159</sup> It tweeted throughout the day, pairing jokes about conducting research, internal NIH practices, and academia with play-by-plays of the physical bear’s adventures. Within a day, it had acquired 2252 followers and showed 331 tweets.<sup>160</sup>

Most news reports of the bear mention, too, the Twitter account. Indeed, many of the reports even go so far as to conflate the physical bear and the Twitter account, with headlines like, “Bear on NIH campus live tweets his own capture”<sup>161</sup> and descriptions like “the creature had at least two Twitter accounts”<sup>162</sup> and “By mid-day, the @NIH\_Bear

<sup>158</sup> [https://twitter.com/nih\\_bear/status/479657203100422144](https://twitter.com/nih_bear/status/479657203100422144).

[https://twitter.com/nih\\_bear/status/479696000467365888](https://twitter.com/nih_bear/status/479696000467365888).

[https://twitter.com/nih\\_bear/status/479697270900658176](https://twitter.com/nih_bear/status/479697270900658176).

[https://twitter.com/nih\\_bear/status/479743305904050176](https://twitter.com/nih_bear/status/479743305904050176).

<sup>159</sup> [https://twitter.com/NIH\\_Bear/status/479651571567833088](https://twitter.com/NIH_Bear/status/479651571567833088).

<sup>160</sup> [https://nihrecord.nih.gov/newsletters/2014/07\\_04\\_2014/story4.htm](https://nihrecord.nih.gov/newsletters/2014/07_04_2014/story4.htm).

<sup>161</sup> <http://www.thespectroscope.com/read/bear-on-nih-campus-live-tweets-his-own-capture-by-raeka-aiyar-128>.

<sup>162</sup> [https://nihrecord.nih.gov/newsletters/2014/07\\_04\\_2014/story4.htm](https://nihrecord.nih.gov/newsletters/2014/07_04_2014/story4.htm).

had its own twitter account.”<sup>163</sup> Reporters tweeting as events progressed also sometimes used the @NIH\_Bear handle.<sup>164</sup>

At 1:59pm, the account—and the bear’s appearance at NIH—was shared to a listserv for governmental social media managers by an employee at the Social Security Administration. The employee concluded, “NIH doing social media right!!!” Numerous other list members wrote in to express their delight. One praised, too, @MDNRP, the Twitter account for the Maryland Natural Resources Police, for its playful interactions with the @NIH\_bear account. (Note the difference here from governmental interactions with @dxbmarinashark in the previous chapter.) At 4:07pm, Alyson Olander, the web analyst/social media specialist at NIH’s OD Online Information Branch, wrote to the list:

My apologies for not responding sooner, but we were out watching the bear rescue (and trying to get a good photo to tweet).

As far as we know this is a parody account and the @NIH account, at least, will not/is not allowed to acknowledge it.

But thanks for the kudos. I wish we were “doing social media right”.

Almost two and a half hours later, at 6:28pm, the director of the NIH, Francis Collins, tweeted, “Hey @NIH\_Bear, great to have you & your sense of humor on the #NIH campus. Sorry about that dart thing, but hope you enjoy your new digs.”<sup>165</sup>

The previous chapter detailed governmental efforts to control and constrain parody. Such efforts are not, however, the sole story of relations between governmental

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<sup>163</sup> <http://gizmodo.com/black-bear-safely-relocated-after-sneaking-onto-nih-cam-1593845253>.

<sup>164</sup> E.g. “The @NIH\_Bear has decided to come down and is now running away #Rockvillebear pic.twitter.com/yuTAUnM7c3”.

<https://twitter.com/Fox5Kyle/status/479696809498251264>.

<sup>165</sup> <https://twitter.com/NIHDirector/status/479752641132908544>.

authority and Twitter parody. On the contrary, as the various commenters on @NIH\_Bear show, the state is porous and polyvocalic. Governments include employees spread across many roles other than law enforcement and records clerkdom. This chapter contends that the governmental social media manager is a key interpreter of representative government—an actor typically overlooked by the public, the news media, and the government itself. The communication ideologies of governmental social media managers tend to emphasize direct interaction with “the public,”<sup>166</sup> even as they continue to position government agencies primarily as authoritative speakers (rather than authoritative listeners or collaborators). Drawing on listserv archives, interviews, governmental social media guidelines, news articles, and social media use, this chapter traces emerging norms for governmental social media managers—around parody and play, authority, and political representation more broadly.

Governmental social media managers, like Alyson Olander and the other listserv members mentioned above, run agencies’ social media accounts, whether that be Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, Snapchat, or something else. Following internal social media guidelines—which may be brief or more extensive—the social media manager shares information, creates a voice, and responds to the public. At times, through their voicing or co-voicing, they also define the social media presence and message of political appointees. As governmental employees, they have a particular relationship to identity and newsworthiness. They are, simultaneously, contemporary adults, with smartphones in

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<sup>166</sup> I use *communication ideology* here to group together language ideologies (Irvine and Gal 2000), media ideologies (Gershon 2010b), graphic ideologies (Hull 2012), and similar: A communication ideology comprises all of one’s ideas about the ways communicative elements both do and should work. Note that the focus here is on *ideas* of how communication works; actual practices may differ significantly from ideologies.

their pockets or bags and personal experience with social media.

As the case of @NIH\_Bear shows—and as we will explore in greater depth throughout the chapter—official recognition and acceptance of parody accounts remains complicated. @NIH\_Bear undeniably reads as having been created by someone who works at NIH. In its early days, it abounded with inside jokes and cultural references. Whoever created it immediately recognized the appearance of the bear as an opportunity for Twitter parody—the account was tweeting within less than an hour of the bear having been spotted. This speaks to the communicative competence of the account creator(s), both in recognizing the event as a subject suitable for this genre, and in having the Twitter familiarity to immediately create it. It is likely this responsiveness, in part, that so delighted the governmental social media managers. (In addition, of course, to the tongue-in-cheek humor of the account.)

@NIH\_Bear wasn't the only such Twitter bear to appear: the event also yielded @bethesdabear. @bethesdabear, however, arrived on the scene at 12:30pm and never seems to have attracted the same following (in March 2017, the account shows 135 followers and 360 tweets). Both #NIHbear and #bethesdabear were in use during that day. A few media articles mention @bethesdabear's existence, but noticeably fewer than include @NIH\_Bear. @bethesdabear just isn't lavished with the attention and embedded tweets that @NIH\_Bear is. This may be because @NIH\_Bear arrived first, had a more newsworthy modulator tag, tweeted far more, or offered a quirkier sense of humor. Note, too, the conflation of the physical bear with the Twitter account in headlines such as "Bear on NIH campus live tweets his own capture." News articles, as highlighted in chapter 2, The Account-Person, are common sites for conflation of person and account.

Here, that conflation extends even further, fusing a bear—who we can reasonably assume does not run a social media account of any kind—with an account run by a human or humans.

Twitter parody accounts are newsworthy. They are not, perhaps, always worthy of their own news articles, but they are reliably newsworthy points of reference and sources for quotation. This resembles the inclusion of parody accounts on Twitter lists (a platform affordance that enables curations of accounts) regarding current events (Johnson 2012). As we discussed in the previous chapter, such newsworthiness holds particular concern for some governmental authorities—in part because a parody account’s newsworthiness can be entangled with their enunciation of public secrets. At the same time, the newsworthiness of parody accounts appeals to others.

As @NIH\_Bear strongly suggests, government employees likely already create such parody accounts unofficially. The governmental social media managers of the listserv loved the account and praised it. No one wrote to criticize it. On the contrary, this was “doing social media right.” At the same time, the NIH social media manager reported that the official @NIH account wouldn’t acknowledge the account—using passive phrasing that suggests this was a decision handed down from above. Here we see a difference across employees and roles. The layer of administrators who advise on and write guidelines for social media tend to suggest caution and a more conservative approach, whether or not that matches their own personal strategy—or even that of the ultimate boss of the institution. (This is likely one reason NASA’s decentralized model of

social media management tends toward the more playful.)<sup>167</sup> To further complicate this picture, the director of NIH engaged directly with the account to compliment it on its sense of humor and recognize such play as a positive contribution to the NIH workplace. Social media norms are far from standardized or stable.

@NIH\_Bear remains highly active: As I write this in March 2017, the account has 5272 followers and shows 9431 tweets. What began as a tongue-in-cheek live tweet of an unexpected ursine visit, with wry thoughts on contemporary research in the US, has become a vocal critic of how politics, and the Trump administration in particular, affects science.




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<sup>167</sup> This is not to say that someone high in the hierarchy might not buck this trend in extreme circumstances: In November 2016, @USOGE, the Twitter account for the US Office of Governmental Ethics, a predictably bland informative account, suddenly burst into a series of snarky tweets attempting to publicly pressure president-elect Trump into ethical divestment from his conflicts of interest, and advertise that he had not yet done so, despite promises otherwise; these tweets were written directly by Walter Shaub, the head of OGE.



*Tweets from @NIH\_Bear; 31 January 2017 and 16 March 2017.*<sup>168</sup>

While many parody accounts created in response to a cultural moment fade away when that moment passes, @NIH\_Bear shows a different model, evolving into a long-term project.

Wondering what happened to the physical bear? The Maryland Natural Resources Police (MDNRP)—the same agency lauded for its playful interactions on Twitter with @NIH\_Bear—set off firecrackers to startle the bear out of the tree. Then, as the bear lumbered deeper into the trees in search of peace, the MDNRP shot tranquilizer darts into him. While unconscious, the bear was transported and released in the McKee-Beshers Wildlife Management Area of western Montgomery County.<sup>169</sup> All of this, of course, was captured by @NIH\_Bear.

### **New skills, new roles, new speech acts**

In her monumental work, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979), Eisenstein examines the social effects of shifting from a scribe-based publication system to a print-

<sup>168</sup> [https://twitter.com/NIH\\_Bear/status/826567922936053761](https://twitter.com/NIH_Bear/status/826567922936053761)

[https://twitter.com/NIH\\_Bear/status/842382154222960640](https://twitter.com/NIH_Bear/status/842382154222960640).

<sup>169</sup> <http://gizmodo.com/black-bear-safely-relocated-after-sneaking-onto-nih-cam-1593845253>.

based system. This shift required, among other things, new ways of editing and reviewing—in particular, a move toward scrutinizing contents with the aim of making material more accessible to readers. It also led to new social types. With the advent of the printing press, roles like printer, scholar, and publicist intermingled and students shifted from consumers of oral information to consumers of written information (Westman 1980, 475).

Printing technologies have also, of course, been tied to changing ideas of public (Habermas 1991) and nation (Anderson 1983). Habermas argues that in Western Europe public opinion began to acquire authority through the communication networks of mercantilist capitalism. The public then became an element of society distinct from the state, one which exists in opposition to the state and serves as the audience before which the state's acts of representation are performed. This idea of a state–audience relationship, in which the former must somehow justify itself to the latter in order to creditably claim authority, is neither new nor specific to contemporary forms of representative government. Machiavelli, often considered the first modern political theorist, devotes *The Prince* to ways of representing before the public in order to achieve political goals. (As a side note, though infrequently taught thus, when read with Machiavelli's other writings, *The Prince* is clearly satire, its advice actually critique.)

Just as the introduction of print technology created new occupations, skills, and standards (Eisenstein 1979; Febvre and Martin 1976), so too has the introduction of social media. These new roles, too, build on preexisting efforts to justify governmental apparatuses to their publics. While the changing status and roles of software engineers

often dominates the spotlight, another class of workers has become pervasive across corporations and governments: the social media manager.

Governmental social media managers originate in part from previous public relations traditions and often are located within communications teams. That is, the traditions and teams long used by the modern state to explain, justify, and perform itself to its publics. However, the practices of social media managers, governmental and otherwise, significantly differ from previous iterations of public relations. Social media communication offers new kinds of speech events. In particular, social media managers focus on conversation with a broader public, rather than announcements mediated through a press. In practice, with regard to governmental social media managers, this isn't as complete a departure as it might be: Government job descriptions and communication guides tend to focus on one-to-many communications and frame the role of social media managers as spokespeople who share content and do image management, with additional monitoring and response duties.

The governmental social media manager is, consequently, a key interpreter of representative government. The authority of a representative government comes, explicitly, from a constituted body of people, often but not necessarily referred to as a "public." Through acts of representing this body, a smaller group governs. Election, though a popular means of establishing representation credibility, is not required. And not all acts of representation are the same.<sup>170</sup> Parody is an act of representation: a

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<sup>170</sup> Practically, this is perhaps most visible in the difference between person-based and party-based representation, with the US among the countries that favor the former and Japan among those that favor the latter. In person-based representation, the political representative is selected as an individual, with individual opinions and stances. In party-based representation, the political representative is selected as a member of a party, with

recognizable original appears in a new version. It's a form of representation that includes intentional interpretation. Contemporary acts of political representation are typically imagined differently, in terms of consistency and faithfulness (to popular opinion, constituents' wishes, party positions, etc.), often verging on reproduction.<sup>171</sup>

How political representation is to occur—the relationship between the represented and the representative—is a matter of ongoing negotiation. In the US, election of representatives and popular forums such as town halls have grown over time, the latter surging with the introduction of new forms of communication media. One key issue is how much representation happens via third-person representation, which treats the represented as objects about which to gather data, e.g., via the census, polls, etc., and how much happens via second-person representation, which relies on direct communication with the represented as subjects. It is consequently a matter in which communication ideologies entangle.

In January 2011, when Jeannie Layson, Director of Communication and Congressional Affairs at the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, asked her colleagues across federal, state, and local levels for advice about whether to include an explanation for why the EAC wasn't going to accept comments on its soon-to-be-launched blog, no one weighed in—at least, not with regard to her specific question. Instead, colleagues from the EPA (regional and headquarters), TSA, Missouri Department of Conservation,

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the party delineating opinions and stances. The two overlap considerably. The UAE, in contrast, is not a representative government. It is the world's only extant federation of absolute monarchies, a union of seven emirates. Sheikh Mohammed, who governs the emirate of Dubai, is a ruler whose authority comes from his lineage and inherited power rather than representation. That said, almost every sovereign state, the UAE included, is a member of the United Nations, which is a representative body.

<sup>171</sup> In many ways this resembles the textual fidelity insisted of translation, a topic taken up in chapter 6, Of Policyness and Global Polysemy.

and the State Department all advised her to revise her plans. “You know what a blog without comments is? A news release or a web page,” wrote Kevin Lanahan of the Missouri Department of Conservation. “You will lose credibility with readers if you don’t take comments,” urged Lynn Dean of TSA. “We respond where appropriate,” offered Lovisa Williams at the Department of State. “We also ask Community Managers and their staffs to develop a plan on how to handle engagement with the community. This is part of their social media strategy.” These are arguments about genre and ideology, about privileging communication—that is, treating the public as collaborative interlocutors—over practices of information dissemination that rely on a participation hierarchy to convey authority.

Social media managers are communications specialists, often working across channels. This is their job, and for them, the consequences of actions on social media have a gravity far beyond those of the casual user. They are thus in their practices quite distant from the idea of the unreal internet that continues to have currency among a wide swath of the population and government workers (see chapter 3, Warranting Parody). Nonetheless, their social media guidelines—likely authored by others—contain phrases like, “Ethics apply, even online.”<sup>172</sup> In bold. The “even” signals that this remains seen by some as a separate domain, a domain not quite as real, a dangerous, distract unreality that must be warned of and watched warily.

To a certain degree, this highlights social media’s status as not yet stable, norms still emerging. More importantly, it points to the mix of roles involved in the production of social media. Governmental use of social media is never a solo endeavor. Simply

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<sup>172</sup> From the EPA; “Representing EPA Online Using Social Media” Approval date 06/20/2011; Office of Environmental Information.

setting it up entails budget, guidelines, and legal review, intersecting across internal departments and expertise. Further, in an update (almost parody even) of Goffman's classic examination of President Nixon's speech as involving different production roles (1981), social media accounts often yoke together different combinations of civil servants, political appointees, and elected officials, with the civil servants speaking seamlessly on behalf of officials and appointees. Indeed, it is often the officials and appointees who carry the seam, as it were, often but not always signing their direct statements with their initials. Even with the diverse mix of perspectives on social media that must be satisfied or consulted, these collaborations give social media managers considerable power. They can also lead to considerable confusion.

The summer 2013 election was the first election in Japan in which politicians were allowed to use social media in their campaigns. Twitter, consequently, produced its own guide to political use of Twitter and hired a slew of contractors to help politicians quickly get up to speed. (Another form of collaboration that we'll revisit shortly.) Twitter use among politicians was therefore still rather young at the beginning of 2014, when Twitter was slammed by the Japanese press for accidentally verifying an account as Prime Minister Abe when there was no such thing. Except, as employees explained to me, it was more complicated than that. Twitter and some of the prime minister's team had been discussing establishing a verified account. Following one of these discussions, an employee at Twitter set up the account. The prime minister, however, hadn't yet approved the account. The press saw the existence of the account as newsworthy and asked the prime minister's office about it, which in turn denied it in its entirety. The upshot was that news media presented the account as a fake that Twitter had mistakenly

verified, rather than premature. This appears to have been a sequence of confusion and poor communication on both sides: between Twitter and the prime minister's office, and also within the prime minister's team.

### **The hybrid professionalization of social media managers**

For those who don't directly manage accounts, even basic practices of governmental use of social media—from the establishment of accounts to the application of ethics—can seem unsettled. Governmental social media managers, however, would likely disagree. Building on earlier work done by web content managers, governmental social media managers draw on a variety of sources and communities to debate and establish norms. These include an active interagency community of social media managers, corporate inspirations and best practices, and personal experience.

The interaction described above, between Jeannie Layson and her colleagues, occurred on the Content Managers Community of Practice (CMCOP) listserv. This listserv grew out of the Federal Web Managers Council, begun in 2004 to promote collaboration across agencies, and its Web Content Managers Forum. CMCOP is one of two key listservs run by the General Services Administration for digital managers. The second, the Social Media Community of Practice (SMCOP) listserv, built atop the work of the first. The level of collaboration and interagency integration present in the Social Media Community of Practice (and the GSA's support for it) is unusual, even with regard to other matters of software. In March 2015, a social media manager from the State department writes in to wonder why such efforts aren't similarly applied to other software, hardware, or services. In response, Jeffrey Levy, currently the chief of e-

communications at US Citizenship and Immigration Services and a long-time participant of both listservs, explained:

To answer your questions about why we have what we have for social media: because in about 2008, several of us saw what was coming in our field (which was then web management) and got together to figure it out. We were able to do so because the Web Content Managers Forum already existed, as did the Federal Web Managers Council, so the infrastructure was in place to support the community coming together. The GSA efforts on social media TOS, GSA's Justin Herman's coordinating efforts, the existence of this listserv, and OMB's involvement all came from that recognition in 2008. I don't say that to brag or toot my own horn, but to explain: it happened because people saw it and took action in their field, using the community that was already in place, knowing they couldn't take on every possible ramification.

To your other, equally important question about why there aren't similar efforts outside of social media: I would suggest it's because there is no overarching body that deals with all of those things. I mean, it involves acquisition, IT, employee policy, privacy, ethics, etc. That said, I know there's quite a bit of attention to this stuff within the federal CIO Council, although they also have many other enormous challenges to take on, and each agency is also working on them.

Building on that work from 2008, the Social Media Community of Practice (SMCOP) listserv spun off from CMCOP in October 2012, a governmental recognition of a larger shift from "new media" to "social media." By 2017 SMCOP included more than 1200 social media practitioners, representing more than 160 agencies. Over the years, both lists have been spaces for asking for advice, exchanging comment policies, worrying over everything from persistent cookies and their consequences for data ownership within privacy policies to what is the appropriate use of memes by governmental agencies.

People crack jokes, swap gifs, and laugh with each; people become cranky, misunderstand, and scold. People declare, "I am not a lawyer," and plunge cheerfully into

legal interpretation. Since SMCOP's inception, Mike Kruger, Director of Digital Strategy at the Department of Commerce, has posted a weekly list of articles to check out,<sup>173</sup> gathered from tech and government sources like Mashable and Re/code, Nextgov.com and TechPresident, as well as business sources such as Harvard Business Review, MarketingProfs, and McKinsey & Company. Every week he includes a "moment of cuteness," a humorous and/or sweet photo from his family life.

List conversations show why governmental agencies can seem to lag behind other entities in their social media presences: participants speak of the need for internal review, for privacy impact assessments and renegotiations of terms of service, for 508 compliance and assessing commitments to third parties. Governments have specific concerns, distinct from other users. Other delays involve a lack of dedicated resources, and what appears to be an unfortunate transposition of experiences or stereotypes about personal use of social media—the "unreal" conceptualization of the internet rearing its ugly head again—such that managing an official account is seen as a trivial addition to a person's workload rather than a professional practice. To be clear: the participants on this list do not frame their work thus; rather, their comments suggest they have made this mistake themselves in the past or have been on the receiving end of such dismissals. Eyes roll about unnamed others in government who have been slow on the ball because they believed the internet was just a fad. Similarly, some mention embarking on the use of social media with distaste and unspecified reluctance. Many others, however, write with earnestness that their job as a representative of the government is to communicate transparently with the public, about their agency, about their activities, about their

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<sup>173</sup> This originates in Kruger's weekly post for the "webgeeks at Commerce," and has been positively taken up by the SMCOP list.

findings—and in order to do that well, they need to “be where the public is.” And social media is where the public is.

*Of corporate inspirations and structural similarities*

Corporate efforts lead the field of social media management. The governmental social media manager is a specialist, nonstandard position—hence my continued use of the wordy “governmental social media managers” to describe them. This corporate connection influences both the language choices and communication ideologies of governmental social media managers. Government social media managers speak in a hybrid government-corporate register. Terms associated with marketing and business thread through conversations, with participants highlighting customer service, stakeholders, engagement.

This isn't, perhaps, surprising. Social media is still being figured out, by users, by platforms, by media—by pretty much everyone. Platforms, seeking to move into the black, have shifted away from ingenious innovations intended to attract individual users and toward monetization strategies designed to attract brands. Twitter has attempted to capture full sets of NBA players, *New York Times* reporters, and government agencies as authorities and “influencers.” Governments, however, are clearly not Twitter's focus. While the company has in the past hired employees specifically to liaise with governments (e.g., as “news and government managers”) this is not currently an area of expansion for Twitter.

Rather, companies currently receive the preponderance of Twitter's investment. Twitter continues to dramatically expand its marketing teams around the world, all

devoted to “brand partnerships”—indeed, this is the primary endeavor of its global offices. As I type this in April 2017, careers.twitter.com currently shows 77 open positions in Marketing & Communications and Sales & Partnerships. There are, unlike the past, no open positions with “government” in the title, although there are 7 with the keyword “government” somewhere in the job description. Twitter has, moreover, created Twitter Analytics to woo brands to the platform. Twitter Analytics surfaces new basic units like impressions and engagements, numbers that imply progress and success and justify directing resources into tweeting.

Government agencies do not receive the same level of TLC from Twitter as companies do. Governmental social media managers, it becomes clear from their threads, cannot get ahold of people at Twitter (or Facebook, or LinkedIn, or...) with much more reliability than the average English-language user. In July 2013, when an employee at the Department of Defense struggled with downloading an account’s Twitter archive, she couldn’t get the governmental contact at Twitter to respond and asked if anyone else on the list had contacts or phone numbers. In response, an employee at the General Services Administration pointed out that Twitter was likely ignoring her emails because the archive was designed to be downloaded by individual users: Twitter presumably expected her to figure it out on her own, just like any other user.

Within the context of the platform, this employee *is* much like any other user: structurally, governments do not enjoy a privileged presence on social media. This contrasts sharply with government presence in other iterations and modes of the internet. The US government is deeply entwined in the history of the development of the internet and its later regulation through ICANN. More broadly, governmental websites around the

world enjoy preferential weighting in search: designated as reliable and authoritative, they are prioritized in search results over other types of websites. In contrast, on social media platforms, governments have only the limited distinction of verified accounts. (If they even are verified.) Verification, however, encompasses all sorts of public figures/institutions, from rock stars to scholars to branded characters to government agencies, without further distinction.

Consequently, government agencies pick their way along a path charted and widened by brand partnerships. And as Mike Kruger's weekly curations and listserv participants' register choices and communication ideologies show, corporate influences shape the approaches of governmental social media managers as well. At the same time, governmental employees write, as they talk, about "the public" as a thing which they are not, about the Hatch Act and concerns about accidentally engaging in political speech or endorsement, about the need to get oversight before running even the shortest online survey. Governmental social media managers have specific needs and concerns. For the most part, they must figure these out among themselves.

### *Of shadow IT*

Another contextual element influences the governmental social media manager, much as it does employees in agencies and companies around the world: shadow IT. Shadow IT is a term used largely by aggrieved IT professionals to describe employees' decisions to download, establish accounts with, or otherwise share unauthorized software—that is, software that hasn't been reviewed by a company's IT team for issues of privacy, function consistency, malware, or similar. This is typically framed in terms of

unauthorized replacements for company needs, believed to be cheaper, faster, or easier than going through normal channels. Shadow IT is, arguably, another effect of the persistent ideology of the unreal internet: for many, potential consequences of unauthorized downloads and the like seem vague and unpersuasive. Turns out the technoliberalism of user-centered design and cloud technologies has unexpectedly emancipated employees from their IT departments.

Our listserv participants do not admit to such IT depravities. Rather, they conscientiously describe working with various agency teams to review social media use, even when they clearly wish such processes were less onerous. There is, however, an additional angle to shadow IT, a battle apparently lost before it was even begun: an employee today walks into an office carrying multiple networks of communication with her. Indeed, the prevalence of mobile phones—and even more so, smart phones—means that a company or government agency's ability to control communications that take place literally in the workplace has disappeared.

As scholars, we've talked about this from another angle, that of context collapse (Marwick and boyd 2010)—our social media networks tend to bring together what would previously have been separate networks with distinctly different relationships. That is, coworkers and high school classmates and exes and grandparents may now mix, where previously those relationships would have been bounded. A piece that hasn't been much considered, however, is that the same technologies that yield such context collapse have a similar destabilizing effect on other boundaries. It is not only the boundaries of one's social networks that have collapsed, it is the boundaries of the communication systems of the workplace, the school, the subway car, the home, the street corner—and the state. Of

course, employees have always created their own separate social networks outside work. Now those are active simultaneous to being at work. Employees might text or tweet to each other or comment on each other's Facebook posts, and as they do, these communications are on software outside of the IT department's monitoring. The state has lost one of its de facto controls on internal communications. The governmental employee no longer has to leave the office in search of a payphone, communicating independently is a possibility wherever she is.

The effects of a parallel decentralization of channel control can be seen in NASA's social media use. NASA has been much heralded for its social media savvy. In 2012, @NASA, the Twitter account run by NASA headquarters, won a Shorty Award for best government use of social media. In 2014 it won another in the government and politics category. Jason Townsend and John Yembrick, the social media team that runs @NASA, attribute NASA's social media success in part to the agency's spectacular images that literally no one else in the world has access to until NASA shares them. They also emphasized, however, that each of the NASA accounts is run locally, by the relevant NASA base. There is no top-down Twitter style guide for all NASA accounts. Many of the projects have their own Twitter accounts. Consequently, each base—and, indeed, each project—offers its own voice, its own personality. Resonating with broader cultures of play in science, many of these official accounts, like @MarsCuriosity (for the Mars Curiosity rover) and @Philae2014 (for the Philae lander), are run playfully and from a direct, first-person perspective. Indeed, they are run so playfully and with such personality that the boundaries between an account like @MarsCuriosity and its parody

siblings Sarcastic Rover and BiCuriosity Rover blur (Johnson 2014).<sup>174</sup>

At the same time, the experience of communicating has changed. Landry and Bourhis (1997) write of linguistic landscapes, or how the specific, surrounding physical contexts of language use influence meaning. We can extend that, I suggest, to consider device landscapes. Many social media managers access accounts through a mobile device at times. That may be a dedicated work device, that may be a personal device. While it's difficult to know the specific contours of the device landscapes used, mobile devices that host apps offer their own emergent heteroglossia, in their screens and app curations as well as in the physical contexts they are carried into and out of. This, in turn, has consequences for register choices, voice, etc. The when and where of expression has changed significantly, and without much attention.

### **Public identity and verified presence**

As crafters of public presence, social media managers are well aware of the challenges of public identity and particularly impersonation. For the government agency, the consequences of a fake or impersonation are considerably more grave than for the individual. As Justin Herman, head of the GSA's Emerging Citizen Technology program, wrote in 2014, "Citizen expectations of access to services is particularly of concern when most government agencies are not verified on major social media platforms—*following a fake celebrity is not the same as following a fake emergency alert.*"<sup>175</sup> As a term, "fake"

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<sup>174</sup> Interestingly, Yutu, a Chinese lunar rover, has a similarly personable social media presence that also deploys a first person perspective. SMCOP participants attribute this directly to NASA's model.

<sup>175</sup> <https://www.digitalgov.gov/2014/04/22/government-social-media-isnt-lagging-its-different-and-thats-good/>. Italics in the original.

is rather fuzzy, combining as it does ideas of both inauthenticity and falseness. Drawing on the inauthentic sense, news media have at times used it to refer to parody accounts, and parody account creators have used it to signal parody in account names. The concern for government agencies that Justin Herman points to here, however, appears more to do with false or inaccurate information. The information a parody account shares needn't be false. (And indeed, this is part of the reason so many Twitter lists for political events include parody accounts.)

Social media managers, in contrast to the law enforcement and elected officials of the previous chapter, appear largely unfazed by the existence of parody accounts. Or at least, accepting of Twitter's parody policy. In the parody account context, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010 is most famous for the emergence of @BPGlobalPR.

@BPGlobalPR began as a tongue-in-cheek prank by a comedian watching news of the disaster. The account later transformed into an explicit parody account that raised funds for aid and critiqued a corporate commitment to image above all else.<sup>176</sup> It inspired a host of other parody accounts, both about the disaster and through its formative

@[ ]GlobalPR template. Little known, however, is @Oil\_Spill\_2010. This account did not begin as prank or parody account. On the contrary, it was an account run by the US government. 2010 was still early in the history of Twitter and there was considerable experimentation with its use. Someone in the US government set up the account to coordinate different governmental information flows. Later, after governmental cleanup efforts had largely ended, the account was closed. On Twitter, however, when an account is closed its username becomes available again. Someone else promptly reestablished

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<sup>176</sup> <https://theawl.com/the-first-interview-meet-josh-simpson-the-man-behind-twitters-bpglobalpr-1c21f016c48b>.

@Oil\_Spill\_2010 as a parody account. The tale of the parodic reuse of @Oil\_Spill\_2010 is related to the CMCOP list by a hydrologist at the US Geological Survey Office of Groundwater—not with anger, but as part of a larger discussion about how to sunset accounts or announce hiatuses.

While governmental parodies aren't a matter of explicit concern, impostors, fakes, impersonation, spoof accounts—the terms seem to be used almost interchangeably—appear and reappear on both listservs. Representatives from the Election Assistance Commission, the Virginia Department of Health, the Department of State, the US Mint, and many others have sought advice on how to handle such situations. “The Army has seen an influx of impersonations of Medal of Honor recipients and General Officers on dating sites as well as Craigslist, Skype, Twitter, Google+ and Facebook,” wrote Brittany Brown, social media manager for the US Army Office of the Chief of Public Affairs in July 2013. “On average, we report several hundred Facebook impersonations each week.”

In addition to their own direct experiences, listserv managers circulate articles on impersonation. One such article emphasized the importance of account verification, through the example of an “impostor” who set up a San Antonio Police Department account on Twitter, where they used the “official seal of the police department on their page and posted law enforcement themed-tweets (Twitter posts).” (This was in 2009, relatively early in Twitter's existence, hence the explanation of the term “tweet.”)<sup>177</sup>

The Yes Men, performance artists famed for their spoofing and satire, make an appearance on CMCOP in 2009 as well. An article outlining US law on parody analyzes

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<sup>177</sup> Quoted from the *Community Policing Dispatch* published by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services of the US Department of Justice. There isn't enough information provided to assess whether this was a parody account taken amiss or an actual attempt at impersonation.

the Yes Men’s US Chamber of Commerce hoax, with its spoofed website and announcements that henceforth the Chamber would acknowledge global warming in their policymaking (which they had strenuously resisted). As with many Yes Men projects, their version successfully seduced members of the press, leading to extensive reporting. On the CMCOP list, this is framed as a warning of possible spoofing.

Returning for a moment to the unamused San Antonio Police Department, the article concluded, “If the department had already made their own official Twitter, the fake account would never have deceived the citizens of San Antonio. Thus, having social networking account [sic] can prevent risks to public safety.” This is a recurring theme on both listservs: the best way—implicitly or explicitly—to handle impersonation is to maintain a verified presence. An argument for official presence in 2008 offered an anecdote about the US Coast Guard and YouTube: until the Coast Guard established an official account, search results for the Coast Guard were dominated by parody videos. Six years later, in 2014, a web and social media manager at the Defense Intelligence Agency asserted, “There’s also a very compelling argument to be made that maintaining an official presence can avoid confusion with fake accounts.”<sup>178</sup>

Presence, particularly verified presence, forms the primary lens through which impersonation is publicly discussed. Indeed, public identity and verified presence are frequently intertwined. Bearing in mind the lack of a structural advantage previously mentioned, establishing a verified presence offers a means to assert authority, at least mildly, within a particular channel. It serves, too, as counterspeech—that is, in Justice Brandeis’s classic articulation, more of speech itself as remedy to “falsehoods and

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<sup>178</sup> Jordan Higgins, Web & Social Media Manager, Defense Intelligence Agency, in April 2014

fallacies.” Not surprisingly, explanations of verification processes and establishing accounts recur on the lists, with participants circulating platforms’ responses to prior questions and contact details, as well as dedicated materials like the *Twitter Government and Elections Handbook*.

While asserting authority, this verified presence approach also firmly aligns with platform recommendations and corporate approaches. Other than renegotiations of terms of service, government agencies rarely insist that platforms accommodate their needs. On the contrary, the agencies by and large accommodate themselves to platforms—even with regard to impersonation. Thus, for example, in discussing Twitter’s more comprehensive verification for baseball players than governmental agencies, one poster wrote:

When Twitter launched verifications, it was to address a pressing need: celebrities and public figures were avoiding Twitter (or looking into filing complaints against it) due to fake accounts. By verifying accounts, it made Twitter a safer sandbox to play in for high-draw figures, which then in turn spread adoption at a critical time in the platform’s development. Right now all government agencies aren’t under a deluge of fake accounts - like for instance a baseball team – so strategically it isn’t such a large priority to verify an account just for perceived status. If your agency is genuinely seiged by imposters, you’ll likely have a more pressing need we can help address with the folks at Twitter. If not, in the meantime there’s likely other things you can do in-house to give you your bonafides. (April 2012)

This quote offers a good window into much of the conversation on the lists:

Impersonation is seen as problematic, but not as an immediate or urgent threat.

Governmental social media managers express few expectations of platforms and are inclined to assume an inevitable backseat to platforms’ work with companies. Further, there’s an assumption that verification—like the downloading of the archive previously mentioned—is a matter for self-action. And, indeed, by June 2014, the General Services Administration had created a Federal Social Media Registry, designed as a central source

for the various platform presences of different federal agencies, but also as an authorizing body: it comes with an API that allows Facebook (and other platforms) to automate verification. US government agencies have here both accepted the doctrine of the verified presence and adapted themselves to the platform's priorities.

While the idea of official presence as a means to prevent impersonation—or, rather, to reduce possible negative consequences of impersonation—is pervasive among social media managers, it's not clear that it extends to other governmental employees. When an attempt to report an impersonation to Facebook in 2010 yielded the recommendation—from the platform—that the agency in question simply establish their own page, the associate general counsel of that agency furiously named this coercion and threatened to involve the Department of Justice.

All in all, neither verification nor a positive presence on a platform solves the problem of the non-authorized adopting an authority's identity. In July 2013, Erin Krayner, social media manager for the Air Force Office of Scientific Research (AFOSR) wrote in to SMCOP to express frustration. Although AFOSR had a verified account on Twitter (@AFOSR) someone had created the @AFOSR\_q account that spoofed it.<sup>179</sup> In response, an employee at the Department of Education, shared a response previously received from Twitter about a similar matter, that included links to Twitter's parody policy, its impersonation policy, and others. In it, a Twitter employee informed its original recipient, "Bottom line: a user cannot pretend to be you, but they can make fun

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<sup>179</sup> At this point, it's difficult to determine whether @AFOSR\_q was a parody account or something else. Searches for @AFOSR\_q on Twitter turn up no results, suggesting both that the account has been removed from the system and that it was likely never particularly popular—otherwise searches would surface other accounts responding to it.

of you.” Parody accounts—and it’s not clear whether @AFOSR\_q was an attempt at impersonation or parody—were simply to be accepted.

As a final note, there remains yet another identity difficulty for authorities on platforms like Twitter. As discussed in part 1, *Parody and Person*, an account can animate any identity, from a pudding bot to a trope to a prime minister. This is a rich source of experimentation and play. It also offers the opportunity for misleading but plausible identities that don’t correlate directly with a target. Thus, for example,

@RepRobMcCaskill/Rep Rob McCaskill, “Proudly representing Texas’ 37<sup>th</sup> district in Congress beginning 2017!” The account began tweeting on Dec 13, 2016. It used a picture of Trump as its background. Its profile image was a balding, middle-aged white man in a button-down shirt, jacket slung over one shoulder.<sup>180</sup> On February 10, 2017, the account tweeted, “Cant wait for next 9/11 so leftish 9th circuit ruling judges will wish they didnt roll over for enemies wishing death to America #MuslimBan.” The tweet raised a furor, with many denouncing Rob McCaskill. The twist is, Texas only has thirty-six Congressional districts. This account impersonated, trolled, and/or parodied, depending on your perspective, a position of authority by creating a nonexistent version of it. In this case, it’s not clear who would have the right to request to have it taken down,<sup>181</sup> as there is no clear target. Indeed, this isn’t just a problem for authorities, it’s a problem for Twitter—their reporting system doesn’t offer an easy category to report this. Its lack of parody marks, though, allows it to fall into the category of intending to mislead. It has since disappeared from Twitter, visible only in the echoes of its replies.

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<sup>180</sup> Reverse image search with Google identifies this as a stock image; Pixabay lists it under keywords “entrepreneur,” “executive,” and “confident.”

<sup>181</sup> This contrasts, for example, with the case of @ChuckJonesUSW19/Chuck Jones USW 1999, in which a specific individual was impersonated to similarly play to high emotions.

### **Emerging norms of parody and play**

Over the years, listserv participants have repeatedly engaged in thoughtful debate as to what constitutes appropriate stances toward parody and play more broadly. This dialectic, this conversation across agencies, speaks more broadly to social media managers' approach: while they receive broad guidelines from authorities above, they work with their colleagues to establish norms and settle questions of practice. In some agencies, these exchanges are then brought into interactions with internal administrators—that is, those outside the social media team—as explanation and counterpoint. This, I suggest, speaks to an important move away from traditional hierarchies of authority and toward what we might think of, loosely, as crowdsourcing. (Semi-)public opinion is the source of authority. This process, of course, resonates historically across many endeavors in which norms and standards have not been settled. I highlight here simply this practice of asking the list and engaging in reasoned discussion—itsself a practice that shapes emerging norms.

What are those norms? Or, from another angle, what does it mean to tweet like a state? Many social media managers assert that being funny or playful allows their agencies to express personality and warmth. They applauded @NIH\_Bear as “doing social media right.” And, too, repeatedly, list participants frame humor in the context of being where the public is and speaking to different audiences. Social media interactions, they argue, take place in spaces with different communicative norms than more traditional government channels. Social media offers different opportunities to engage. A listicle on BuzzFeed from the Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs to warn

people about online scams, complete with memes and gifs,<sup>182</sup> may be appropriate due to its context when similar use of gifs in, for example, a press release from Congress,<sup>183</sup> might not. (Note that these discourses firmly reinforce the idea of government as speaker.) Multiple people from different agencies note that when they write tweets or other social media posts that are “edgier,” typically by deploying pop culture references in a humorous way, their material gets shared and reshared significantly more than more straightforward recounting of information. Social media metrics abound.

With regard specifically to parody accounts, Twitter, it must be noted, offers government employees a slightly different construction of Twitter parody than it offers on its public help pages. *The Twitter Government and Elections Handbook* (2014), which circulated on SMCOP, is one of several use-specific materials put together by Twitter teams. The helpful glossary of this 137-page publication defines parody thus:

**PARODY:** Twitter users can create parody Twitter accounts, to spoof or to make fun of something in jest, as well as commentary and fan accounts. These accounts must disclose that they are not really the person or subject being parodied, or they will be in violation of our strict policy against impersonation. These politics may be reviewed and violations reported at support.twitter.com.<sup>184</sup>

The “politics” for “policies” is a curious typo, one that cannot but trigger a rueful laugh. It at once both points to hastiness and individual creation—this entry has not been cut and pasted from another document, but rather authored specifically for this document and likely not reviewed broadly—and is a painful Freudian slip. Policies become politics;

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<sup>182</sup> <http://www.buzzfeed.com/travelgov/6-signs-your-online-sweetie-might-be-an-overseas-s-lbebs>.

<sup>183</sup> <http://www.zdnet.com/article/us-congress-publishes-press-release-made-of-copyright-violating-animated-gifs/>.

<sup>184</sup> Twitter Government and Elections Team. 2014. *The Twitter Government and Elections Handbook*; page 128.

parody accounts may be objectionable (to some) due to their politics.

The mockery component of parody accounts is emphasized and even overelaborated, perhaps similarly due to hasty production with minimal oversight. The commitment to freedom of expression that Twitter’s official parody policy so resoundingly declares has taken backseat. Impersonation and intention, too, manifest here differently. Impersonation, which the official parody policy mentions but has moved away from, here has a “strict” policy. Requirements for marking parody have become disclosures of unreality, which are a “must.” Interestingly, the glossary includes an entry for impersonation as well: “see PARODY.” The distinctions between parody and impersonation—visible in their separate official policies—have been collapsed. Intention, meanwhile, so prominent across the history of the official parody, lurks coyly beneath the “to.”<sup>185</sup>

For the most part, while the listservs show that participants want to play in social media spaces—that they don’t just want to “play it straight,” as might be expected of authoritative entities, particularly those that don’t interact directly with individuals—there is little direct discussion of creating parody. This isn’t to say social media managers aren’t thinking about it. In May 2013, Justin Herman at GSA wrote:

[...]On the other hand, there's needless buzz creation that takes resources but has no clear impact on the mission, whether accidental or not. I've answered multiple emails lately on whether agencies can make light-hearted parodies, for instance, and we advise that while its legal it certainly could raise risk significantly in the current climate. This is why we push legitimate performance measurements so much, so rather than having to stick our heads in our shells everytime an agency has a bad week (hint: someone somewhere will likely have a bad week ahead of them

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<sup>185</sup> See part 3, Parody and Platform, for extended analysis of the official parody policy.

periodically), we can smartly advance forward like citizens need while accurately gauging and mitigating risks.<sup>186</sup>

Parodies made by government agencies, this suggests, are unlikely to have “clear impact on the mission.” At the same time, social media managers want to make “light-hearted parodies.” They spend their time attending to interaction channels where fun, clever play is rewarded. And, as the example of @NIH\_Bear shows, when a playful parody waves from a nearby tree, they embrace it enthusiastically.

Meanwhile, in their own discussions, social media managers and content managers—at least those who contribute publicly to the lists—celebrate and seek both parody and play. Thus, for example, they’ll cite @FakeAPStylebook, a parody account that uses a stylebook frame to offer tongue-in-cheek social critique, in good-natured arguments about whether “internet” and “web” should be capitalized.<sup>187</sup>

*Of EPA, Old Spice, and other bewitchments of the Good Idea Fairy*

Not everyone on the listservs greets the public social media experiments with play with delight. Most of the pushback is mild, minor suggestions to think carefully about context, about the agency’s image. One notable exception is Paul Villano, a civilian working for the Army, who at times comes off as a curmudgeon with a fondness for all caps and extravagant suspicion, and at times as a sober, thoughtful resister to media hype.

Consider the CMCOP thread entitled, “Having a little fun w/offical[sic] social media: Old Spice and @EPAGov,” from August 2011.

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<sup>186</sup> Justin Herman, May 29, 2013.

<sup>187</sup> On CMCOP.

The thread begins with Jeffrey Levy<sup>188</sup> describing a recent social media success of the EPA. Old Spice was at that time running a campaign in which Fabio, model hunk of countless romance novel covers, challenged the “Old Old Spice Guy.” Old Spice invited people to ask the rivals questions on Twitter. EPA tweeted to them to promote the EPA’s Pick 5 for the Environment campaign: “Dear @Oldspice guy and @fabiooldspices, what would you do for the environment? epa.gov/pick5.” To the surprised delight of the EPA, Fabio responded, reading the tweet aloud in a YouTube post.<sup>189</sup> Levy announced proudly to the list that this “little fun” helped spread the EPA’s message, with the YouTube video having already been viewed 50,000 times.

Amidst various comments, Scott Horvath, web and social media chief for the US Geological Survey, mentioned that the USGS team monitors trending topics and works to add hashtags for ongoing events like movie premieres and celebrity news to their tweets. Horvath framed this as an example of “being where the public is.” Villano, in turn, argued vehemently against this, first as a form of endorsement:

Why not is that we are not the public, Scott. And by doing those hashtag tricks you are in effect endorsing those products and movies, etc. It’s no different than including commercial links on websites. Be careful. The Good Idea Fairy can be bewitching but government entities must still use social media with the same common sense and ethical guidelines as traditional tools.

Other list members disagreed. Subsequently, Villano described such practices as “fake interaction” and “showing preference and spamming.” Taking up the role of

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<sup>188</sup> You met Jeffrey Levy earlier in this chapter, as the chief of e-communication at USCIS. Just as employees at social media platforms tend to circulate within the tech industry, so do the governmental social media managers circulate among agencies. At this point in time Jeffrey Levy is the director of web communications at the EPA.

<sup>189</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7fXT-YwGPRc>.

reasonable peacemaker, Will Zachmann, the PD&R Web Manager and Contracting Officer's Technical Representative at the HUD USER Research Information Service and Clearinghouse, noted:

There will always be a contingent among our audience who just want their content "straight, no frills - hold the humor and whimsy," and I suppose it's their prerogative to feel that way, and to steer well clear of sites & media outlets that employ / deploy this sort of thing.

For Villano and Horvath, disagreements about what it means to tweet authentically as a state are not new. In March 2010, when discussing governmental renegotiations of terms of service, Villano took issue with the word "modified":

I'd be much more concerned with the word "modified" than anything else. If that is in the officially tweaked version of the TOS for Government use I'd advise strongly that it be taken out. We want government materials viewed, downloaded, even reposted elsewhere. What should NOT happen is that they be edited in any way. Even simple editing can send entirely different messages than the one intended by the official agency and that is untenable.

Villano, who works for the Army, wants governmental material to remain unaltered, arguing that alterations could introduce unintended meanings. The official agency, from Villano's perspective, should control the meaning of its products. This both resonates with corporations' invocations of intellectual property law to control the meaning of their brands (Coombe 1998) and echoes stances discussed in the previous chapter; Villano's position may be related to the Army's strong emphasis on a hierarchy of authority. This position echoes, too, a belief in the moral rights of authors, inscribed into the legal systems of Japan and others, but not the US. A support of moral rights has important consequences for parody. Horvath replied:

@Paul V: “Modified” was my word. But in reality, that’s what people will do since it is public domain. I can’t tell you how many “dancing grizzly” parodies and remixes I’ve seen ever since we re-release[sic] a video on YouTube over a year ago showing a grizzly bear rubbing his back against a tree like he was dancing.

Among the vocal of the lists, Villano’s desire to control governmental material is distinctly in the minority. Levy’s playful engagement and Horvath’s calm acceptance of parody and remix are more representative.

### *Of NOAA mermaids and tellability*

Given the attention that government agencies receive from the news media, it is perhaps not surprising that social media managers might both embrace play and occasionally worry about it. Carnavalesque play—and particularly carnivalesque play on social media, and even more particularly carnivalesque play by a government agency on social media—is highly tellable. Tellability refers to how noteworthy or shareable a particular narrative is (Sacks 1992). As Sacks notes, even amidst destructive, hopeless experiences, “apparently one natural thing that people do is to directly and immediately orient to what a thing it will be to talk of.” (1992: 780) Unusual or quirky practices of social media—itsself still contemporary technological spectacle—remain highly tellable, particularly when performed by official newsmakers like governmental agencies.

Parody can be understood as an attempt to make something tellable. At the same time, encounters with parody accounts are themselves tellable. On an individual level, often the description of a parody account—or even the mention of parody accounts as a topic of study—will trigger reciprocal accounts of parody account pleasures. On a broader level, while parody accounts likely would not appear in an annual or monthly

news summary, the 24-hour news cycle creates space for such small-scale news, much like daily personal interactions include discussions of small experiences that would seem out of place in interactions that occur every six months (Sacks 1992). Practices that yield tellable narratives can thus lead to attention and amplification via both news media and word of mouth. From the perspective of governmental social media managers, with their background in communications and PR, this can be extraordinarily appealing. It can also go awry.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency mermaid controversy<sup>190</sup> shared on the list offers an example of well-intentioned social media play going awry. In May 2012, Animal Planet aired a fictional documentary entitled, *Mermaids: The Body Found*. During the show, actors playing (fictional) NOAA scientists are interviewed and (fictional) evidence of the existence of mermaids is shown.<sup>191</sup> NOAA, as Genevieve Contey, deputy director and managing editor for digital media at NOAA headquarters, was quick to point out to her listserv colleagues, had nothing to do with this production.

After the production aired, “the public” began to query NOAA about mermaids. Consequently, the National Ocean Service, a branch of NOAA, decided to publish a short, three-paragraph post entitled, “Are mermaids real?” as one of its website’s “ocean facts.”<sup>192</sup> The post discussed mermaid lore around the world and emphasized that “no evidence of aquatic humanoids has ever been found.” The National Ocean Service’s

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<sup>190</sup> It really shouldn’t have been a controversy.

<sup>191</sup> A considerable number of threads on internet forums are devoted to arguing the reality of the documentary. Many viewers evidently did not recognize this was fictional. Others, intent on debunking, surface actor bios and scrutinized their purported agency. Thus, for example, <http://projectavalon.net/forum4/showthread.php?41421-Real-mermaid-A-scientific-hypothesis>.

<sup>192</sup> <http://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/mermaids.html>.

social media accounts then promoted this post, as they normally do with ocean facts. All was going swimmingly,<sup>193</sup> until Discovery News published an article entitled, “NOAA denies the existence of mermaids.”<sup>194</sup> That article, which reads as a mixture of accusation and support, led to further developments:

Within a few days, we were receiving inquiries about our mermaid science program, including one question from the Hill about why NOAA was spending any resources on denying the existence of mermaids. In short, we got more attention than we could have imagined (success), and a lot of it wasn't positive for the agency (not success).<sup>195</sup>

Contey ruefully related this story in 2013, roughly a year later, at the prodding of list colleagues following the re-airing of *Mermaids: The Body Found* and a consequent spike in searches on USA.gov for mermaids. At the time, much of the US government was shut down by a sequestration. Tim Fullerton, director of digital strategy at the Department of the Interior (like NASA, the Department of Interior is a social media favorite among government agencies, thanks to the many natural wonders of the National Park Service) added:

It might also be good to remember that we're in the middle of sequestration, which is hurting a lot of people both inside the gov and the general public. It might not be wise for us to be talking so much about mythical creatures. It certainly adds to the “why is the government wasting my tax dollars” argument you hear all the time.

That's not to say there isn't space for jokes or light hearted commentary. But sometimes, we need to take a step back and say “is this really for the betterment of the public and the agency” rather than doing something because it's funny and might increase web traffic for a day or two.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Sorry.

<sup>194</sup> <http://news.discovery.com/history/noaa-mermaids-120629.htm>.

<sup>195</sup> Genevieve Contey, May 29, 2013, to SMCOP.

<sup>196</sup> Tim Fullerton, May 29, 2013, to SMCOP.

Key to Fullerton's comments—and indeed the NOAA mermaid saga overall—is the role of the news media. The ocean fact from NOAA alone comes off as harmless, gentle play that details historical takes on the mermaid. It is the news media, in interpreting the ocean fact, that transforms it into a differently tellable narrative, about waste of resources and political battles.

When the US Office of Governmental Ethics intentionally parodied President-elect Trump's tweet patterns in a series of tweets in November 2016, in order to underscore the need for him to divest from his holdings, the news media framed it with similar negativity. FOIA requests show that the news agencies that contacted OGE overwhelmingly focused on the authenticity of the tweets. Only one specifically identified it as humor. Many wrote of impending deadlines, with implicit threat that the office should propitiate them with immediate response. (Other, nonjournalists who contacted OGE seemed to have similar difficulties recognizing this was intentional humor, with many castigating the office for apparently groveling to the president-elect's lack of ethics.) News coverage, by and large, followed this pattern, with most reports focused on the authenticity of the tweets and their oddness. In contrast to the NOAA mermaid and OGE's sadly unloved parody, @NIH\_Bear charmed the news media. Tellability can have positive and negative effects.

The social media managers of the listservs are professionals. Although they may regret the unfortunate frames placed by the news media and gesture to collapsed efforts ruefully, at the same time they demonstrate a resilience to such experiences. They bear in mind the reactions—and potential reactions—of news media, but such reactions do not define their opinions. Thus, for example, when the official @CIA account celebrated its

one month anniversary on Twitter by lightheartedly answering five questions—e.g., “No, we don’t know where Tupac is. #twitterversary”<sup>197</sup>—the reactions of news media and Twitter users were mixed. While some praised the CIA for being funny, many others sharply criticized the agency, arguing that this lighthearted play dismissed, obscured, or normalized problematic behaviors and projects of the agency. In contrast, all of the social media managers who wrote in publicly to SMCOP on the matter congratulated the @CIA social media manager on wonderful use of social media.

### **Final thoughts**

“The thing the dystopian novels could never predict was the sudden rebellion of the national park social media managers” @DavidJHoyt January 24, 2017.

The preceding tweet was posted roughly two hours after @AltNatParkSer—the first of what would become a flourishing of rogue government accounts—appeared on Twitter. Two hours or so later, just before 10pm ET, @AltNatParkSer had accumulated 13.8K followers. Its bio, which would change over the next 48 hours, read, “Official “resistance” account of the U.S. National Park Service. Protecting rugged scenery, fossil beds, 89 million acres of landscape.” By 11:30pm it had more than 50K followers. By 7am the next morning, that number was up to 157K. Throughout the day, news articles about the account and its early siblings began to appear, and more and more people followed it. By the end of January 25, the day after its inception, @AltNatParkSer had more than 838K followers. The advent of @AltNatParkSer was, by any measure, an extremely tellable story.

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<sup>197</sup> <https://twitter.com/CIA/status/486255845588475905>.

The account's early bios paid homage to that of @BadlandsNPS, an official government account that had received considerable attention earlier in the day after four tweets it posted about global warming were deleted. The National Parks Service later attributed the four tweets to a former employee with unauthorized access (a rogue, one might say). These tweets and their deletion occurred during the Trump administration's broader attempts to suppress information about global warming throughout government channels via gag orders and targeted website editing. Outrage at this suppression was compounded by a comment about the existence of "alternative facts" that Kellyanne Conway, counselor to President Trump, had made two days earlier. Against this backdrop, park rangers—the purported employees behind the @AltNatParkSer but also more generally—quickly became lauded as resistance heroes. Even more, as suggested by @DavidJHoyt's tweet, they became *unexpected* resistance heroes.

This was, largely, the narrative the news media and others told about @AltNatParkSer in that first blossoming of stories: federal employees, prevented from doing their jobs by an administration intent on discrediting them and their service, had taken to Twitter to do their jobs regardless, in their own time. A few journalists advised caution, emphasizing that these were pseudonymous accounts behind which anyone might lurk—and that, therefore, one could not depend on them for expertise or credibility. (Here we see again an ideological entanglement of the inauthentic and the false.) While their tweets might, for now, accurately publish scientific data, there was no guarantee this would persist. The question of whether or not rogue accounts were run by actual federal employees dominated the discussion surrounding them. At least one news

site verified former or current employees behind several of the more prominent accounts.<sup>198</sup>

This chapter’s examination of the social media manager suggests that this development is not so unexpected at all. Indeed, as @NIH\_Bear tweeted regarding rogue accounts, “Newsflash: I have been doing this for 2.6 years already.”<sup>199</sup> I’ve argued that the social media manager is a key interpreter of what representative government means in the contemporary environment—an actor, moreover, typically overlooked by the public, the news media, and the government itself. Governmental social media managers tend to have intense communication ideologies that prioritize direct interaction with “the public.” In the case of the governmental social media manager, communication ideologies include specific ideas about representative government and the role of communication within it, including an eagerness to celebrate and experiment with parody and play. This intertwining of representation and communication has larger consequences for how representative governments are and should be run.

Similar ideologies appear to have motivated the initial creators of many, though not all, of the rogue accounts. There are parallels, moreover, in the extensive IANAL (“I am not a lawyer”) debates on SMCOP and CMCOP about everything from the Hatch Act to Section 508 compliance, and the decision-making processes rogue account creators articulated following their sudden success. Some rogue accounts explicitly declared that their employee creators were transferring the reins to nonemployees. Some replaced official organization logos with redesigned ones. Some did not. Much of the decision-

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<sup>198</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2017/03/11/rogue-twitter-accounts-fight-to-preserve-the-voice-of-government-science/> by Alleen Brown, published March 11, 2017.

<sup>199</sup> [https://twitter.com/NIH\\_Bear/status/824429234533851136](https://twitter.com/NIH_Bear/status/824429234533851136).

making visible among the rogue accounts thus suggest sensibilities that parallel those of governmental social media managers.

This story has not yet ended: On March 14, 2017, Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) issued a summons demanding Twitter turn over user data for @ALT\_uscis, another such rogue account, this time for the US Citizenship and Immigration Services.<sup>200</sup> The summons attempted to use a tool allowed to CBP solely for the purpose of investigating imported merchandise. It is difficult to see this as anything other than a preparatory step to block or chill the free speech of whomever runs the @ALT\_uscis account. This act, too, should come as no surprise given the previous chapter.

Twitter, on April 6, 2017, filed suit to prevent turning over @ALT\_uscis's user data. In their 25-page complaint, Twitter demolished the CBP's attempt as an illegal use of a tool and a direct attack on freedom of expression. Within a day of Twitter's suit becoming public, the CBP withdrew its summons. It is unknown if they are pursuing other action. As we will see in part 3, Parody and Platform, Twitter's actions, too, are very much to be expected.

In their suit, Twitter describes these accounts as "alternative agency accounts." Of the various account categories on Twitter, the alternative agency account most resembles the parody account, particularly in its political guise. It builds on a relationship between itself and an original, and uses that relationship to comment on the original while creating something new. It is, further, unquestionably political speech. As Twitter notes in its complaint, simply sharing factual information can be an act of political dissent.

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<sup>200</sup> Ironically, Jeffrey Levy, who has come up several times in this chapter, is the director of e-communications at USCIS and most assuredly could have told CBP that, entirely separate from the legal issues, this was a bad decision with regard to both Twitter's corporate culture and broader internet norms regarding attention.

Interestingly, the boundaries of the alternative agency category are a bit blurry and have grown more so over time. Some account founders explicitly handed the reins to others, with an accompanying shift in the account's style and content. Other such accounts, however, were, right from their beginnings, parody accounts adopting a new mantle for comedy.

The story of rogue government accounts, its tellability not yet exhausted, unites many of the changes in power traced in this dissertation. Social media platforms, and Twitter in particular, overflow with recreations of personhood and governance. Some governmental actors attempt to control and restrict such recreations. Others accept and engage with them. In the process, power slips from government to platforms, and platforms slowly—and then hastily—reshape themselves to new authority and responsibility.

## Part 3

### Parody and Platform

#### **Our Value Proposition to Users**

... Our platform has been used for charitable campaigns, disaster relief efforts, bearing witness to history, communicating with elected officials, political movements, responding to fans, empathizing with one another, parody as social commentary, product announcements and live play-by-play of sporting events.

~ Twitter's S-1 filing, October 3, 2013

The history of Twitter's parody policy is the history of Twitter's social contract. It is a contract that sidesteps other forms of authority to interact directly with individual users, and it plays out differently across languages. Twitter's policies align the company with different legal systems—and create new, worldwide jurisdictions of their own. They have arisen in response to user creations and demands, the abdication of traditional authorities, and Twitter's own corporate interests.

The two chapters of part 3 chart the platform's evolving articulation of this social contract through the lens of the parody policy. The chapters draw on historical contextualization and multilingual discourse analysis. While these chapters integrate ethnographic and interview data, they also privilege the policy texts. From one perspective, this may seem odd: Many Twitter users seem unaware of the existence of Twitter's policies until they run afoul of them. Others may have a vague awareness of the existence of policies but must resort to Google search in order to find them. Still others

are intensely aware of the policies and build their play—and attacks—in relation to them. So why focus on the policy texts?

Twitter's policy texts are works of expressive art, crafted for multiple functions and audiences simultaneously. In this they reflect the curious ambiguous state of platforms and the ongoing re-creation of law and governance. They also embody a key piece of Twitter's globality: While the English-language versions of the parody policy were written by Twitter's in-house legal counsel, other language versions are the products of translation. The authorial shift from lawyer to translator influences the meaning and function of the policy. Both language coverage and the specificities of language transform who and what the social contract covers.

Lawyers, as Crystal and Davy underscore (1969), are hyper-aware of language and attempts to control interpretation: "Faced with such a series of constraints—the need to avoid ambiguity, to be precise or vague in just the right way, to evade the possibilities of misinterpretation and to conform to the linguistic dictates of the law—lawyers, as we said, became and have remained in their use of language, cautious, conservative, ingenious, and self-aware" (214). It is no exaggeration to assert that every word and phrase of these policies carries an enormous cultural, legal, financial, and technical burden. Chapter 5, *The Social Media Contract*, details how these language choices have changed over time and reveal shifts in agency, responsibility, and rights between users and platform.

Translators, however, typically focus less on fields of possible interpretation and more on fidelity through capture and correspondence. To do so, they often must prioritize a stance and build from there. Consequently, as chapter 6, *Of Policyness and Global*

Polysemy, shows, a platform policy in translation is a different beast from a platform policy in its original language. Through its examination of the parody policy across languages, this chapter also offers cross-cultural comparisons of parody and policy as both actors' and analytic categories.

## Chapter 5

### The Social Media Contract

A change is in progress. We're seeing the writing—the typing really—of a *social media contract*, a governance compact between users and platforms. Its authors are legion: Users clamor and call for accounts to be suspended, reinstated, warned, deleted. Journalists amplify such user calls to castigate platforms while simultaneously ignoring possible roles for local law enforcement and court systems. Law enforcement and elected officials have difficulty recognizing the reality of social media interactions, at one moment abdicating responsibility, at another launching insupportable attack. Government agencies negotiate special terms of services (or not) and launch digital presences as users almost but not quite like everyone else. Platforms write and rewrite terms of services and policy after policy, both in response to these calls, this attention, this abdication, and in response to concerns and goals of their own. And so a social media contract builds, one piece at a time, a global contract uneven in its globality.

Classic social contract theory, of Hobbes, of Locke, of Rousseau, relies fundamentally on the natural rights of people and the consequent consent of the governed. It's there in all of their descendants, too, from Rawls to Habermas—the ultimate authority in a modern state is its public. Similarly, but in the rather less rarified corporate sphere, Hirschman (1970) proposed that we understand brand loyalty through two key acts: exit and voice. The consumer who voices a complaint shows a willingness to engage with the brand, to help the brand recover and improve. The consumer who exits

does not. This theory has shaped much customer support of the last four decades. What happens, though, when those (loyal) voices urge a brand to become a government? When people choose to use their voices in corporate spaces rather than state spaces, and governments, intentionally or not, support this transition? What happens when platforms listen and act?

Twitter's policies articulate an evolving, unexpected, corporate social contract. The history of the parody policy is the history of Twitter's social contract. Twitter uses the parody policy to articulate its constitutional principles. It is a space, moreover, to grapple with issues of intention, impersonation, and censorship. These three issues assert an ability to partake in the contract; to reckon with an account-person that exists as hybrid, envoiced creation of human and platform; and to regulate the platform's constitution by and capitalization on expression. Indeed, users are the platform's fundamental natural resource, their expressive actions refined through platform architecture into commodity. As such, at times Twitter offers a direct social contract with users, at times it presents itself as a guardian of users in its market relations.

In this chapter, I examine Twitter's parody policy across time. In the next, I examine the parody policy across language. As the parody policy is revised and translated, the social contract becomes further institutionalized. The policy's multiple incarnations amplify and justify each other, other policies, and the larger social contract endeavor. This chapter offers a map of the changing political status of a platform as it moves into governance, a status limned and relimned with a mixture of tentativeness and certainty. This map does not look like our familiar terrestrial map. As with Twitter's other policies—and indeed platform policies more generally—the parody policy is

neither tightly bound to the legal system of its nation of origin, nor is it equally global. Rather, it establishes its own structure of parody and expression, of evidence and assessment.

Policy, as we see in this growing social contract, has taken on a new role. Labov, the well-known parent of sociolinguistics, argued for a real-time sensibility to identify and analyze linguistic ‘change in progress’ (1972). While much of such research has focused on phonological variation, the attention that Labov calls for applies equally to other linguistic units. In similar vein, Tiersma (1999) in a comprehensive history of legal language of the UK and US, notes a mode shift in legal language: Initially written records served a primarily evidentiary purpose—they preserved and reported the oral arguments and judgments that took place in court. Over time, however, the written documents themselves acquired power.

In platform policy, we see another linguistic change in progress. Here it is neither phonological variable nor mode that changes. Rather, it is the genre of policy. The felicity conditions (Austin 1975[1962]) of what constitutes policy and who can make policy—with consequences for who and what holds governing authority—are changing. We might even liken this change to the transformations of parody, with platform policy a parody of law, for this change too draws on processes of layered meaning, of replications of another’s identity—though not, perhaps, with quite the same elements of recognition and intention as parody.

Platform policy is not the only form these acts of replication take. For several years Twitter<sup>201</sup> has drawn on authorized reporters, a loose collection of judge–advocates,

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<sup>201</sup> Though not much discussed publicly, Twitter is not alone in this practice. Thus, for

to help address issues of harassment (Matias et al. 2015). More recently, in 2016, Twitter established a formal “Twitter Trust & Safety Council,” a global advisory group promoted as “a new and foundational part of our strategy to ensure that people feel safe expressing themselves on Twitter.”<sup>202</sup> Nonetheless, policy is the most prevalent of such political replications—policy currently multiplies across platforms, carried by employees that circulate among the same elite tech firms.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

### **Before Twitter’s origin story, a policy origin story**

In 2003, Biz Stone,<sup>203</sup> who three years later would help found Twitter, faced off with the executive legal team at Google over Blogger’s content policy. The problem: An abundance of blogs that could be considered impersonation—and thus problematic—“but were obviously fake and often hilarious” (2011: xiii). In classic techie vs. suits style, Stone and his Blogger colleague Jason Goldman—later Twitter VP of product and the first Chief Digital Officer of the White House—insisted that such “solidly funny content should be allowed.” (xiii)

As Stone recounts it, after he and Goldman had dug themselves deep into a pit, a soft-spoken lawyer, who had until then said very little, asked if they really and truly

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example, YouTube has used a system of “trusted flaggers” (Barr, Alistair, and Lisa Fleisher. 2014. “YouTube Enlists ‘Trusted Flaggers’ to Police Videos.” *Wall Street Journal*, March 17.) Similarly, in private communications (2016) activists have indicated performing similar roles for Facebook.

<sup>202</sup> <https://blog.twitter.com/2016/announcing-the-twitter-trust-safety-council>.

<sup>203</sup> Of all Twitter’s founders, Stone has long been the one most explicitly associated with company culture. Indeed, after leaving the company in 2011, in May 2017 he announced he was returning to Twitter specifically to “guide the company culture, that energy, that feeling.” <https://medium.com/@biz/whats-happening-with-me-73e0192c54e8>.

wanted the legal team to create a test for funny content. At their aghast silence, the lawyer—no doubt now quite amused—explained to them that, “in the case of a farcical impersonation, funniness was too subjective.” The category of parody, on the other hand, opened up possibilities, because “parody might be determined fairly by asking ourselves, “Would a reasonable person understand that this isn’t real?”” The argument ended, parody prevailed. This was, in Stone’s words, “a huge win for freedom of expression...” (xiv).

Stone offers this anecdote as an origin story of sorts for Twitter’s parody policy. The soft-spoken Google lawyer with the sense of humor is Alex Macgillivray, known widely as AMac (also his Twitter handle). Macgillivray became Twitter’s first general counsel in the second half of 2009—after Twitter’s first major proliferation of policy in January 2009, but before the introduction of the first parody policy. A *New York Times* article identifies Macgillivray as a formative source of Twitter’s pro-speech policies until he departed in 2013,<sup>204</sup> famously promoting the idea of Twitter as the “free speech wing of the free speech party.”<sup>205</sup> Macgillivray was later appointed Deputy US Chief Technology Officer by President Obama in 2014.

The origin story appeared in 2011 in the foreword of *The F\*\*\*ing Epic Twitter Quest of @MayorEmanuel* by Dan Sinker, an edited, annotated volume of the tweets of @MayorEmanuel, Sinker’s pseudonymous parody account that chronicled an imagined

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<sup>204</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/03/technology/twitter-chief-lawyer-alexander-macgillivray-defender-free-speech.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/03/technology/twitter-chief-lawyer-alexander-macgillivray-defender-free-speech.html?_r=0)

<sup>205</sup> The phrase is first attributed to Twitter UK general manager Tony Wang in 2012 (<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/mar/22/twitter-tony-wang-free-speech>); it later surfaces in conjunction with Macgillivray, as if a quote from him as well, e.g., <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/aug/30/business/la-fi-tn-twitters-legal-champion-of-free-speech-steps-down-20130830>. This both speaks to Macgillivray’s association with this stance and the likely internal circulation of the phrase.

version of Rahm Emanuel's mayoral campaign of 2010–2011. @MayorEmanuel was far from the first such account, but for many users and journalists, @MayorEmanuel put parody accounts on the map as a recognized category.

“On Twitter,” writes Stone in the foreword, having now established his long-term cred, “our rules are clear. Impersonation is pretending to be another person or entity in order to deceive and may result in a permanent account suspension, but parody is encouraged. We even suggest ways users can indicate that an account is not impersonation, such as a bio that distinguishes the account as parody. We think a reasonable person would understand that a man campaigning for political office would not use the following for his official bio: “Your next motherfucking mayor. Get used to it, asshole.”” (xiv)

Ironically, it's not at all clear that Stone has understood Macgillivray's point about the need to set aside humor criteria in favor of recognizable distinctions from realistic representation. In introducing Twitter's parody policy, Stone also writes, “Had this account [@MayorEmanuel] not been funny, it very well may never have survived. More to the point, it might have been deleted.” (xiii) The message here is confusingly mixed: *We don't want to delete funny things. If they're obviously not real, we don't have to. This account is funny and we're not going to delete it. Oh, and this account is also obviously not real.*

Legal advice has swirled with anecdote and personal reasoning to yield what is sometimes referred to online to as “internet lawyering”: the offering of legal interpretation or advice by nonlawyers online. This coincides with changing conceptualizations of expertise, in which technological expertise is extended to new

fields and reframed as subject matter expertise rather than methodological intervention (e.g., Kelkar 2016). Implicated here are long ideologies of programmers as wizards; personally internalized versions of what Lessig (2006) famously articulated as “code is law,” and its pseudo-logical corollary, coders as lawyers; and persistent beliefs of the pre-jurisdictionality, nonjurisdictionality, or a jurisdictionality of internet channels.

Given the elimination of founder Noah Glass’s role from Twitter’s own origin story for many years, we should regard this origin story with some skepticism. Nonetheless, this anecdote—and, more to the point, Stone’s decision to claim this origin story for Twitter’s parody policy—highlights that, by the conclusion of the @MayorEmanuel saga in 2011, parody was already firmly enshrined in ideologies of Twitter. Parody is something to be both regulated and encouraged. Corporate protection of parody—whether that’s by Google or Twitter—is “a huge win for freedom of expression.”

### **The multiple functions and people of platform policy**

Twitter is the only major social media company to have a dedicated parody policy. The policy—and the desire for such a policy—emerges in part from the high-minded philosophy Stone articulates, in part from the disgruntled nudges of parodied celebrities, and in part from the longstanding name affordances of the platform.

Unlike Facebook and, temporarily, Google’s various social arms, Twitter does not require the use of a “real name”—that is, a name registered with a governmental authority. Rather, Twitter works on a dual naming system: a username that begins with an “@” (e.g., “@MayorEmanuel” or “@amac”) and is restricted by availability and length

but not meaning; paired with this is an account name or name (e.g., “Rahm Emanuel” or “Alex Macgillivray”), with similarly minimal restrictions. (Think: machine code and source code, with one addressed to the platform architecture and the other to the human architecture of the account-person, though in this case both are visible to the human eye.) The name can be changed repeatedly and will remain tied to the username. This is significantly different from the parody that thrives on YouTube, primarily as responses to, or new versions of, other YouTube videos. On Twitter, parody exists at the level of account—at the identity level—as opposed to just the level of a tweet or video. This break with governmental authentication has far-reaching consequences for personification and presentations of personhood on Twitter (see part 1: Parody and Person).

Ask an organizational sociologist or a political scientist about Twitter’s use of ‘policy’ to describe its statement on parody and you receive a lengthy, possibly slightly irked, definition of terms. In organization studies, policy is traditionally understood through the lens of corporate governance. Historical and more recent investigations of such governance often emphasize ownership structures and investor relations (e.g., Fligstein and Choo 2005; Hilt 2014). Internal rules—and whether or not employees actually follow such rules—also appear as matters of concern (e.g., Gray and Silbey 2014). In political science, policy is the purview of governments, with its creation, implementation, and consequence extensively studied.

Platform policy is neither of these, both of these, and something altogether different. Where policy-as-corporate-governance is specifically related to the governing *of* the company, platform policy includes an element of governing *by* the company, much

in the way of governance by traditional state actors. Indeed, it is tempting to understand a user agreement or terms of service—the contract presented to a user at the inception of an account, which must be agreed to before proceeding further, often described as “clickwrap”—as a constitution. From this angle, other platform policies become legislation. Platform policy thus plays a curious role, balancing legal force with expressive performance.

Platform policy, as we see it in US tech firms, has roots in the corporate social responsibility (CSR) phenomenon of the 1990s and 2000s. As Shamir (2010) describes it, “CSR is a phenomenon whereby commercial entities deploy social and environmental policies that go beyond their formal legal duties and potentially beyond their goal of maximizing profits for shareholders” (532). San Francisco, a city with a long-term cultural interest in social justice and environmentalism, has hosted the headquarters for the nonprofit Business for Social Responsibility organization since the late 1990s. At Twitter, early company blog posts show employees concerned by the environmental impact of some of their perks and consequently redesigning company choices.<sup>206</sup> Early employees mention that company dinners were often held at Millennium, a famed vegan restaurant in downtown San Francisco, as at least three of the founders were, at the time, socially conscious vegans.<sup>207</sup> In the midst of California’s long-term drought, the green spaces behind Twitter’s Market Street headquarters bore small plaques announcing the

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<sup>206</sup> Thus, for example, this post from 18 July 2007 about switching away from single-use bottled water: <https://blog.twitter.com/2007/twitters-drinking-water-strategy>.

<sup>207</sup> Jack Dorsey, Biz Stone, and Evan Williams; Dorsey later gave up veganism after experiencing some health problems. An employee who mentioned this said all the founders were vegan, but I haven’t been able to confirm Noah Glass’s veganism.

use of grey water in their care.<sup>208</sup> At Twitter's 2015 holiday party at the Exploratorium, San Francisco's hands-on science museum, tipsy employees on the legal and policy teams told me with great pleasure of the meaningful pro bono neighborhood work they did as Twitter employees.

When a concern for social responsibility animates a corporation embedded in and created by social interaction, it is almost a given that the corporation will enact social policy. What is surprising is that this happens with so much acceptance and so little questioning.

Twitter creates and publishes policy with its own set of goals: to mitigate complaints; to establish legal defenses in the event a specific instance is argued in court; to establish self-regulation as the industry status quo; to promote freedom of expression and play/creativity; to appear transparent; to declare a right to make policy and accustom others to following such policy. Lawyers write such policies with the idea always in the back of their mind that they may have to argue the meaning of the texts in court—formal legal court or the informal courts of news media and public opinion. Policies consequently mix legal force with expressive rhetoric, an attempt to manage what some have called context collapse (Marwick and boyd 2010) at the readership level.

People—including governments, activists, brands, lawyers, social managers, and the everyday user—come to Twitter's parody policy with various goals: Their account has been suspended and they are trying to understand what rule they have violated. They have discovered another account in their name with their likeness—they may be being spoofed, impersonated, or parodied. They want to harass another account or engage in

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<sup>208</sup> I observed these over the course of 2014–2016.

otherwise dubious behavior and seek a defensive shield of ambiguous intentionality. They seek to remove material they dislike and are looking for levers and prods to action.

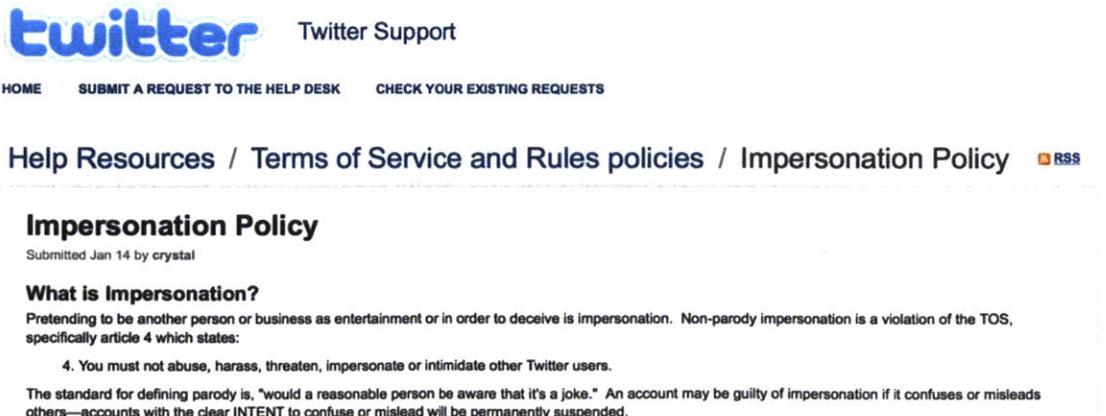
But not everyone finds or looks for the policy. People who are more concerned about a government's surveillance of their life probably aren't looking for Twitter's rules or policies, because they become comparatively less important and/or irrelevant. Further, if you as a user are not framing things under the idea of 'parody' (but rather, for example, as 'bots'), you're not likely to search for or identify the parody policy as relevant in the first place.

If you do look, whether that's through the single dedicated path available in each Twitter client or—more likely—through a Google search, what you find has changed over the years and across languages.

### **The pre-policy: Declaring the recognizability of parody**

The earliest articulation of what would become Twitter's parody policy appeared within Twitter first impersonation policy, part of the company's January 2009 proliferation of policy simultaneous with the previewing of the Rules.

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The screenshot shows the Twitter Support page for the Impersonation Policy. At the top left is the Twitter logo and "Twitter Support". Below it are navigation links: HOME, SUBMIT A REQUEST TO THE HELP DESK, and CHECK YOUR EXISTING REQUESTS. The main heading is "Help Resources / Terms of Service and Rules policies / Impersonation Policy" with an RSS icon. The title "Impersonation Policy" is followed by "Submitted Jan 14 by crystal". A section titled "What is Impersonation?" explains that pretending to be another person or business as entertainment or in order to deceive is impersonation, and that non-parody impersonation is a violation of the TOS, specifically article 4. A numbered list item states: "4. You must not abuse, harass, threaten, impersonate or intimidate other Twitter users." A final paragraph defines the standard for parody as "would a reasonable person be aware that it's a joke." and notes that accounts with the clear intent to confuse or mislead will be permanently suspended.

*Excerpt from the January 2009 Impersonation Policy.*

The impersonation policy opens with the question, what is impersonation?

Pretending to be another person or business as entertainment or in order to deceive is impersonation. Non-parody impersonation is a violation of the TOS, specifically article 4 which states:

4. You must not abuse, harass, threaten, impersonate or intimidate other Twitter users.

The standard for defining parody is, “would a reasonable person be aware that it’s a joke.” An account may be guilty of impersonation if it confuses or misleads others—accounts with the clear INTENT to confuse or mislead will be permanently suspended.

This category of “non-parody impersonation” is a curious one, in that it locates parody as a subset of impersonation. Even more curious is “the standard for defining parody.” Though this invokes the reasonable person test often deployed in US courts and elsewhere, the parody standard Twitter so boldly declares here as “the” standard doesn’t actually match any legal standard. Indeed, US courts, at least, have been loath to approach parody as anything other than contextually determined. The closest legal relative of Twitter’s standard here is the threshold question Justice Souter offers in the US Supreme Court’s seminal *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music* decision: “The threshold question when fair use is raised in defense of parody is whether a parodic character may reasonably be perceived.” (1994) Twitter’s 2009 “standard” doesn’t even match the standard Alex Macgillivray—as recounted by Biz Stone—apparently offered six years prior. “Would a reasonable person understand that this isn’t real?” has been transmuted into “would a reasonable person be aware that it’s a joke,” which is significantly narrower.

Intent—or rather, INTENT—jumps off the screen here, the only word all in caps in the policy. The importance a deliberating system places on intent—when intent is to be considered, whose intent matters, and how it is to be assessed—is a key defining feature of that deliberating system. The role of intent in social and legal regimes varies considerably, with some systems using intent to distinguish among classes of crime (e.g., premeditated murder compared to manslaughter, or burglary as trespass plus intent to commit a crime), while other deliberating systems rarely take intent into consideration (e.g., Duranti 1988; Ochs 1984). As Duranti (2015) notes, in US and European law, intention often “seems to be based on a rather generic sense of intending as a state of mind devoid of or separable from emotions, embodiment, and history” (32). Intent is easy to announce as important, but difficult to describe or prove externally—most understandings of intent rely heavily on subjective knowledge inaccessible to other parties. Courts that attempt this often seek to weigh the probability of events and the level of certainty an individual—the imagined reasonable person, for example—would have that the events that occurred would, in fact, occur. Assessing intent is an act of backwards mathematical prediction, an unsteady, changing algorithm. It’s significant that this platform policy grapples with intent rather than simply focuses on outcome.

In addition to signaling a proto-judiciary at work, this focus on intent serves another important purpose. Intent is tied to agency—and consequently, both liability and the ability to make a contract. This simultaneously recognizes and asserts both the ability for users to participate in this social contract and their responsibility for “their” account actions. Twitter here declares the human primacy of the hybrid account-person.

With no further mention of parody, the remainder of the policy (not shown in the preceding image) concerns itself solely with aspects of reporting impersonation—presumably non-parody impersonation. This entanglement of parody with impersonation decreases but continues throughout the parody policy's versions. Curiously, this impersonation policy, or parody pre-policy, provides steps for redress for both users of Twitter and nonusers, an element that appears in none of the future versions of the actual parody policy. Indeed, it has disappeared from platform policy more broadly as the social contract has narrowed to apply to users and, more particularly, good faith users.

Why, for Twitter, is impersonation parody's bugaboo? The fundamental unit of Twitter is the account, and, except in rare cases, the account presents as a unified identity. As discussed in previous chapters, this opens the door to the use of accounts for identities other than those sanctioned by governmental authority. In this new venue, where the performance or animation of identity is fundamental, impersonation initially appears a sizeable danger. At this point in 2009 Twitter had no verification process, no little blue badge that indicated an account's identity had been authenticated.

The act of impersonation—barring, possibly, Elvis impersonators—carries with it a host of negative connotations, such as deceit and fraud. Impersonation, as a genre, intends to pass unrecognized. Parody, on the other hand—as Twitter argues here—is fundamentally *recognizable*, although recognition of a particular parody as parody may not be universal. This is an attempt to distinguish between good faith and bad faith actors. It's a fascinating one in its elaboration of what we might think of as sincere parody through recognizability. And indeed, as we shall see in a moment, the various iterations of the dedicated parody policy are preoccupied by acts of recognizing parody, detailing

the evidence necessary for such recognition, as well as who must be able to recognize parody.

Fundamental to this discussion of parody and impersonation is the unit of membership. I have argued previously that social media structures cyborgs in the form of the account-person. Some platforms, such as Facebook, have sought to handle impersonation by limiting the account-person to identities validated—and unified—by traditional forms of government. Twitter has not. Twitter, on the contrary, privileges good faith over formal identity. As we will see, the user and the account share the role of subject in the various iterations of the policy. This focus on the account-person yields a curious complexity: in theory, one account associated with a human may be deemed a good faith actor, while another account associated with that same human may be deemed one of bad faith.

**First version: Suggesting guidelines**

On 1 February 2010, the first version of the parody policy appeared on Twitter’s site. Technically, it’s the “Parody, commentary, and fan accounts on Twitter” policy, but as lawyer Christine Kao, the author of the second version of the policy, explained to me—and other conversations confirmed—at Twitter it’s usually referred to simply as the parody policy. Indeed, the second version of the policy uses this shortening in the text of the policy itself, as do media outlets that mention it in articles. 1 February 2010 is the point where the parody policy first exists as a policy in its own right, rather than as an assertion smuggled into the impersonation policy.

In the interim between the impersonation policy's articulation of parody and the first version of the dedicated parody policy, Twitter was sued by Tony La Russa, manager of the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team, who had discovered a parody account in his name. The account, @TonyLaRussa, used an image of La Russa for its profile photo and declared its name Tony La Russa; its location as "Tossing Pujols' salad;" its website as the URL for Mothers Against Drunk Driving (presumably in reference to La Russa's 2007 arrest for drunk driving); and its bio as "Parodies are fun for everyone." As of May 5, 2009, the day before the suit was filed, the account showed three updates (tweets) and had four followers.

La Russa sued Twitter within the Superior Court of California for monetary and punitive damages, claiming trademark infringement, false designation of origin, trademark dilution, cybersquatting, misappropriation of name, misappropriation of likeness, invasion of privacy, and intentional misrepresentation. In the case paperwork, the suit is categorized by La Russa's lawyers as best described as 'Business tort/unfair business practice' (not, it should be noted, as defamation, fraud, intellectual property, professional negligence, or breach of contract/warranty, all of which options were also available). The specific arguments offered to support these claims are dubious at best—for example, it's difficult to see how the existence of a Twitter parody account constitutes "an intentional attempt to divert the public away from Plaintiff's [La Russa's] authorized websites to Defendant's [Twitter's] website" (2009: 4). The account, however, was subsequently taken down and La Russa claimed that he settled with Twitter. Twitter adamantly denied this on its blog, declaring that the company has no intention to pay or settle and believed that a court will uphold its terms of service and dismiss La Russa's

lawsuit.<sup>209</sup> A month later La Russa dropped his lawsuit. Later that summer, Twitter launched its verified account status and, half a year later, in February 2010, the dedicated parody policy.<sup>210</sup> Let us examine it carefully.

The screenshot shows the Twitter Help Resources page for "Parody, commentary, and fan accounts on Twitter". The page is titled "Help Resources / Policy: Rules, Terms, Violations / Parody, commentary, and f...". The main heading is "Parody, commentary, and fan accounts on Twitter", submitted on Feb 01 by ginger. The text explains that Twitter users are allowed to create parody, commentary, or fan accounts, but each user is responsible for the content they provide. It outlines guidelines for parody, commentary, and fan accounts, including:
 

- Username:** Should not be the exact name of the subject; use qualifiers like "not," "take," or "fan."
- Name:** Should not list the exact name of the subject without distinguishing words like "not," "take," or "fan."
- Bio:** Should include a statement to distinguish it from the real identity, such as "This is a parody," "This is a fan page," "Parody Account," "Fan Account," or "This is not affiliated with..."
- Communication with other users:** Should not try to deceive or mislead others through private or public communication.

 The page also includes a search bar, a list of related topics (Impersonation Policy, Username troubleshooting, Inactive Usernames, Filing Terms of Service or Rules complaints, The Twitter Rules), and a list of help resources (Getting Started, Using Twitter with your phone, Troubleshooting, Known Issues, Policy: Rules, Terms, Violations, and various language support options). A note at the bottom states "Topic is closed for comments".

*The parody policy, version 1; posted 1 February 2010.*

<sup>209</sup> <https://blog.twitter.com/2009/not-playing-ball>.

<sup>210</sup> Tony La Russa took over the @TonyLaRussa account in July 2009; it is currently his active, verified account. It is tempting to attribute causality here, between the @TonyLaRussa case, verified status, and the launch of the dedicated parody policy. However, as Twitter employees are typically not allowed to speak about ongoing projects, from the external public perspective policy and architecture changes may be mistakenly attributed to media spectacle and PR needs. Thus, for example, Twitter employees related to me that although the addition of the report button to individual tweets has often been described as created in response to the abuse targeting Caroline Criado-Perez after the successful campaign to put Jane Austen on a bank note in the UK in the media (and also by scholars, e.g., Crawford and Gillespie 2014), in fact it was already in progress when the incident occurred. The incident undoubtedly impacted executive decisions with regard to timeframe and launch, but not the creation of the button itself.

Note the granularity here: in all its iterations, this policy applies to accounts and account-level acts, not to individual tweets or profile descriptions. Again, the underlying unit of Twitter, from this perspective, is not its iconic tweet, nor is it brand-focused impression or engagement, but an account. The user and the account are here intertwined in terms of actions, rights, and responsibilities. An account-person, as described in part 1, *Parody and Person*, exists in different circumstances and with different capabilities than a direct human. This policy implicitly recognizes that.

The first paragraph of this version of the parody policy includes these two sentences:

Twitter provides a platform for its users to share and receive a wide range of ideas and content, and we greatly value and respect our users' expression. Because of these principles, we do not actively monitor users' content and will not edit or remove user content, except in cases of violations of our Terms of Service.

The parody policy is the public-facing statement where Twitter repeatedly commits to freedom of expression. Twitter here explicitly asserts its "principles." This is the only policy in which they do so, and the principles will be emphasized even more strongly in the next version of the parody policy. A later, separate policy, the country withheld content policy, bears similar principled resonance.

For Twitter, freedom of expression isn't simply an ideological stance, it's a corporate claim: expression is the resource out of which Twitter is built. Classic social contract theory assumes a state of nature from which people contract together, with the aim of self-preservation or out of a natural sociality. Though one could argue sociality as the primary aim of social media use, Twitter focuses on expression as its heart.

(Curiously apropos, platform employees often discuss events that happen without

platform involvement as happening “in the wild.”) While Twitter is often described as a free service, more accurately, Twitter is a service created and paid for through use.<sup>211</sup> And for Twitter, use = expression. Censorship, consequently, represents a threat akin to that of fatal force for Hobbes: when death looms, the contract dissolves and the individual plunges back into a state of nature.

In the parody policy, Twitter cites these principles to ground their assertion that they will not “actively monitor users’ content and will not edit or remove user content.” This fine-sounding statement recurs in every subsequent version. It does curious, contradictory work: it establishes an anti-censorship stance, while obscuring the fact that Twitter is in fact monitoring, editing, and removing content. Thus, for example, Twitter deploys various algorithmic anti-spam measures as well as PhotoDNA to address child exploitation.<sup>212</sup> These are, fundamentally, efforts to catch bad faith actors in the act. Because such efforts often eliminate content without the visibility of redaction practices, the hindsight perspective of Twitter will fail to reflect the lived experience. Such censorship often goes unnoticed by users and scholars because it is generally considerable desirable—and censorship, in contrast, is implicitly undesirable.

In one very narrow, very particular sector, Twitter restricts namespace: with regard to itself. Thus, for example, if a user wants to parody Twitter itself, they will discover that no version of the word “Twitter” or even a tweaked version of the word “Twitter” is possible in a username. Consequently, the only parody account that, to my

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<sup>211</sup> That is, Twitter sells advertising space and promotion options, as well as access to its full data—eyeballs and behaviors, often grouped in marketing as impressions and engagements.

<sup>212</sup> Note that, while spam, child exploitation, etc. constitute violations of Twitter’s terms of service, such monitoring precedes the act of violation, and thus, when defined as “active” monitoring, is not acceptable under Twitter’s statement.

knowledge, directly parodies Twitter as an institution—indeed, its support team—is named @TrustySupport. Even spam filters have repercussions for the non-spammer user: in the event that a user posts multiple very similar messages within a short timeframe, followers of the account will not see all of them. This censorship, however, is invisible to the normal user as all of the examples appear in *their* timeline.<sup>213</sup> At issue here is the word “actively”—algorithmic intervention is implicitly framed as passive.

In this first version of the parody policy, the curious category of non-parody impersonation from the pre-policy has flipped to become non-impersonation parody/commentary. While parody and impersonation remain entangled, parody is slowly being redefined as having a positive existence of its own.

“The” standard mentioned so definitively in the pre-policy has disappeared altogether. In its place are guidelines suggesting four key contexts: username, name, bio, and communication with other users. Additionally, for three of these contexts (username, name, bio), the guidelines offer clear markers or signifiers to use within them. Thus begins Twitter’s process of formalizing its recognition of parody. Note that these guidelines are significantly more restrictive than US law. In regard to 2 Live Crew’s fair use claim with regard to its parody of Roy Orbison’s “Oh, Pretty Woman” in *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music*, the Supreme Court noted that:

2 Live Crew need not label its whole album, or even this song, a parody in order to claim fair use protection... Parody serves its goals whether labeled or not, and there is no reason to require parody to state the obvious, (or even the reasonably perceived). (1994: note 17)

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<sup>213</sup> 2017 has seen the rise of similar restrictions in conjunction with the company’s efforts to combat harassment on the platform; known as shadow banning, the triggers and contours of this practice remain unclear, possibly because they remain in flux.

The fourth and final context, communication with other users, is curiously different from the other three. It states:

The account should not, through private or public communication with other users, try to deceive or mislead others about your identity. For example, if operating a fan account, do not direct message other users implying you are the actual subject (i.e., person, band, sports team, etc.) of the fan account.

‘You’ occupies an ambiguous position in this guideline. On the one hand, as the imperative of the second sentence suggests, ‘you’ is the human person reading this policy and directing the account. On the other, ‘you’ is both conflated with the account and an identity produced by the account.

Lists are a common feature of legal language, with enumerations of specific persons, objects, or acts typically concluding with a final catchall category. This list follows that overall pattern. In the process, the final guideline recasts the other three: This list formalizes Twitter’s acts of recognition, defining what constitutes evidence—what will be scrutinized in the event scrutiny is demanded—and what does not. These should not be read as detailing the specifics of parody as parody itself. That is, Twitter is not suggesting that parody inherently or necessarily includes the word “fake” or “not” in its naming practices. Rather, this is a list of the areas the Twitter staff will in theory assess in the event of a dispute.

This list does, however, surface an underlying parody ideology: The idea that parody *can* be signified with discrete markers.<sup>214</sup> This is a flipside of the belief that

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<sup>214</sup> The use of “ideology” in this sense draws on a robust scholarship in linguistics and linguistic anthropology to indicate an intersubjective belief about the way something works which may or may not reflect practices; thus, for example, language ideologies (Kroskrity 2004, 2010; Schiefflin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998; and others), humor

parody can be recognized, the two joined by an assumption that recognition requires signifiers. As discussed in the introduction, Parody and Play, others have argued along these lines: Bateson suggests we understand play as play through the use of frames (1972); Goffman contends that communicative keys modulate our experience so that we interpret interactions as playful (1974); Gumperz emphasizes our use of communicative cues to convey an appropriate context for determining meaning (1992). Such arguments, however, allow rather more ambiguity than Twitter's first three suggestions, for what establishes a frame, key, or cue however, shifts with context. Here, Twitter appears unsure whether the first three suggestions it has detailed will sufficiently cue users and thus adds the catchall fourth. Note that while the first three suggestions follow fairly straightforward, black-and-white Aristotelian reasoning, the fourth offers a messy principle explained by a prototypical example. In the La Russa case, the parody account would have failed the first two guidelines (distinct username and name markers) but would have passed the bio guideline and presumably this final guideline.

“Communication with other users” is, on a social media platform like Twitter, a solipsistic set: almost every act a user performs with a Twitter account can be interpreted as communication with other users, whether that's an @reply directed at a particular account or manually inputting the account's profile location as ÜT:

25.74959,123.47559.<sup>215</sup> Buried in a bullet list behind three quite specific suggestions, this last guideline is simultaneously an assertion of Twitter's ultimate, unchecked authority and of flexibility. In this it resembles other phrasing that appears in the policy, like “[an

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ideologies (Kramer 2012), media ideologies (Gershon 2010b), graphic ideologies (Hull 2012), and many more.

<sup>215</sup> The latitude and longitude of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, under dispute between Japan and China.

account] will generally be free to continue in its parody” and “we may request that the user make further changes.” This is a new kind of social contract, one that embraces a degree of ambiguity and openness, not unlike parody itself. Such possibility modifiers, whether they appear adverbially or as moody subjunctives, are the steps of Twitter’s public dance between commitment and option management. Account creators, it should be noted, are assured similar flexibility: “Users may also choose to use different language to indicate that an account is a parody, commentary, or fan account so long as it is clear.”

Intent, while no longer screaming out in all caps, remains present: “Accounts with clear intent to deceive or confuse are prohibited.” Despite Twitter’s pro-freedom of expression positioning—seen here most visibly in the policy’s second sentence: “Twitter provides a platform for its users to share and receive a wide range of ideas and content, and we greatly value and respect our users’ expression”—this formulation remains significantly more restrictive than, for example, the US’s First Amendment. Twitter, which has long promoted itself as one of the most pro-speech platforms available (remember, “the free speech wing of the free speech party”) might be expected to embrace policies of similar breadth as the legal system of its nation of origin. It doesn’t.

When displeased by platforms’ censorship choices, some users of social media platforms contend their freedom of speech has been unlawfully infringed. For Americans, this represents a misunderstanding of the First Amendment: the amendment protects public speech; traditionally speech in corporate spaces is not considered public. Nonetheless, such clamoring contributes to the changing political status of platforms, developing the social contract further. By applying such standards to a corporate platform

like Twitter and insisting the platform follow them, users frame Twitter within a natural rights context—and award it, implicitly or explicitly, an authority to govern.

Returning to intent, intent to deceive or confuse is *not* a standard used in deciding legal cases in the US. Deceit, confusion, and even impersonation are not, in and of themselves, illegal—rather, it is fraud or stolen valor or similar that is illegal. Even trademark law, which specifically seeks to limit consumer confusion, has no way to measure how much confusion is too much confusion, or how much confusion is acceptable confusion.<sup>216</sup> Intent, however, remains necessary to make contracts—both to consent initially and to provide ongoing assent.

Overall, this version of the policy evokes the image of a harried team, seeking desperately both to preserve the expressive possibilities of parody and to provide clear steps that will reduce the amount of work piled on their plate—all the while simultaneously grappling with parody’s contextual messiness. Meanwhile, there’s a growing use of platform policy as the go-to communication tool. In 2011, when asked by journalists about the @ceoSteveJobs parody account after Apple objected, a Twitter representative responded, “We don’t generally comment on alleged user violations. Our rules, guidelines and actions tend to speak for themselves.”<sup>217</sup> (Note the nonhuman speech here, of both policy and platform. Expression, while framed in a natural rights context, remains entangled with the nonhuman. This aligns with the rather astonishing

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<sup>216</sup> Various legal scholars have attempted to capture meaningful likelihood of confusion in terms of percentages of a population, mostly to widespread amusement. That said, in person, legal scholars will estimate it as considerably less than 50% and more than 1%. Many thanks to Andy Sellars for discussing this point with me.

<sup>217</sup> <http://techcrunch.com/2011/01/06/apple-twitter/>.

*Citizens United* case, in which the Supreme Court of the United States recognized corporations as legal persons with speech rights.)

This version of the parody policy continues for the next 3-1/2 years, but not unchanged: In the course of its first year or so, it is tweaked to include role-playing accounts.<sup>218</sup> This modifies the opening line to read, “Twitter users are allowed to create parody, commentary, or fan accounts (including role-playing).” And beneath the four guidelines comes a short paragraph on its own, very much in line with the guidelines already described:

**Role-Playing:** Twitter allows role-playing accounts. If you are operating a role-playing account that may include inflammatory or controversial topics, we suggest that you add a clarification to your bio, such as "role-playing," in addition to complying with our best practices.

Curious here is the use of the phrase “that may include inflammatory or controversial topics”—nothing similar appears in the descriptions of parody, suggesting that parody, unlike role-playing, may be assumed inflammatory or controversial by nature.

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<sup>218</sup> Role-playing accounts have been a persistent feature of Twitter. As discussed previously (chapter 2: Parody and Personhood), the boundaries between parody accounts and role-playing accounts can be unclear, with overlaps and distinctions. The clearest differentiation usually lies in addressivity and use of tweet. Role-playing accounts tend to exist as parts of larger role-playing networks, with specific voicing conventions (e.g., the use of double parentheses or OOC to indicate speech out of character) and narrated action. Parody accounts, while they may at times engage with other parody accounts don’t typically define themselves as part of a larger parody network. Role-playing accounts in this context connect to larger fan fiction and role-playing traditions across media. On Twitter, they have been a matter of public awareness at least since the suspension of *Mad Men* characters in 2008 (Highfield 2015). Companies like Sega have at points asked account creators to mark their accounts as “unofficial,” much to the irritation of role-playing fans—and noticeably different from the marking that Twitter requests. Companies have also at times engaged in role-playing, particularly when they own character properties. Thus, for example, as part of the promotion for *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), @Iron\_Man and @CaptainAmerica engaged in numerous snarky exchanges.

Nonetheless, role-playing, like parody, is assumed to be both recognizable and in good faith.

### **Second version: A right to parody? Establishing requirements**

In the fall of 2013, a second version of the parody policy appeared. A great deal had happened with parody accounts in the interim. “Parody account” had become a recognized phenomenon in English (see introduction: Parody and Play), to the extent that journalists and bloggers had begun to grumble about its prevalence. In early 2013, a comedian even preemptively registered the @RussiaMeteor account in an attempt to block others from creating a parody account version of the Chelyabinsk meteor explosion.<sup>219</sup> The flourishing of parody accounts related to the Arab Spring saw a parallel surge of pro-regime attacks involving IP spy links, threats, and false flagging. From my own corpus, begun during the height of the Arab Spring in early 2011, by 2013 numerous accounts had already either vanished or transformed their identity, completely or partially. Thus, for example, an account that once parodied the king of Morocco has changed its name and the nature of its tweets, but left its bio the same. One Twitter employee described to me word of such attacks appearing on an all-employee listserv during this period. People in different roles across Twitter wrote in, urging the defense and protection of such accounts, whether that be through architectural or social solutions. The suppression or drowning of parody accounts seemed felt a particularly noxious form of censorship.

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<sup>219</sup> <http://www.thewire.com/technology/2013/02/twitter-parody-accounts/62189/>.

This new version of the parody policy appears in conjunction, too, with Twitter's IPO, a period with considerable change in executive staff, a move typically thought to signal new management and policy direction. And indeed, several employees mentioned to me that, at the time, events made them wonder if Twitter would change its practices in China, where it has been banned since the second half of 2009. Specifically, they speculated that Twitter perhaps planned to compromise its freedom of expression stance in order to open the market.<sup>220</sup> In this context, this second major version of the parody policy can be interpreted in a number of ways—as a sort of sprucing up prior to fresh attention, but also as drawing a line in the sand: parody and freedom of expression are an area to which Twitter remains committed. The rebounding nature of attacks on humor, where legal success can pair with pillory by public opinion, makes this policy in particular less likely to be challenged. Consequently it also makes the policy a good choice for defense.

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<sup>220</sup> This did not end up occurring.

Help Center Search English ▾ [Got an account?](#) [Sign in](#)

[Welcome to Twitter](#) [Me](#) [Connect](#) [Discover](#) [Mobile & Apps](#) [Troubleshooting](#)

[Twitter Rules & policies](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Report a violation](#)

## Parody, commentary, and fan account policy

### Our principles

Twitter provides a platform for its users to share and receive a wide range of ideas and content, and we greatly value and respect our users' right to expression. Our users are solely responsible for the content they publish and are often in the best position to resolve disputes amongst themselves. Because of these principles, we do not actively monitor users' content, and we do not edit or remove user content except in response to a [Terms of Service](#) violation or valid legal process.

Users are allowed to create parody, newsfeed, commentary, and fan accounts on Twitter, provided that the accounts follow the requirements below.

### Requirements for parody, newsfeed, commentary, and fan accounts

Here are the requirements for marking your account. All requirements must be met in order to comply with our parody policy.

- **Avatar:** The avatar should not be the exact trademark or logo of the account subject.
- **Account Name:** The name should not be the exact name of the account subject without some other distinguishing word, such as "not," "fake," or "fan."
- **Bio:** The bio should include a statement to distinguish it from the account subject, such as "This is a parody," "This is a fan page," "Parody Account," "Fan Account," "Role-playing Account," or "This is not affiliated with..."

Please note that your account must be fully compliant with the [Twitter Rules](#) and [Terms of Service](#) in addition to meeting these requirements.

### How do I file a trademark or impersonation complaint?

Please see our [trademark](#) or [impersonation](#) policy pages for more information on filing a complaint regarding those issues.

We will review an account under our parody policy in response to an impersonation or trademark complaint. An account that complies with our parody policy may not be found to be violating our trademark or impersonation policies.

If your complaint is about abusive behavior on Twitter, please see our [abusive behavior](#) policy for more information on how to file a complaint.

### How are complaints processed?

We process complaints in the order in which they are received. Please note, submitting duplicate complaints may result in a delay in processing.

When we receive a valid impersonation or trademark complaint about an account that may violate our parody policy, we may give the user an opportunity to come into compliance before taking further action or may choose to temporarily suspend the account while user edits are pending. Accounts with a history of repeated violations may be permanently suspended.

### What happens if someone makes a complaint about my account?

If someone makes a complaint about your account and we determine it is not compliant with the parody policy, we will email you with further instructions on how to comply with our requirements.

[Tweet](#)

[Back to Twitter](#) [Contact](#) [Blog](#) [Status](#) [Goodies](#) [API](#) [Business](#) [Help](#) [Jobs](#) [Terms](#) [Privacy](#)
© 2013 Twitter, Inc.

*Parody policy, version 2; posted between 28 September 2013 and 7 December 2013.*

A number of elements have changed in this second major version of the policy. The Twitter Help Center, where the policy remains located, has been overhauled, with its participatory and interactive features eliminated. The policy now exists as a flat document separate from interactions with support staff. In reverse of the aspect shift of parody, Twitter's policies are becoming formally closed. The social contract is being presented as more epic<sup>221</sup> and unquestionable, and, much like contemporary state authorities, the platform limits opportunities to engage it in a listening dynamic.

The non-impersonation parody and non-parody impersonation language has also disappeared. Parody has achieved a positive status of its own, with priority over impersonation and now trademark infringement as well: compliance with the parody policy overrules either of these other claims. This policy is in turn subordinate to the Twitter Rules and Terms of Service. Not all policies are the same in their power or policyness. (We will take this point up again in the next chapter, from the angle of translation.)

Most visually striking, this second version of the parody policy is laid out in headed sections:

- Our principles
- Requirements for parody, newsfeed, commentary, and fan accounts
- How do I file a trademark or impersonation complaint?
- How are complaints processed?
- What happens if someone makes a complaint about my account?

The principles mentioned in the previous version have now acquired their own labeled section, underscoring their presence and importance. This is unusual. It is not Twitter's habit to lay out principles at the beginning of its policies—indeed, this only occurs in this

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<sup>221</sup> In Bakhtin's sense.

policy and the Twitter Rules, one of the three documents of the Twitter User Agreement—suggesting an unusually direct connection between this policy and perceived values. Or, at the very least, an unusually direct connection for the teams involved in writing and editing this document, if not Twitter more broadly.

This statement of principles evokes the genre of political self-declaration, akin to beginning with a phrase like, “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” Further, within this statement of principles, the phrase used in the first version, “users’ expression,” has been transformed into the bolder and more politically resonant “users’ right to expression.” This is an abbreviated declaration of rights of sorts, but not one that originates in political self-determination. Rather, this is a corporation asserting these rights on behalf of their users—and simultaneously positioning themselves as guardians of those rights.

If this version shows an increase in political positioning, it also shows a decrease in flexibility. The guidelines and suggestions of the first version have been replaced with requirements, all of which “must be met in order to comply with our parody policy.” (Note: As the previous sentence illustrates, throughout this version the name of the policy is elided to the “parody policy” without apparent need for explanation: This policy is about parody. The other categories come along for the ride. The role-playing account, as a relevant related category, has vanished.) The flexible catchall fourth guideline on communication with other users has been dropped entirely. Username, name, and bio have been replaced with avatar, account name, and bio. By reframing the suggested markers as requirements and eliminating the flexible category, this version of the parody

policy is even more restrictive than the last, and thus significantly more so than US law in either its First Amendment or fair use iterations.

Following this larger shift away from flexibility and nuance, intent has disappeared as an explicit category for assessors to consider. “Accounts with a clear intent to deceive may be permanently suspended” has been replaced by “Accounts with a history of repeated violations may be permanently suspended.” Determining a bad actor becomes not about identifying a specific intent to deceive, but about aggregating history and sequence. Present behavior is understood through past action, with intent now judged through a limited type of character evidence.

Here it appears policy may be taking on yet another use: as roadmap for automation. Judges around the world have long considered prior offenses when sentencing. Our understanding of such sentencing practices—their application and fairness—assumes a human judge. Twitter has publicly stated that they are experimenting with a variety of techniques to improve their responses to harassment and other violations.<sup>222</sup> Employees have told me of internal software changes. While no employee has explicitly confirmed this, it seems likely that in an effort to handle scale, Twitter is using or will use an algorithmic form of mandatory sentencing for habitual or persistent offenders—a three strikes algorithm as it were. Something along the lines of: if account x has y number of violations, upon receipt of an additional report, automatically initiate suspension. Mandatory sentencing in judicial systems has been criticized for limiting the

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<sup>222</sup> Among others, from 2014 through 2016 the Twitter blog announced:  
<https://blog.twitter.com/2014/building-a-safer-twitter>,  
<https://blog.twitter.com/2015/policy-and-product-updates-aimed-at-combating-abuse>,  
<https://blog.twitter.com/2015/fighting-abuse-to-protect-freedom-of-expression-au>,  
<https://blog.twitter.com/2016/report-multiple-tweets-in-a-single-report>.

flexibility of courts and unjustly broad application. If Twitter automates a system to combine history of violations with fresh reports, there is a danger that false flagging practices—e.g., inaccurately reporting a parody account or activist’s account as in violation—will be successful. No language in the policy tells us whether previous violations are contextualized within the policies in effect at the time, or not.

Unlike the first version, much of this second version is taken up with process description, with three different scenarios broken down here. In the amended first version—the role-playing iteration—one such had already been added: “What Happens When We Receive a Valid Report?” This seems to have been a gradual style shift. While the underlying points of these three scenarios—directions for filing impersonation complaints, Twitter’s possible responses, and user options—are all contained in the previous 2010 version, they receive considerably more words and space in this version. The harried writer of version one who tried to lay out very clear steps while remaining mindful of the complexities of the situation has been replaced by the frustrated writer who has been asked again and again—by confused users, activists, journalists—but how does the internal process actually *work*? As with irate users’ freedom of speech complaints, this too is a moment where the social contract is poked and negotiated, the position and authority of the platform correspondingly shifts, and the proto-judiciary develops a bit further.

The result reads like a stab at transparency hampered by a clinging to proprietary information, simultaneously a PR attempt to cast Twitter as active. Indeed, this latter function surfaces in the choice of subject here: The use of ‘we’ or ‘Twitter’ as subject occurs 4 times out of the 430 words (0.9%) in version 1, and 10 times out of the 468

words (2%) in version 2. ‘You,’ ‘user,’ and ‘account’ as subject occurs 10 times (2%) in version 1 and 5 times (1%) in version 2. The agentive person focus of this policy has flipped between the two versions.<sup>223</sup> Twitter is acquiring a governance apparatus, and as it does so, the allocation of roles, rights, and responsibilities sways and shifts.

### **Current version: An “intended audience”**

This second version of the parody policy is, for the most part, the version that remains in effect in April 2016 as I write this chapter. There have, however, been a few important tweaks. First, all instances of “complaint” have become “report,” conjuring up a different relationship between the person contacting Twitter and Twitter. Whereas before the person was positioned as irked and protesting—with implicit assumptions of perceived causes for such—now they are framed as engaging in the more neutral act of reporting. Twitter, however, takes on more authority as a source that receives, reviews, and responds to reports. The report genre functions as a component of larger processes, suggesting investigation, follow-up, internal action.

In the current tweak of the second version the process details have been trimmed slightly—no longer are readers informed that complaints/reports are addressed in order received. This has been excised entirely, as has:

If someone makes a complaint about your account and we determine it is not compliant with the parody policy, we will email you with further instructions on how to comply with our requirements.

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<sup>223</sup> Version 1: 435/430 words we/Twitter as subject: 3/1=4; you/user/account: 2/3/5. Version 2: 471/468 words we/Twitter as subject: 9/1=10; you/user/account: 0/2/3. These counts include both active and passive subjects; in both versions, some tokens from the you/user/account category are passive.

Twitter thus no longer promises to assist users with compliance.<sup>224</sup> The avatar requirement has also been eliminated entirely, and the remaining two requirements—account name and bio—have had their order swapped, with the bio now placed above the account name.

Most interesting, though, is what has been added. Both the bio and the account name requirements now end with the phrase “and be done so in a way that would be understood by the intended audience.” This is a curious amendment that introduces complexity and context—with intent implicitly reemerging in the process—but in a completely different way than earlier attempts. Rather, this addendum locates the appropriate arbiters of whether or not something constitutes marked parody *not* among either the Twitter staff or anyone who might be filing a report (or complaint), but among the account’s target audience. How an “intended audience” might be identified is left undefined, but its inclusion nonetheless suggests that policy enforcers responding to a report will privilege how others (followers? other accounts the account in question engages with? lists?) relate to the account. It is very pro-speech, as it essentially prioritizes those who get it over those who don’t. From a legal perspective, this is a standard with a high level of sophistication;<sup>225</sup> it is an unusual one in content moderation, which tends to focus more on identifying problematic content and less on specifying the relevant social context within which to assess expression. In application, this description, for example, embraces the manual bot phenomenon in Japanese as marked parody (see chapter 2, *The Account-Person*).

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<sup>224</sup> This doesn’t mean that they no longer do so; on the contrary, in practice they have continued to do so.

<sup>225</sup> My thanks to Andy Sellars for discussing this point with me.

As with the new emphasis on a history of repeated violations, this standard, too, reads as possible groundwork for automation, with some category of interacting accounts used as a rubric for an intended audience. This is a critical difference between Twitter’s assessment options and a legal assessment system: Legal fictions like the reasonable person or the fair-minded and informed observer or the officious bystander are contextually defined, influenced by the other circumstances of a case (see chapter 6, On Policyness and Global Polysemy for more on legal fictions). With the data at its disposal, Twitter can create algorithmic definitions of fictions like an intended audience or a reasonable person.

### **The Country Withheld Content Policy and worldwide jurisdiction**

In some ways, the country withheld content policy, published in early 2012, is the younger sibling or redo of the parody policy—not in terms of content targeted, but in terms of function. This policy takes Twitter’s early governance experiments a step further: it stakes out a worldwide jurisdiction and uses platform design to carry out policy.

Although it lacks the explicit statement of “Our principles” that the parody policy boasts, the country withheld content policy presents a similar ideological stance:

We have found that transparency is vital to freedom of expression. Upon receipt of requests to withhold content, we will promptly notify affected users unless we believe we are legally prohibited from doing so (for example, if we receive an order under seal). We also clearly indicate within the product when content has been withheld. And, we have expanded our partnership with Lumen<sup>226</sup> to publish not only DMCA notifications but also requests to withhold content -- unless, similar to our practice of notifying users, we are legally prohibited from doing so.

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<sup>226</sup> Linked in the original doc to <https://lumendatabase.org/twitter>.

We strongly believe that the open and free exchange of information has a positive global impact, and that the Tweets must continue to flow<sup>227</sup>.

In distinct contrast to the widespread acceptance the parody policy enjoys in media reports—typically it appears in calm quotation, the policy itself unquestioned—the launch of the country withheld content policy was greeted with much public dismay. This dismay focused primarily around the policy’s announcement that:

In our continuing effort to make our services available to users everywhere, if we receive a valid and properly scoped request from an authorized entity, it may be necessary to reactively withhold access to certain content in a particular country from time to time.<sup>228</sup>

What exactly constitutes “a valid and properly scoped request” or “an authorized entity” is left undefined. And, of course, “may” signals that even if these conditions are met, enabling or withholding access remains very much at Twitter’s discretion.<sup>229</sup>

The policy was a response to pushback from multiple governments regarding the availability on Twitter of speech that violated national laws. In the US, where Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 (prior, of course, to social media) denotes online service providers as safe harbors, Twitter enjoys broad immunity from intermediary liability—currently the broadest, most extensive protections available, as described by MacKinnon et al. (2014). To scale and monetize, however, social media companies seek to establish partnerships with local brands, institutions, and influencers.

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<sup>227</sup> Linked in the original doc to <https://blog.twitter.com/2011/01/tweets-must-flow.html>.

<sup>228</sup> <https://support.twitter.com/articles/20169222>.

<sup>229</sup> This is not unique to Twitter, but standard to US tech firms. Overall, Twitter tends to be heralded for its relatively extensive transparency, while Facebook is castigated for its almost nonexistent transparency of processes.

That is, to have a physical, local presence—which in turn yields a need to attend to terrestrial government.

Many reporters, users, and others who heard about the policy and possibly even read it, immediately decried it as noxious censorship: “Twitter Commits Social Suicide,” “Twitter’s New Censorship Plan Rouses Global Furor,” “Twitter Censorship and the Future of Authoritarianism in a High-Tech World,” “Twitter Caves to Global Censorship, Will Block Content on Country-Specific Basis as Required.”<sup>230</sup> This outcry wasn’t about the definitions Twitter didn’t offer, or the policy’s failure to make explicit its processes of determining validity, scope, or authorization. Rather, it focused on the idea that *any* withholding is bad and wrong—a stance which speaks both to perceptions of Twitter as a public space and sovereign entity and to the standards expected of jurisdiction of digital spaces.<sup>231</sup> A stance rich, that is, in assumptions about the building social contract.

Hasty readers of the policy, however, missed the real story. Tweets or accounts are only “withheld” (and Del Harvey and Jeremy Kessel of Twitter’s Trust and Safety team assured me that they put considerable thought into that word choice and how it translated across languages) within the country-level jurisdiction of that “authorized entity.” Thus, for example, in the policy’s first official application, Twitter blocked users located in Germany—but *only* users located in Germany—from accessing a neo-Nazi

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<sup>230</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/markgibbs/2012/01/26/twitter-commits-social-suicide>, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/news/story/2012-01-27/twitter-blackout-censorship/52818724/1>, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2012/01/28/twitter-censorship-and-the-future-of-authoritarianism-in-a-high-tech-world/>, <http://boingboing.net/2012/01/26/twitter-caves-to-global-censor.html>.

<sup>231</sup> And too, to the various visibilities and invisibilities of censorship; there has never been a similar outcry about the effects of spam filters.

group's account, following the request of local German law enforcement after German authorities banned the group.<sup>232</sup>

From Twitter's perspective, the country withheld content policy means they never take down the material, they merely alter access frameworks. And they do so very explicitly—tweets and accounts that have been withheld through this policy appear with a specially marked format that explains this is a jurisdictional consequence. Clicking through to 'learn more' yields an explanation about how location is determined de facto—and how to change location setting if that's incorrect. Or, of course, if a user would simply like to see the forbidden material. There's even a 'worldwide' location setting featured that has no jurisdiction associated with it. So anyone with more than a passing interest in the unseen communication can easily reach it. The balance of responsibility shifts in the process, however, because the user now chooses their location.

Consider an example of the policy in action:

**@RedBaRiKaT withheld**

This account has been withheld in: Turkey. [Learn more](#)

*Image collected via the Twitter web interface, 29 April 2016.*

This notification is significantly more detailed than cases where Twitter is the sole adjudicating body.<sup>233</sup> The username is preserved, the location where it is withheld is given, and more information is offered. Accounts that have been suspended for abuse or

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<sup>232</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/19/world/europe/twitter-blocks-access-to-neo-nazi-group-in-germany.html>

<sup>233</sup> Copyright takedowns, like state censorship requests, also hold more explanatory detail in their attributions. Thus, "This Tweet from [username] has been withheld in response to a report from the copyright holder. [Learn more.](#)"

spam, or tweets that have been suspended for harassment or trademark infringement, are simply marked suspended.

### **Account suspended**

This account has been suspended. [Learn more](#) about why Twitter suspends accounts, or [return](#) to your timeline.

*Image collected via the Twitter web interface, 29 April 2016.*

In the preceding bland suspension example, neither username nor jurisdiction location—and, by extension, its governmental origin—is given. The “learn more” link offers an overview of what suspension means and the process for responding if you run the suspended account. It doesn’t offer options for users to circumvent the policy or decide to take their own responsibility for viewing the content. Given their status under Section 230 as a safe harbor that cannot be held liable for content, Twitter certainly could offer such options, at least in the US, if their version of freedom of expression extended that far.

Together, the parody policy and country withheld content policy represent Twitter’s explicit policy commitments to freedom of expression. Building on its earlier policy efforts, with the country withheld content policy, Twitter extended the social contract even further: it created an intermediary structure to bridge state legal regimes with its own governance apparatus. It both accommodated and responded to the demands of states, and supplanted them with its own worldwide jurisdiction setting.

### **Final thoughts**

Silverstein (2003), reframing Labov (1972), writes of orders of indexicality, what we might think of as degrees of awareness of an indexed meaning. Classically understood

through phonological variation, an example of first order indexicality might involve an observable correspondence between place and speech; second order indexicality might treat that correspondence as an explicitly recognizable marker; third order indexicality might extend this to the intentional performance of that marker. (Much parody draws on such third order indexicality as it makes available socially recognized categories, like the nasal Boston ‘a’ or the syntax of Yoda.) As different orders of indexicality can simultaneously exist in a population, thinking analytically with orders of indexicality offers a means to integrate the complexity of indexed associations with individual communicative competences.

This chapter has detailed a change in progress, of governance and authority, as seen through the genre of policy. It is easy to set aside the aspirations of Twitter’s legal team, it is easy to dismiss the parody policy and its siblings as akin to technical manuals: unread by any except the most dedicated or in need. Very few of the parody account creators I have spoken to have been aware of the parody policy. And yet... The parody policy is cited far more frequently in news articles than any policy except perhaps the Twitter Rules, hinting of a second order indexicality beyond most other policies, an explicitly recognized relationship.

Some people, intent on harassment—whether to be executed individually or in coordination—adopt the parody account label as a defensive tactic, assuming that the parody label will protect them from Twitter’s review process. Does it? It is uncertain, but given that Twitter’s reviewers have at times been constrained to make their assessments

within less than a minute,<sup>234</sup> it introduces an ambiguity that is likely to allow some such to slip through. The parody policy holds, for this group, a third order indexicality—it has become a salient and deployable resource. As they attempt to manipulate the spirit of the law through its letter, those who strategically deploy the policy also fundamentally embrace a recognition of Twitter’s sovereignty. Users and media recognize Twitter’s stance as one of rule of law; the parody policy is one of these laws.

Over the development of the policy, the social contract builds and refines: Twitter delineates ways to recognize parody and what kind of intent matters. Twitter pledges allegiance to freedom of expression and explicates its judicial process (sort of). By replicating the trappings of an authoritative identity, in this case the stances and apparatuses of government, Twitter acquires similar authority of its own. This is, of course, a classic power of parody. In embracing the form of governmental authority, Twitter both comments on the original—the weakness of terrestrial governments in internet channels—and acquires some of its power.

These policies construct the social contract, too, in the particulars of the language they deploy. Legal talismans, or legal language used in nonlegal contexts to obfuscate, create a magical shield, and ward off trouble (Albert 2016), shimmer throughout Twitter’s policy statements—and indeed, throughout policy statements online more generally. Legal talismans can be lexical items, syntactic choices—whatever constitutes a recognizable marker of legal language. Thus, for example, in the parody policy, in addition to the legal fictions already highlighted, we find examples such as “provided that,” “fully compliant,” “right to expression,” and “non-impersonation parody.” The use

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<sup>234</sup> According to a former Twitter employee connected to the larger policy and review teams.

of legal talismans involves picking and choosing among salient markers. Thus, for example, the policy contains no examples of legal language's characteristics archaisms or capitalization quirks. Further, contrary to much legal language (Crystal and Davy 1969), the policy demonstrates a willingness to use pronouns.

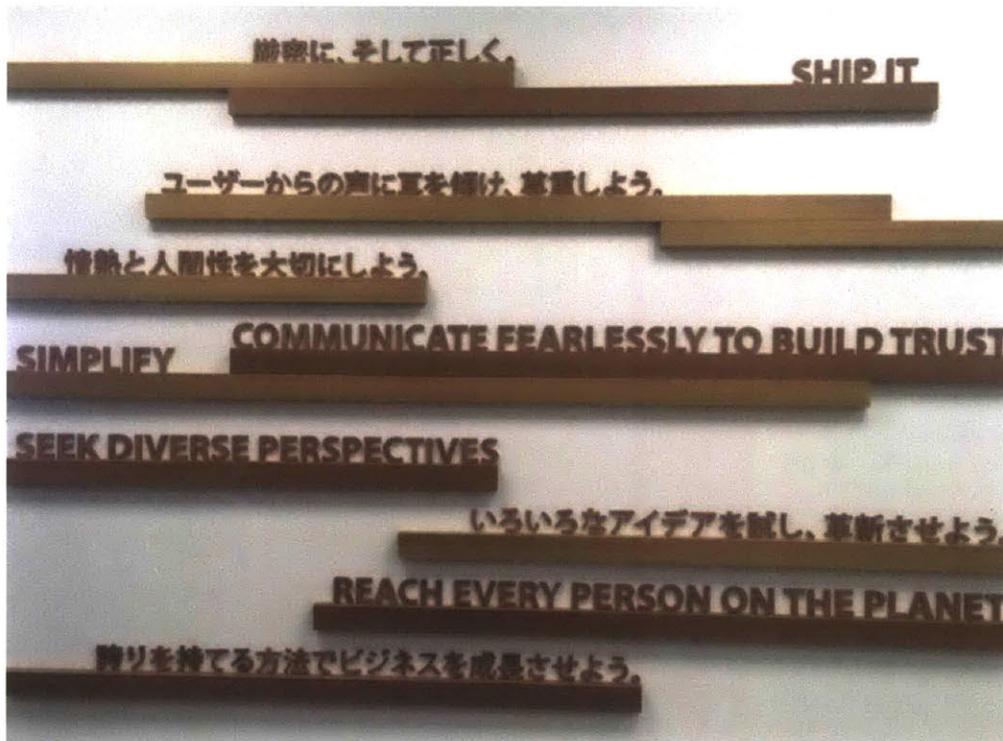
Legal talismans work through a process of *enregisterment* (Agha 2005; Johnstone, Andrus, and Danielson 2006), or the intentional deploying of salient markers of a socially recognized register of language. When a text not wholly of this register deploys such markers, it acquires some of the indexical qualities of the original. (Parody, of course, delights in processes of enregisterment; this transformation of policy resembles parodic transformation, though it lacks the same elements of recognition and intention.) In platform policies, legal talismans index legal force. In the next chapter, as we examine the parody policy across language and explore how parody, policy, and the social contract transform through translation, we will see that invocation of legal talismans doesn't always cross language boundaries successfully.

Beneath these policy versions and modifications lies, too, a distinct parody ideology: parody is recognizable; parody is intentional; parody and commentary enmesh; parody has a distinct creator and subject; the parodic subject can be a person or "entity" (and this could mean band or sports team or other unspecified things); parody is defined in contrast to impersonation—not untruth or abuse or unfunniness or aesthetic crudeness. Parody is, fundamentally, expression worthy of protection, including corporate protection. It is very much an ideology that prioritizes what Bakhtin (1968[1965]) describes as a negative form of parody, with a focus on good faith critique. The

extravagant, revitalizing positive parody Bakhtin finds in Renaissance carnivals—and we see on the Twitter platform itself—lurks in the ambiguous margins of the policy.

## Chapter 6

### Of Policyness and Global Polysemy



*Core values display in Tokyo office, summer 2015; located in the internal space of the office.*

When Twitter's Tokyo office moved into a larger space in August 2015, they acquired wooden wall art of Twitter's core values. It was, an employee told me proudly, the first-ever example of the core values in a language other than English. The company had articulated these core values (in English) almost four years prior, between the two major versions of the parody policy (2010 and 2013). Though not published officially anywhere on the Twitter platform, Twitter accounts of employees first mention the introduction of

the core values in early October 2011.<sup>235</sup> The timing is not a coincidence: In many ways this set of values represents the culmination of the internal definition work that the Arab Spring and Japan's 3.11 triple disaster<sup>236</sup> begin.<sup>237</sup>

These ten value statements mix corporate and political stances, displaying an internal moral compass that is a hybrid of the two. This hybridity evokes the mix of corporate and governmental sources that governmental social media managers draw on for training and inspiration.

Grow our business in a way that makes us proud.  
Recognize that passion and personality matter.  
Communicate fearlessly to build trust.  
Defend and respect the user's voice.  
Reach every person on the planet.  
Innovate through experimentation.  
Seek diverse perspectives.  
Be rigorous. Get it right.  
Simplify.  
Ship it.

"Defend and respect the user's voice," the core value in which this hybridization is perhaps most evident, connects strongly to parody accounts and the parody policy. The parody policy's freedom of expression frame, its priority over the impersonation policy and trademark infringement, and its avowal of support, all align firmly with this idea of defense. In a sense this is a reinterpretation of a customer service ideal, except the user is

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<sup>235</sup> <https://twitter.com/rno/status/122012650635923456> and <https://twitter.com/kpk/status/122019155636523008>.

<sup>236</sup> "Triple disaster" is the term used by Japan studies scholars to refer to the combination of the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, followed by the related Fukushima nuclear disaster, after the Japanese.

<sup>237</sup> They are significantly more pro-social than the three guiding concepts Biz lists in a Buddhism-resonant Twitter blog post from May 2008:

Simple is significant.  
Craftsmanship builds character.  
Constraint inspires creativity.

not the customer in this relationship but rather the natural resource out of which the product (personal data) is built. The core value thus asserts the platform in a position of guardianship or alliance against an unspecified other, but for which the immediate inclination is to interpret as either other users or governments. Twitter's transparency reports—and, indeed, transparency reports for platforms more broadly—implicitly argue that this unspecified other is governments: the reports detail government takedown requests and only government takedown requests.<sup>238</sup> At the same time, this core value builds again around the natural rights scaffold, as we discussed in the previous chapter. This hybridization is part of a larger phenomenon often described as technoliberalism (Malaby 2009) and particular to US tech culture (Coleman 2013; Kelty 2008), but arguably a notable ideology across the global tech sector.

As much as policy addresses multiple external audiences, it also reflects and performs internal work, particularly through alignment of principles. The core values have long pervaded the internal physical and digital spaces of Twitter. They appear as wall art, as laptop skins, and screensavers, and are cited in internal emails, all-hands Tea Time meetings, arguments on the internal Q&A forum, and occasionally external interviews or speeches. Internally, they are often but not always accompanied by their character count. (They're all less than 140 of course.) They are as much part of the internal propaganda or branding work that the company does as its generous distribution of material swag, its use of quarterly hack weeks, or its quirky offices. More recently, such work has been carried by hashtag displays, whether that's #blacklivesmatter painted on the wall of the San Francisco headquarters, or a #lovewhereyouwork sculpture made

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<sup>238</sup> While there is, in 2017, a push for platforms to include data regarding suspensions and similar actions resulting from their user-based reporting tools, at the moment they do not.

entirely out of hanko seals in the new Tokyo office. The Dubai office, small and new and utilitarian, enjoys no such display.

“Defend and protect the user’s voice” is one of the five core values chosen for translation into Japanese, rendered here as: ユーザーからの声に耳を傾け、尊重しよう。The use of 耳を傾け reframes the act of defending into that of listening carefully to something important. Nuance and meaning change across languages. Translation, like parody, yields an original and a modified version. Translations are both necessarily partial (Gentzler and Tymoczko 2002) and metastatements on the source text (Tymoczko 2003). This is something that I, working across three languages in this dissertation, experience directly; when translating, I must decide whether to seek equivalent effect, to showcase specific linguistic details, or to pursue some other goal. The translator, like the lawyer, engages in acts of interpretation. The lawyer writing a policy carefully considers its many different potential readerships, strategically picking a path through clarity and ambiguity. The translator writing that policy—lawyer and translator share authorship—navigates plural systems of language and cultural references, striving for fidelity or at least equivalent effect, all the while making choices about voice and stance.

This chapter builds on the previous one to investigate how this new social contract solidifies not only through revision and amendment, but through translation. “Reach every person on the planet” declares another of Twitter’s core values. Platform translation is a complicated, fascinating process, with the iconic product and its policies translated (developed, updated) at different times. The chapter argues first, that policies select bodies of law and align platforms to these bodies of law, in varying degree and depending on specific legitimation practices. Key here are practices of global polysemy

embedded within policies. Second, the chapter argues that policies are not equal in their policyness. In the previous chapter we discussed this in the context of policies' relation to other policies: some policies outrank others, some policies are defined through others. In this chapter, we focus on differences of language coverage and how that affects who this social contract includes and how; and on translation specifics and how they alter what a policy describes. Threading throughout is the shift from the lawyer-author to the translator-author.

### **“Our policies”**

In English, the term ‘policy’ itself confuses. Deriving from the Greek word *polis* or city-state, policy is etymologically related to ‘politics,’ ‘polity,’ ‘politician,’ and ‘police.’ A policy is a political directive issued by the politicians of a polity that may need to be policed. Except, policies may also be issued by other institutions. From this perspective, policy becomes a public statement, from an entity with a public presence, that publicly defines an institutionalized stance of that entity. ‘Public’ here, of course, runs into its own problems (see, for example, Fish et al. 2011), with the public-private relationship best understood as contingent on context (Nissenbaum 2010) and fractally recursive (Gal 2002). Overlap and ambiguity have long resided in the heart of policy—and consequently, are available for platforms to use to construct new meanings.

Other languages—German, Norwegian, Czech, Polish, many others—don’t offer a similarly resonant, similarly ambiguous term. Translation into these languages often yields the choice between law, rule, or guideline. Twitter’s choices in the Japanese and Arabic versions of its parody policy, however, have significant overlaps with English. In

Japanese, Twitter's documents use the Japanese English word ポリシー (*porishii*), which allows it to capture this ambiguity while marking it as foreign. In the Arabic documents, the word is سياسة (*siyaasa*), from a root meaning 'to dominate, govern, rule' or 'to lead, guide, conduct, direct' and—similar to the English 'policy'—etymologically related to 'political,' 'politician,' and 'administration.'

The parody policy is one of 16 policies listed in Twitter's 'Our policies' submenu, under its default 'General policies' list. Arriving at the parody policy and this submenu through the Twitter platform is a lengthy process with little built-in redundancy. When non-Twitter employees I spoke with specifically looked for the policy—interviewees often used their devices for demonstration or followup during our conversations—they at times started from the 'help' link on the iconic platform but inevitably ended up using Google search to locate it. 'General policies' is distinct from 'Advertiser policies.' By design the two cannot be opened simultaneously, pointing to different categorization and contracts at work. Advertisers are declared distinct from other users and governed under other rules. Shifting to 'Advertiser policies' reveals a list of 30 policies, nearly twice as many as the general policies.<sup>239</sup>

At least, that's what you see when you have your account language set to English. In Japanese and Arabic, the initial help center homepage parallels the English one, as does the overview policy page. Both of these exist in full Japanese and Arabic. However, clicking the nested submenu corresponding to "Our policies" surfaces important differences: neither Japanese, nor Arabic—both of which fall into the category of

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<sup>239</sup> Advertiser policies are, unfortunately, mostly out of the scope of this project. This isn't intended to suggest that they are not worthy of study. On the contrary.

relatively extensive coverage on Twitter—has the same set of policy documents that English does.

<b>POLICY</b>	<b># LANGUAGES (32)</b>
The Twitter Rules	32
Child sexual exploitation policy	14
Twitter media policy	13
Twitter’s use of cookies and similar technologies	13
Inactive account policy	12
Impersonation policy	11
Country withheld content	10
<b>Parody, commentary, and fan account policy</b>	<b>10</b>
Private information posted on Twitter	10
Trademark policy	10
Username squatting policy	10
Copyright policy	8
Counterfeit goods policy	8
Twitter search rules and restrictions	7
Twitter API limits	1
Fair Use	1

*Table 6.1: “General policies” across languages.*

Every policy has an English-language version. As of April 2016, there are 32 language options in the Twitter language setting for the Help Center site. Compare this to the 48 language options for the platform itself. (In addition to “English” these include two English variants: LOLCATZ and UK English; English is the only language for which such play is available.) For all that updates are coordinated promptly across existing language versions, the platform<sup>240</sup> and the help center remain out of sync, with the latter a

<sup>240</sup> Or, to be more precise, the iconic part of the platform, as the help center can also be considered part of the platform.

noticeably lower priority. Advertiser policies (not shown in the table) are offered in even fewer language versions than the general policies.

The parody policy, with 10 language versions, falls right at both the median and the mode of the general policies set. It appears in English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Japanese, Portuguese, Korean, Turkish, and Arabic.<sup>241</sup> Note that the Twitter Rules dominates with versions in all languages. Further, neither the terms of service, nor the privacy policy<sup>242</sup> appears here. Of the Twitter User Agreement triad, only the Twitter Rules do.

Twitter is a US-based multinational. Are Twitter's policies simply US policies reformulated through a commercial lens? Is this, in a sense, a case of stolen authority a la stolen valor? Let us turn for a moment to the case of the missing fair use—a policy curiously available only in English—to investigate how Twitter policies align and don't align with US policies around parody.

### *The case of the missing Fair Use*

In the latter half of 2014, Twitter added to its policy collection a new document entitled “Fair Use.”<sup>243</sup> Fair use is a legal doctrine that modifies copyright, grounded in an economic rights perspective of copyright in contrast to a moral rights perspective. As a doctrine, fair use is strongly associated with the particulars of the US legal system. In the

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<sup>241</sup> Languages are listed in the order they appear in Twitter's language options menu. It's important to note that help resources more generally were initially only provided in the FIGS group (French, Italian, German, Spanish), a common first language layer among English-language companies seeking to internationalize.

<sup>242</sup> ‘Private information posted on Twitter’ addresses a different set of privacy concerns than the privacy policy.

<sup>243</sup> A previous policy with nominally overlapping subject matter, entitled the “Reposting content without attribution policy,” vanished in mid 2013.

US, legal cases involving parody are typically defended either under the First Amendment or fair use doctrine, with parody explicitly articulated by the Supreme Court as an example of acceptable fair use. Section 107 of the US Copyright Act of 1976 limits copyright for purposes such as “criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching..., scholarship, or research” and outlines four factors to be considered to determine whether a particular use qualifies as fair use:

- (1) the purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of a commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes;
- (2) the nature of the copyrighted work;
- (3) the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole; and
- (4) the effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work.

Relatively few countries have fair use doctrines. A handful of others, mostly Commonwealth countries, draw on the similar but more rigidly defined idea of fair dealing. All in all, however, fair use and fair dealing are not widespread.<sup>244</sup>

Twitter’s Fair Use document is a latecomer available only in English. This is thrice awkward: First, the US is the only primarily English-language country that employs a fair use doctrine, so this document overreaches within its English readership. Second, it remains untranslated into the languages of the few other countries that *do* employ a fair use doctrine, such as South Korea and Poland. Nor is the Fair Use document available in any form in the comprehensive Japanese policy set, even though

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<sup>244</sup> Although fair use and fair dealing parody protections appear to be spreading—possibly an effect of internet use practices as well as international IP agreements such as TRIPS. Thus, for example, the UK’s fair dealing parody exception introduced in October 2014, and Hong Kong’s Copyright (Amendment) of 2014 which included a fair dealing parody exception but was criticized for not including even stronger parody protections.

some Japanese-language Twitter users have actively created their own convention—*#twremix*—to address issues that overlap with fair use. If it is the doctrine of fair use itself that is of concern, it is odd that the document doesn't exist in at least these other languages. Finally, Twitter's Fair Use document doesn't link to the parody policy or vice versa, despite legal entanglements of parody and fair use.

What, then, accounts for the curious case of the missing Fair Use document? Unlike issues of speech online, issues of money have received considerable attention from governments, and are one of the notable exceptions to the persistent belief in the unreality of online spaces. Fair use straddles the two. Translating the Fair Use document would consequently bring with it a tangle of national and international regulation. With regard to parody, whether explicitly linked to the parody policy or not, such translation would add a highly nation-specific economic frame, thus complicating Twitter's assertion of parody as a matter of freedom of expression. Likely Twitter intentionally hasn't translated it into other languages due to the alignment with (US) government that such translation would de facto suggest. That is, the Fair Use document remains untranslated because translating it would assert not *Twitter* governance but *US* governance. Unlike the country withheld content policy, which serves as a bridge between state governance and Twitter governance and, like the parody policy, is translated into ten languages, translating Fair Use would serve to undermine rather than strengthen the growing social contract. In contrast, the parody policy, grounded in its sovereign assertion of natural rights, flourishes across languages.

### **Localization, meaning, and power**

The languages of Twitter's policies follow both historical market patterns for English-language companies as well as Twitter's own user populations. Thus, for example, the Twitter platform's first non-English version was Japanese.

Japanese became the first non-English language for the Twitter platform through Twitter's partnership with Digital Garage, a Japanese "context company" focused on incubation and innovation. In 2008, after the English-language version of Twitter had already achieved early success in Japan, Digital Garage joined Twitter's team of investors.<sup>245</sup> This prompt availability of the platform in Japanese differs from standard translation hierarchies of English-language multinationals, which typically prioritize what are referred to collectively as the FIGS languages: French, Italian, German, and Spanish. This Japanese version of Twitter, however, was limited to the platform interface. Policies do not appear to have had Japanese-language versions until 2011.

In contrast to Japanese, despite the strong adoption of Twitter in Indonesia from quite early on, Indonesian languages wouldn't come until much later. Rather, next came the FIGS languages. In part, the order of translation stemmed from a paucity of employees with fluency in non-European languages. One employee told me the process of enabling Arabic-language hashtags in 2012 was cobbled together by a Persian speaker (Arabic script originates in Persian and the two remain similar today) and a Japanese speaker.

The Arabic version of the Twitter platform emerged in the fall of 2011. It originated not in a partnership with an investor nor in English-language corporate norms.

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<sup>245</sup> The Twitter–Digital Garage partnership yielded not only translations, but a number of innovations, including the first experiments with monetizing Twitter in 2008.

Rather, the Arabic version of the Twitter platform came from crowdsourced, volunteer translation work by Taghreedat. “Taghreedat” means “tweeters” or “warbles” in Arabic. The word is used to describe Twitter tweets as well as actual birdsong.<sup>246</sup> As the name suggests, translating Twitter was Taghreedat’s original objective, though it subsequently significantly expanded. The organization is based in the UAE, its volunteer corps of translators heavily populated by residents of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

It should be noted that, given the global prevalence of English, for many Japanese and Arabic speakers native-language interfaces were not necessary for platform use. Indeed, it was Twitter’s success in Japan when it only had an English interface that persuaded Digital Garage to invest. And while the May 2011 Arab Social Media Report, “Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter,” compiled by the Dubai School of Government posited that the lack of an Arabic interface was a key reason Twitter saw lower regional use than Facebook, it also pointed out that at the same time users in some countries in the region—notably the GCC countries—predominantly used Facebook’s English-language interface over its Arabic-language one, suggesting that English was a preferred use language in some countries (2011:24).<sup>247</sup> By 2012—that is, after the Twitter platform acquired an Arabic interface thanks to the efforts of Taghreedat and Twitter’s Translation Center—the Arab Social Media Report described English and Arabic as “the

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<sup>246</sup> The English plural here doesn’t fully convey the sense of the Arabic plural in this context. It’s a bit like data and media with their double single-plural sense. So this example resembles “معلومات” an Arabic plural usually translated into English simply as “information,” and “وسائل الاعلام” an Arabic plural usually translated into English simply as “media.”

<sup>247</sup> The top five Arab countries at that time in terms of number of Twitter users were UAE, Qatar, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait (2011:16). In terms of Twitter penetration—or percentage of population that uses Twitter—it was Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait, and Lebanon (17).

dominant languages for Twitter users in the Arab region [as a whole], with Arabic tweets numbering almost double those in English.” (2012:18)

But what of policies? As of July 2011 the Twitter Help Center offered policies in English, the FIGS, Japanese, Portuguese, and Korean. While the Twitter platform was translated into Arabic in the autumn of 2011, the help center didn’t host any Arabic-language policy documents until May 2013, roughly two years after the platform was translated.

As considerable scholarship in language planning and policy attests, status planning—the institutionalized ranking of one or more languages over others—is used to assert and defend hierarchies of power, whether that’s in the form of an official national language or a refusal to register baby names in certain languages. Such hierarchies are often quite literal. One Twitter employee described to me a division of possible platform languages into three tiers, prioritized in relation to forecasted market growth. This approach is by no means unique to Twitter. Rather, companies that grapple with scale regularly build teams and tools of *localization*—“the process of translating a product into different languages or adapting a product for a specific country or region,” according to that same Twitter employee, referencing an internal company document.

Both the localization practices of corporate language planning and the shifts in meaning as the policy crosses languages influence the authority and governing power of the policy. This originates in large part from the fact that as policies are translated, they move from the domain of lawyers, with their artistry of the precise and the vague, their careful attention to the multiple audience, to that of translators. Translators, in turn, focus less on plural interpretations and more on fidelity through capture and correspondence.

Indeed, in the fourteenth century translation shifted away from the informal and ad hoc and toward literalness and the source text (Tymoczko 2003:190),<sup>248</sup> a shift that continues to influence translators today. Consequently, a policy authored by a lawyer and a policy authored by a translator are significantly different beasts. As we will see after a brief excursion into legal fictions, this is true with the Japanese and Arabic versions of the parody policy, even though in their treatments of the concept of policy they perhaps come closer than European-language versions of the policy.

### **Language affordances and strategic polysemy**

As the lonely, untranslated state of the Fair Use document illustrates, languages and legal regimes do not map perfectly. Translation is not the only method available to adapt policy across jurisdictions. Twitter’s policies, particularly in their English-language versions, draw on techniques of *strategic polysemy*—language crafted to host multiple meanings catalyzed by person and context—to create a subtle regulatory system that spans jurisdictions without clearly belonging to any single jurisdiction. Thus, for example, Del Harvey and Jeremy Kessel of Twitter’s Trust and Safety team emphasized the care with which the word “withhold” was deployed in the country withheld content policy, with regard to its connotations both in English and in translation. Language affordances thus play much the same role as do the technical affordances that give shape to the country withheld content policy.

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<sup>248</sup> Tymoczko specifically ties this to the introduction of the word “translation” into English in the fourteenth century; other languages’ translation histories and practices may follow different paths. As the dominant language of Twitter’s place of origin and the most common vehicular and relay language, English-language translation practices are both particularly and broadly relevant.

Strategic polysemy is not unique to Twitter; rather, it can be found in policies across platforms. Indeed, strategic polysemy is one of social media's fundamental tools for establishing structures of governance and authority that extend across traditional boundaries. So far, such polysemy appears most successful in managing multiple English-language jurisdictions simultaneously—what we might think of as context collapse (Marwick and boyd 2010), but for a company rather than a user—in part due to the change in linguistic expertise that occurs when authorship shifts from lawyers to translators. English-language versions, moreover, have often been awarded more authority. Thus, for example, the majority of Twitter's advertising policies<sup>249</sup> begin with this caveat:

You can view available translations of this article by selecting a language in the upper-right corner of this page. Translations are provided as a convenience, and are not meant to change the content of our policies. The English version will control and should be your reference in case of conflict between a translation and the English version.<sup>250</sup>

In-house lawyers wrote both major English-language versions of Twitter's parody policy. Consequently, the use of strategic polysemy is not surprising—careful attention to precision and vagueness characterizes legal language more broadly (Crystal and Davy

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<sup>249</sup> As presented in August 2016; Twitter's general policies—those aimed at individual users—contain no such heads up.

<sup>250</sup> This difference between the two sets of policies suggests a related difference in political structure. Bellos (2011) has argued that translation and empire are oppositional (205); in empire, populations are expected to learn the language of empire; translation supports and prefigures a different set of political relations. The explicit recognition of the English-language version here could be understood as akin to an imperial frame.

1969; Tiersma 1999).<sup>251</sup> The legal fiction is one such technique, and platform policy strategically deploys it to automatically re-key policies to jurisdictions.

Legal fictions are perhaps best understood through the functions they take on: to resolve definitional challenges (Stern 2015), to temper rigidity (Lind 2015), to experiment with legal change (Del Mar 2015), to engage in substituted judgment (Harmon 1990), and many others. Legal fictions allow the introduction of structured subjectivity without altering the larger framework of law. Thus, for example, the “reasonable person” referred to in the parody pre-policy within the impersonation policy and Biz Stone’s origin story boasts a long tradition as an imagined construct juries may use during deliberations to evaluate real choices. The “intended audience” of the 2016 modification of the second version of the policy functions similarly.

While legal fictions, as a category, grew from a need to resolve inconsistencies within single legal systems, they also serve admirably as global means for organizing polysemy across legal regimes. Thus, while how a “reasonable person” is determined and recognized may vary by jurisdiction, the category “reasonable person” will be recognized and understood as *having* a specific definition across multiple systems. This allows a company with global reach to craft a single policy that simultaneously says different things in different legal contexts. When these appear in parallel legal terms in other

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<sup>251</sup> Lest it seem this chapter overstates the level of intent or thought involved in the writing of Twitter’s policies, recall that Crystal and Davy underscore lawyers’ hyper-awareness of language and attempts to control interpretation: “Faced with such a series of constraints—the need to avoid ambiguity, to be precise or vague in just the right way, to evade the possibilities of misinterpretation and to conform to the linguistic dictates of the law—lawyers, as we said, became and have remained in their use of language, cautious, conservative, ingenious, and self-aware.” (1969: 214)

language versions of a policy, the effect continues across languages. If, however, they are simply translated literally, effect diminishes.

Legal fictions with sufficient popular recognition act, too, as legal talismans (Albert 2016; discussed in chapter 5: The Social Media Contract). The use of strategic polysemy grounded in legal language thus both establishes an adaptive mantle of authority and blurs the boundary between law and policy—and it does so across jurisdictions.

### **A parody policy across three languages**

Before we turn to a close look at the Japanese and Arabic versions of the policy, it is important to note that it is no coincidence that the English version deploys “parody” rather than “satire” as its key term: In *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music* the US Supreme Court distinguished between parody and satire. Parody, in this framing, mimics an original work to make a point related to that original work, while satire uses a work to make a point about something else. Parody, consequently, broadly satisfies the transformative condition of fair use. Satire may or may not. The Court recognized the murkiness of this distinction, and in a footnote points out that looser forms of parody as well as satire may still be considered fair use, based on the weighting of the four overall factors. Consequently, when the American Bar Association took up the question of the satire/parody distinction in copyright and trademark law for one of its IP online roundtables, two prominent lawyers began with the written declaration, “Parody Versus Satire in Copyright Law: Just Argue Parody” (Marshall and Siciliano 2006).

Satire and parody nonetheless remain entangled in minds at Twitter: In the context of differentiating @BPGlobalPR—initially a response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill—as parody and @kanyewest as impersonation,<sup>252</sup> Sean Garrett, a Twitter spokesperson told *Forbes* in August 2010, “Satire and parody have been part of literature as long as there’s been literature.”<sup>253</sup> Note that, in contrast to the egalitarian, carnivalesque play described by Bakhtin (1968[1965]), Garrett mobilizes here a prestige category of high art to frame the entangled pair. Nonetheless, the selection of parody over satire in the policy has consequences for its meaning in its other language versions.

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<sup>252</sup> The @kanyewest account, which was run by an anonymous individual who was not Kanye West, was an early account suspension that received considerable press—in part due to Kanye’s fame and how he personally wrote about the experience. On 12 May 2009, Kanye West wrote, “(This spaz comes courtesy of losers making fake Kanye West Twitter accounts) I DON’T HAVE A FUCKING TWITTER... WHY WOULD I USE TWITTER??? I ONLY BLOG 5 PERCENT OF WHAT I’M UP TO IN THE FIRST PLACE. I’M ACTUALLY SLOW DELIVERING CONTENT BECAUSE I’M TOO BUSY ACTUALLY BUSY BEING CREATIVE MOST OF THE TIME AND IF I’M NOT AND I’M JUST LAYING ON A BEACH I WOULDN’T TELL THE WORLD. EVERYTHING THAT TWITTER OFFERS I NEED LESS OF. THE PEOPLE AT TWITTER KNOW I DON’T HAVE A FUCKING TWITTER SO FOR THEM TO ALLOW SOMEONE TO POSE AS ME AND ACCUMULATE OVER A MILLION NAMES IS IRRESPONSIBLE AND DECEITFUL TO THERE FAITHFUL USERS. REPEAT... THE HEADS OF TWITTER KNEW I DIDN’T HAVE A TWITTER AND THEY HAVE TO KNOW WHICH ACCOUNTS HAVE HIGH ACTIVITY ON THEM. IT’S A FUCKING FARCE AND IT MAKES ME QUESTION WHAT OTHER SO CALLED CELEBRITY TWITTERS ARE ACTUALLY REAL OR FAKE. HEY TWITTER, TAKE THE SO CALLED KANYE WEST TWITTER DOWN NOW .... WHY? ... BECAUSE MY CAPS LOCK KEY IS LOUD!!!!!!!!!!!!”. [http://techcrunch.com/2009/05/12/kayne-west-is-mad-as-hell-at-twitter-and-hes-not-going-to-take-this-anymore/ @kanyewest](http://techcrunch.com/2009/05/12/kayne-west-is-mad-as-hell-at-twitter-and-hes-not-going-to-take-this-anymore/@kanyewest) is now a verified account run by Kanye West.

<sup>253</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/2010/08/02/bp-angelina-jolie-technology-twitter.html>.

*Policy Related to Parody and Commentary (Commentary) et al., Fan Accounts*

In late 2012, a Japanese-language version of the parody policy became available.<sup>254</sup> In Japanese, the policy's title, パロディやコメンタリー(解説)、ファンアカウントに関するポリシー, translates literally to “policy related to parody and commentary (commentary) et al., fan accounts.” This includes several nuances difficult to preserve in translation: “parody” “commentary” (the first one) and “fan” are all written in katakana, transliterations of the corresponding English words. 解説, the kanji in parenthesis, is used to qualify “commentary” with the Japanese word *kaisetsu*, translated into English as commentary or explanation. The three items, parody, commentary, and fan are linked in different ways: parody and commentary are joined by や, a connector used to nonexclusively mark items in a list. That pair—and the invisible siblings the や suggests—is then separated off from fan accounts with a comma. This unusual nonparallel structure persists across titles from the 2012 version through the 2016 version. Both the internal text and the policy's subheaders, however, organize this list differently, deploying two commas to create a parallel structure that spans the three categories. Even still, however, the suggestion that these are merely instances of a larger phenomenon—signaled in the policy title by the や—remains, now embodied in the use of など or etc. There persists the suggestion that the policy covers more than the specific instances mentioned; these instances are examples only. This policy addresses other categories as well, but those categories needn't be named.

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<sup>254</sup> The Wayback Machine, the Internet Archive's excellent archiving and search tool, includes a capture of the Japanese-language version of the parody policy from 14 December 2012. This capture is of the first version of the policy, with the additional role-playing modification.

Lists occupy considerable space in legal language. Consequently, various rules have arisen with regard to the statutory interpretation of lists. Thus, for example, the principle of *eiusdem generis*, which specifies that a more general category in a list containing specific items must be interpreted as limited to the same larger class as the specific items. Or the principle of *expressio unius est exclusio alterius*, which suggests that items *not* covered by a list are therefore excluded from the statute. From this standpoint, the introduction in Japanese of unspecified others significantly changes the scope of the parody policy.

Considerable scholarly work argues that humor genres and epistemologies in Japan differ significantly from such genres elsewhere (e.g., Davis 2006), with important distinctions between humor and laughter as phenomena. Parody, as a category, doesn't have a direct analogue in the history of Japanese humor. That said, as literary scholar Tomoko Aoyama noted in 1994, "For the past two decades, parody and pastiche have occupied a prominent position in the Japanese literary scene. Familiar and lesser-known tales, stories, novels, poetry, and plays have in one way or another been subjected to a rewriting that constitutes, among other things, an explicit critique of what we shall call...the 'old literacy'" (Aoyama 1994:35).<sup>255</sup>

More recently, tech and design firms in Japan have made extensive use of parody in creating April Fools Day gags. Thus, for example, Adobe Real, announced by the Japan branch of Adobe: a physical version of the components of the popular software program (magnifying glass, eraser, etc.) that implicitly responds to critiques of its Creative Cloud model. Or Umer, the environmentally friendly, horse-sharing app from

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<sup>255</sup> Note that Aoyama's description resonates with the modern idea of parody as negative critique that Bakhtin (1968[1965]) articulates.

Hands Lab that parodies Uber. This use of Uber as a parodic target speaks to the mismatch between industry and territorial maps: despite various efforts, Uber has not succeeded in entering the Japanese market. Consequently, although famous among tech firms—and even cliché, given that new app proposals were often jokingly referred to as “Uber for [x]” at least through 2015—Uber doesn’t have the popular name recognition in Japan that it enjoys in major cities in the US or the UAE. In Japan, such gags are usually explicitly labeled as April Fools Day pranks, rather than left ambiguous in the expectation that a reader or viewer will connect the date and the announcement.

All of which is to say, parody in Japan is active and thriving and complex with transnational dimensions. The use of パロディ, “parody” in katakana, in the policy responds to this complexity. The manual bot phenomenon (see chapter 2, The Account-Person) and the minimal use of “parody account” or “parody policy” in Japanese media suggests that this term has limited efficacy. The unspecified categories included in the title, however, allow such alternatives to be grouped under the same policy, even as the language of the second version introduces more rigidity and requirement.

The marked signifiers in the versions of the Japanese-language policy have a distinctly different cast than appears in any other language version: the signifiers are included in English rather than Japanese. While the use of roman characters for the username category in the first version makes sense (the Twitter system currently only accepts usernames in roman characters), the use of English words is curious. So, for example, the bio category of the second version specifically exhorts users to use the English words “parody,” “fake,” “fan,” and “commentary” in an account description.

- 自己紹介: 自己紹介は対象のアカウントとつながりがないことを示すために、「parody」、「fake」、「fan」、「commentary」などの語句を含めるようにします。また、対象のユーザーが誤解を抱かないような内容にします。
- Bio: The bio should indicate that the user is not affiliated with the account subject by stating a word such as "parody," "fake," "fan," or "commentary," and be done so in a way that would be understood by the intended audience.

• النبذة التعريفية: ينبغي أن توضح النبذة التعريفية أن المستخدم لا يتبع موضوع الحساب عن طريق وضع كلمة مثل "ساخر" أو "زائف" أو "معجب" أو "ناقد"، وأن يتم بطريقة يفهمها الجمهور المقصود.

*The bio requirement, parody policy, version 2, 2016 modification; Japanese, English, and Arabic.*

This is not the only example of use of English in the policy, though the strangest.

Throughout the policy, Twitter is written “Twitter” rather than ツイッター as it is usually referred to in Japanese. On the one hand, this instance can be understood as an example of the integration of romaji, or roman characters, in Japanese writing more broadly, particularly with regard to proper nouns or initialisms like DVD or CD. In urban Japan, English in romaji appears often on transit signs, as well as on clothing, stationary, character goods, and in advertisements and shop names. Such English is alternately utilitarian, cool, and foreign. On the other hand, the collection of items retained in roman characters in this policy serves to unite these specific instances: The markings for a parody account—the legislated signifiers of parody—are part, first and foremost, of Twitter. They, like Twitter, are English-language quirks, cool and foreign simultaneously.

Similarly, though with less visible insistence, the policy uses ロールプレイングアカウント, a katakana version of the English phrase “role-playing account.” Role-playing has

a thriving history in Japanese across all sorts of media; often the practice is referred to as なりきり, some Twitter accounts thus describe themselves as a なりきりアカウント. This latter phrase, however, despite its long history and breadth, appears nowhere in any of the Japanese versions of the policy.

*A policy for cynics, admirers, and critics*

Within a year or so of the second English-language version of the parody policy appeared an Arabic version.<sup>256</sup> This version shows both that the policy’s stability itself varies across languages—with consequences for its power and authority—and the complexities of nuance.

The title of the parody policy in Arabic allocates agency differently than its English sibling: سياسة حسابات الساخرين والمعجبين والناقدین. This translates into (awkward) English as “the policy of accounts of cynics, admirers, and critics.” It is not the accounts that are engaging in parody, fandom, or commentary, but the people behind the accounts, typified in terms of their stance-taking behavior.<sup>257</sup> The abbreviation of the name of the policy within its text follows this awkward pattern as well سياسة حسابات الساخرين or “policy of accounts of cynics/jokers” (compare to the English-language version’s “parody policy”). The word used to signal parody accounts, الساخرين (*as-saakhiriin*), usually translates as sarcastic, snide, or wry *people*—cynics or jokers, but, first and

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<sup>256</sup> While the Wayback Machine doesn’t contain any captures of the Arabic-language version of the parody policy until 27 August 2015, my personal collection of policy documents includes an Arabic version of the policy that predates that, from 30 October 2014. The details of the policy correspond to those of the English-language 2013 version, thus, for example including newsfeed accounts (Arabic: موجز الأخبار), which first surfaced in version 2.

<sup>257</sup> Arabic’s distinct pluralizations of the animate and inanimate make this very clear.

fundamentally, animate human actors. Satire holds a venerable place in the history of Arabic literature, with a dedicated poem type known as الهجاء (*al-hijaa*'), similar in many ways to the ancient Roman satire of Juvenal—heavy on ad hominem attacks and invective, targeted at an individual, named or otherwise. الهجاء is alternately translated as “satire” and “defamatory poetry.” Use of it in the policy would simultaneously recognize the form as having aesthetic and literary merit, situate it as an extension of a long rich Arab heritage, and mark it as a specific type of defamation.

Another option would be المحاكاة الساخرة (*al-muḥaakaah as-saakhirah*), which conjoins the idea of copying or simulation with sarcasm/cynicism and is typically translated “parody.” As a comparison, Arabic-language Wikipedia, a source heavily edited by Arabic-language internet users, links its article entitled “المحاكاة الساخرة” to the English-language “parody” article as describing the same subject.<sup>258</sup>

السخرين, however, is the word chosen. السخرية, (*as-sukhriiah*) the abstract noun from the same root, usually translated as ‘sarcasm’ or ‘mockery,’ has widespread presence in Arabic and surfaces in modern Arabic law. Thus, for example, it appears in Article 29 of the UAE’s Cybercrime Law of 2012, which makes undertaking “sarcasm<sup>259</sup> [السخرية] or damage to the reputation, prestige, or stature of the State or any of its institutions or its president, vice-president, any of the rules of the Emirates, their crown princes, or the deputy rulers of the Emirates, the State flag, the national peace, its logo,

<sup>258</sup> In Japanese, both the Twitter policy and the Wikipedia article use パロディ, the English word “parody” written in katakana.

<sup>259</sup> Though the Arabic-language version of the law serves as the official legal document; the UAE government also provides an English-language version of the law; this version translates السخرية as “sarcasm.”

national anthem or any of its symbols” punishable by imprisonment or a fine not in excess of one million dirhams (equivalent to roughly \$272,000 as I type this in 2016).

Both this Arabic-language iteration of the second version of the policy and its later modifications in 2016 show lexical inconsistency. While the title uses المعجبين (*al-mu'jabin*), usually translated as “admirers” or “fans,” internally that word has been replaced by المؤيدين, (*al-mu'ayyidiin*) a word more typically understood as “adherents,” often surfacing in religious collocations. Again, using Arabic-language Wikipedia for comparison, “fan” as a person in Arabic is معجب (*mu'jab*, singular of المعجبين); nowhere in that (very short) Wikipedia article is مؤيد (*mu'ayyid*, singular of المؤيدين) used, nor do users suggest it as an alternate or replacement on the article’s talk page. I do not mean to suggest here that the policy, when read in Arabic has a religious slant; it does not. Rather, this example is intended to highlight both the different degree of stability the policy commands in its Arabic-language version and the complexities of nuance that differ across languages.

As a whole, the document reads very much as translation, as deriving from another language rather than written in Arabic—the constructions, though grammatically correct, are awkward and often not standard use. Thus, for example, both iterations of the policy use the phrase “حق تعبير المستخدمين” to parallel the English-language version’s “users’ right to expression.” The grammatical choice of an *idaafa* construction in Arabic, however, translates to something closer to “the right of expression of users” or “the right of user expression”—the right described isn’t a human right of expression, exercised by users, but one that semantically entangles expression and users. In Arabic, right to expression in policy and legal documents—the legal talisman version—is “حق التعبير”;

consequently, a more fluent phrasing here would be “حق التعبير للمستخدمين” that preserves the underlying legal and political phrase being described. This is an example of a linguistic failure in using a legal talisman to manage globality. Reading the policy in Arabic, the translated quality emerges clearly: this is not written by a lawyer and lacks the authority brought in so successfully in the English-language version via register choices.

Both the Arabic and Japanese versions have been altered to reflect the changes of 2016. And, of course, they exist within the same location and design template as the English-language version of the policy. All three currently display the same navigational framework, the same header portrait photo of a woman smiling at a mobile.

Many of the changes between this Arabic second version and its 2016 modifications parallel those described for differences between the English-language examples: the elimination of the third bullet point, the reordering of bio and account name, the elimination of the suggestion that complaints/reports are processed in the order received, the weakening of Twitter’s promises to work with users to bring them into compliance with the policy. Parallel changes appear to have been mandated across all policy documents. The consistency of these changes across language versions underscores the changes’ perceived importance.

While it’s easy to see why the areas designated for evidence should be consistent across all languages, the careful nuance shift from complaint to report is curious in this context. In Arabic, the shift from complaint to report—from “شكوى” (*shakwa*) to “بلاغة” (*balaaghah*)—arguably shifts the language away from an official, formal filing to an interaction with less gravitas, with “بلاغة” suggesting simply that information was shared.

A similar tone shift manifests in a change from “يجب” (*yajib*) to “ينبغي” (*yanbaghi*) in the bullet points. While both indicate necessity, the former typically correlates to “shall” or “must” and resonates with legal obligation, while the latter correlates to “should” and points to desirability. This linguistic tweak is specific to the Arabic-language documents—it does not appear in the English-language ones. Despite the considerable linguistic revision between the 2014 and 2016 examples of the policy, the المعجبين – المؤيدين inconsistency remains.

### **The audience, the public, and the user**

The addition of the pro-speech “intended audience” phrase to the 2016 iteration appears differently in both Arabic and Japanese than in English. In English the phrase is “and be done so in a way that would be understood by the intended audience.” The same phrase is used in both the bio requirement and the account name requirement. In both Arabic and Japanese, the two are different. Again, the stability and continuity of the policy document changes as it passes through translation.

In Arabic, the bio addition reads: “وأن يتم بطريقة يفهمها الجمهور المقصود” or, “and to be completed in a manner such that the intended public understands it.” In the account name it is: “ويجب أن يكون ذلك بطريقة يستطيع الجمهور المقصود فهمها”, or “and that must be in a manner the intended public is able to understand.” The verbs of these two clauses differ from both English and each other in important ways. Arabic and English weight mood and tense with different value, with Arabic prioritizing the former and English the latter

(Holes 1995).<sup>260</sup> The English-language version of the phrase draws on the subjunctive: “that would be understood.” In Arabic this is expressed in the indicative, what is usually translated simply as present tense in English, but in Arabic also more clearly underscores the notion of incompleteness. The Arabic subjunctive is not used here. Further, perhaps in an attempt to bridge the mood–tense weight differences of the two languages, the first verb here is simply “understands,” while the second verb is “able to understand.” The latter offers additional indeterminacy.

There’s nuance as well to the use of the word “جمهور” (*al-jumhuur*) in both versions of this phrase. The word syntactically corresponds to the English word “audience.” “جمهور” however, is more widely understood as “public” in its political sense. As a result, the Arabic phrase added to the account name bullet point translates as “that shall be done in a way that the intended public understands.” (“يجب” reappears here in this new addition.)

In Japanese, the bio addition is: “また、対象のユーザーが誤解を抱かないような内容にします” or, “also, make the content such that the target user does not misunderstand.” The phrase attached to the account name requirement is: “アカウント名についても対象のユーザーが誤解を抱かないようなものにします” or, “regarding the account name, too, make it such that the target user does not misunderstand.” Whereas both the English and Arabic versions use nouns—“way” and “manner”—to anchor what is to be done, suggesting a process with its own existence, in Japanese a grammatical how is offered without a similar nominal anchor. Consequently, “content” is added to the bio phrase and *もの* is added to the account name phrase as a nominalizer. The latter is primarily a grammatical

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<sup>260</sup> Though this is shifting with the rise of media Arabic, which shows grammatical and syntactical influences from English and French (Holes 1995).

addition. The former, however, introduces further specificity into the phrase. Undefined “content” has become key.

Finally, this policy brings “audience” in English, “public” in Arabic, and “user” in Japanese, into equivalence. As with ポリシー (*porishii* or “policy”), パロディ (*parodi* or “parody”), and others, the word “user” is Japanese English written in katakana: ユーザー (*yuuzaa*). In both English and Japanese, this use of “user” to denote a membership category that defines a person in relation to a technology is relatively new, though now widespread and ascendant. If this phrase is indeed ever used as a roadmap for automation of policy—a possibility posited in the previous chapter—on its own, “audience” suggests a measurable interaction relationship in a way that neither “user” nor “public” does. In English, the addition of “intended” serves to amplify a sense of preceding relationship. In both Japanese and Arabic the modifier—“target” and “intended”—bears the full weight of defining that relationship. Still, while audience, public, and user differ importantly, all three are also reasonable translation choices: the idea that Twitter is reaching for entangles all three.

### **Final thoughts**

If, as argued in the previous chapter, the history of Twitter’s parody policy is the history of Twitter’s social contract, that contract has developed differently across English, Japanese, and Arabic. The iconic product and its policies are translated (developed, updated) at different times, into specific languages responding at times to market assessments, at times to popular will. Language coverage affects who this social contract includes and how. Twitter’s policies align it with different legal systems—and none at

all. Policies draw on practices of global polysemy to select bodies of law and align platforms to these bodies of law, in varying degree and depending on specific legitimation practices. Not all policies are the same in their policyness. Legal force, expressive function, addressivity, etc.—the performative aspects of policy, the commitments and persuasions, the posturing and selections of plural audiences—vary. And, when there's an authorial shift from lawyer-as-author to translator-as-author, language choices interrupt, eliminate, modify, and add to what has already been written.

## Conclusion

Twitter parody accounts, their actors, and the many contexts they intersect continue to change. Over the course of this research a number of notable changes thrust parody and its diverse aspects into popular discussion. *The Colbert Report* ended, with Stephen Colbert taking over as host of *The Late Show*. Terry Pratchett, likely the most popular writer of parody in recent times, passed away. Terrorists attacked the office of lampoon magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. The UK added new parody, caricature, and pastiche exceptions to its copyright law. In Hong Kong, legislators sutured a parody exception into copyright update proposals in a failed attempt to reassure internet users regarding freedom of expression. World events and local events, from the rise of Trump to annoying demands from high school teachers, triggered outrage and ridicule and parody accounts. Meanwhile, though Twitter's parody policy has remained relatively stable, Twitter continues to tweak its reporting tools and platform affordances, on what sometimes seems a daily basis. Throughout have thrummed parody accounts, roaring and quieting as events—and life—played out.

These chapters have traced the thread of the Twitter parody account as an off-platform use, examining in turn the contours of that use, its adversaries and proponents among traditional structures of authority, and how the platform has ratified and deployed it. In the process, we have explored how these actors re-create and recreate language, personhood, law enforcement, representative government, corporate policy, and globality. Throughout, an attention to language and lived experience has guided us.

The material presented here could have been organized around different themes, while still attending to language and lived experience. Thus, for example, rather than integrating examples from the three languages throughout, material could have been divided by language or location. In which case, this dissertation would likely have examined the differences among parody accounts, their actors, and contexts, perhaps highlighting further the manual bots of Japanese-language Twitter, the dominance of political parody in Arabic-language Twitter or the breadth of technology-based parodies in English-language Twitter. Alternatively, I might have organized this material around dimensions of context collapse (Marwick and boyd 2010), a factor which, to my surprise, materialized across the multiple contexts<sup>261</sup> of these pages. Thus, for example, in part 1, context collapse was contrasted with the account-person's opportunities to create context by summoning a world; in part 2, context collapse lurked in shadow IT, destabilizing office hierarchies and contributing to the new role of government social media managers; and in part 3, platform policies attempt to navigate a context collapse of sorts in readership, communicating with multiple potential readerships simultaneously. These are, perhaps, ideas to explore for future articulations of this research. For now, though, building on the foundation of the off-platform use and the various actors who negotiate it, I want to turn briefly to ideologies of play and what I term *usership*.

### **Ideologies of play**

This dissertation has, in classic STS fashion, drawn on thick detail to examine the larger network of actors who have negotiated and are continuing to negotiate the boundaries and

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<sup>261</sup> Sorry.

shape of the parody account category. Another way to understand this story of off-platform use is to examine the ideological shifts and contests of the various interactions.

In *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997) Sutton-Smith articulates seven different “rhetorics” of play—that is, seven different ideologies, spanning disciplines and eras and regions,<sup>262</sup> that have been used to explain, assess, and justify play. Three of these Sutton-Smith identifies as both ancient and associated with a collective focus: play as fate, play as power, play as (community) identity. Three Sutton-Smith associates with a modern focus on the individual: play as progress, play as imaginary, play as self. The final rhetoric, play as frivolous, Sutton-Smith frames as a responsive rhetoric, used to denigrate and dismiss forms of play other than whatever is currently hegemonic.

As discussed in the introduction, Parody and Play, the off-platform use is situated and marked by ambiguity. The off-platform use may, consequently, seem difficult to meaningfully bring into discussion with other scholarship except in explicit comparison across off-platform use trajectories. Shifting to an ideological perspective, however, allows us the opportunity to bring in a different set of frames and categories.

In the preceding six chapters we have drawn on different ideologies to investigate the network of actors interacting through parody accounts. In part 1, Parody and Person, account creators engaged in play as power, declaring enmity and issuing challenges across scale. Ideas of play as imaginary and self surface here, too, in both the actions described and our analysis, with account creators glorying in exuberant transformations and expressions of identity.

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<sup>262</sup> Most of the scholarship reviewed seems to focus on Europe and English-speaking countries, though examples from other continents sporadically appear.

Part 2, Parody and Authority, revisited the idea of play as power. Some governmental officials perceive parody accounts as a threats to their power, and social media platforms as spaces both dangerous and liberating for the performance of power. At the same time, for governmental social media managers, play is emerging as a powerful mode of being. In this, play becomes a declaration of self, but also of community identity: governmental social media managers draw heavily from corporate experiences online, identifying with corporate counterparts and relating to platforms from similar positionality.

Part 3, Parody and Platform, revealed these various ideologies conjoined: through Twitter's dedicated parody policy, ideologies of play as self and play as imaginary are used to establish authority and power. Ideals of freedom of expression implicitly counter frivolity claims. Meanwhile, the work of protecting and regulating play functions as a move in a linked contest grounded in play as power.

### **Usership**

A recurring theme in this dissertation has been the role corporations—particularly social media platforms—play in shaping contemporary sociality, from personhood to governance. The global corporation builds from a framework of different shape and texture than the nation-state and other traditional political units, and we see those differences reflected in its effects. The social media corporation does not enjoy absolute rule by technological fiat. Rather, as we have investigated, user practices and demands shape the platform and its possibilities. The emerging social contract detailed in chapters 5 and 6 reflects these negotiations. More than that, users and platform together enact what

I term *usership*, a member relationship entangled with ideologies of citizenship, yet largely asserted and negotiated between individuals and corporations with minimal governmental involvement. Implicitly recognizing this, a group of users has banded together to propose turning Twitter into a co-op, owned by users. Twitter's shareholders are scheduled to vote on whether to explore the possibility further in a May 2017 meeting.

In usership, individuals—persons with legal rights and bodies, alternately protected and controlled by governments—become users, defined through their relationship with the platform. Rights become reporting options with uncertain consequences. Bodies become symbiotic presences. Governments, meanwhile, take on these same rights and bodies, becoming users themselves. At least at the moment—this relationship continues to shift and expand. Still, stop for a moment and let the other connotations of the word “user” echo in your ears, of substance abuse and manipulation. For better or worse, users are intimately and integrally connected to the thing they use.

Expressions of usership vary with platform. Twitter usership has its own characteristics, and these differ with community and language. Notably, Twitter users—particularly English-language users—assert a right to freedom of expression and demand protection from harassment. Users' political actions within the platform look a little different from traditional political actions. These might include, for example, closing an account, shifting an account status between public and protected, opening an additional account, promoting new accounts on other platforms, and others.

Twitter, meanwhile, builds policy, transparency reports, reporting tools, new platform affordances, a Trust and Safety Council. Some of these offerings follow user

requests. Others do not—sometimes angering users with how nonresponsive they appear. Twitter expects users—whether those users are unverified individuals or verified government accounts—to resolve problems of their technical ignorance on their own. Twitter is accountable, too, to its shareholders and industry norms, and this shapes the company’s actions.

Such usership urges questions about where the platform fits into larger balances of power. What are the implications of usership for other institutional relationships? Will the platform be merged, perhaps, with a nation-state, akin to the governance experiments of European colonialism? Is the platform rival power, parallel power, or categorically different? Is this a contracting out of (speech) governance? How will platform practices and experiences of governance and membership influence such practices and experiences in other channels?

### **Final thoughts<sup>263</sup>**

As I close this dissertation, there are things I worry I haven’t yet made clear enough. Perhaps foremost of these is the importance of the physical spaces of my ethnographic fieldwork to my analysis. The physical spaces I inhabited, from the friend’s house in Alameda just across the San Francisco Bay from Twitter headquarters, to the tiny apartment in Tokyo near the soy donut shop that liked to play the theme song to *My Neighbor Totoro*, to the residential complex of the Airbnb in Dubai with its grass and fountains abutting grungy Tecom Park and persistent construction, and the cities and

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<sup>263</sup> For you who have read this far, thank you. I appreciate the time and thought you’ve put into reading this dissertation and hope it has been a satisfying—or at the very least mildly entertaining—endeavor.

countries beyond, played an enormous role in my understanding of parody accounts as a global speech genre. Not only are parody accounts often directly responsive to local—well, local to them, which can mean many different things—events and news, Twitter occupies different niches in different media and advertising ecologies. In Tokyo I saw ads for Twitter on subway trains—Japan is the only country to my knowledge where Twitter advertises its service directly. In Dubai I found myself intrigued by the ephemerality of news media, where paper newspapers regularly include a page or two worth of tweets and local magazines offer no online archives. In San Francisco I walked down Market Street and there was Twitter headquarters, amidst neighborhood ambassadors and bike rental stations and corners smelling of urine. I spotted Twitter employees over fancy cocktails in Tokyo, at Comedy Hack Day in San Francisco, at food trucks on the beach in Dubai. I suspect it will take me another version or two before these influences make it onto the page more explicitly.

My other worry is that I have, through extended analysis and a gravitation toward the weighty, squashed the playfulness out of parody accounts. The whimsy of play is notoriously difficult to capture in scholarship—there’s something about the scholarly process that strips the experience of whimsy away even as it pins its subjects to the paper for closer examination. It’s not just that a part of parody evades scholars determined to be buzzkills, parody’s slipperiness is important. This slipperiness is a key defensive tactic, one that signals a powerful linguistic act. There’s something about parody that encourages people to dismiss its importance and, after a laugh or a groan, shift their attention elsewhere. Even the most serious of parody somehow also presents itself as simultaneously trivial (this is a trick, don’t fall for it)—with consequences for the kinds

of actions that can be taken against it. The person or institution that attacks parody almost inevitably becomes a subject of mockery for their inability to “take a joke.” A win in a court of law or a platform’s reporting system may nevertheless be accompanied by a loss in public opinion. But I am veering toward the weighty again. Let me just say, during the public presentation of this dissertation, I was asked about the role of parody—its language play, its humor—in the various acts of re-creation I discussed.<sup>264</sup> With parody accounts, re-creation and recreation are firmly intertwined.

These most final of final thoughts are also beginning thoughts. Setting off to investigate Twitter parody accounts as a form of social critique and verbal artistry, in English, Japanese, and Arabic and across a network of actors has left me with new questions to ask and new experiences and phenomena to analyze. These range from the curious similarities of Hulk, Dalek, and Trump parody accounts; to the creation of comedic robots by the Yoshimoto Robotics lab, a spinoff from giant entertainment agency Yoshimoto Kougyou; to questions about the unparodied and unparodiable.

I’m excited to keep playing.

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<sup>264</sup> My thanks to Erhardt Graeff for this thoughtful question.

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