

The Doxxing of Violentacrez:

Interplay between Action and Structure on Reddit



Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.

Karl Marx , “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”

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ABSTRACT

On October 10, 2012 controversial online figure “Violentacrez” was doxxed¹ by Gawker writer Adrien Chen and his true identity was shared with the general public. This MRP traces the development of the discussion on Reddit surrounding the doxxing from October 10, 2012 until October 18, 2012. Discussion is tracked by examining posts and comments gleaned from Reddit, and it is supported by an analysis of the structures that regulate user action on the Reddit platform. In a larger context, this MRP will show that users are engaging in collaborative, iterative and alternative practices--creating multi-layered documents and building upon the work of their predecessors. As well as offering insight into user action, an analysis of Reddit discussion will show the kinds of meanings being created within this online community.

¹ Doxxing is the public identification of anonymous speakers and the sharing of their personal information.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, for their love, constant support and patience.

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INTRODUCTION

On October 10, 2012 controversial online figure “Violentacrez” was doxxed² by Gawker writer Adrien Chen and his true identity was shared with the general public. “Violentacrez” is Michael Brutsch, a 49-year-old software programmer who lives in Texas and is married with children. People who met Michael Brutsch in real life described him as a “perfect gentleman” and a “really nice guy” (Starr). Online, however, Violentacrez created and moderated several controversial subreddits³ on the Social News (SN) site Reddit that then made him a target for scandal. As this scandal unfolded, it was documented and discussed extensively in mainstream media and on Reddit. This MRP traces the development of the discussion on Reddit from October 10, 2012, when Gawker⁴ ran a feature story exposing the identity of Violentacrez, until October 18, 2012 when CNN aired an exclusive interview with Violentacrez. Discussion is tracked by examining posts and comments gleaned from Reddit, and it will be supported by an analysis of the structures that regulate user action on the Reddit platform.

In a larger context, this MRP is trying to understand the potential intersections between virtual life and ‘real’ life. Although norms or rules of some online communities help keep cyber life separate from ‘real life’ (for example, anti-doxxing rules that protect the anonymity of users engaging in potentially illegal activities), this scandal shows that activities undertaken in online communities such as Reddit can and do have ‘real’ life repercussions. For Michael Brutsch, these ‘real’ life repercussions included being fired from his job, being shamed on national television, and receiving numerous death threats (Levy). In other words, even when cyber life is structured around fantasy, the border between ‘real life’ and cyber life is permeable, and the normative

² Doxxing is the public identification of anonymous speakers and the sharing of their personal information.

³ A subreddit can be thought of as an online forum.

⁴ Gawker is a website that calls itself “the source for daily Manhattan media news and gossip.” The blog focuses on celebrity news and the media industry.

systems of the two domains may overlap.

Background to the Controversy

The scandal that emerged on Reddit and in mainstream media in October of 2012 was fueled by Violentacrez's controversial, dichotomous status as both an "excellent" and "powerful" community moderator ⁵ and as "Reddit's creepiest user" (Chen). Michael Brutsch joined Reddit as Violentacrez in 2007. He quickly began posting obscene material to the site, and initially he faced opposition from the employees at Reddit. Eventually Reddit staff became more lenient because they realized Violentacrez would identify and remove illegal content that populated the site at a time when employees were "not sufficiently staffed to take on the task" (Chen). As a result, Brutsch developed close relationships with senior moderators and administrators on the site. Violentacrez also moderated more than 250 subreddits (Fernando). Both users and the media found several of the subreddits Violentacrez moderated to be offensive and controversial despite technically being legal. For example, r/jailbait featured sexually suggestive photos of "teenage girls and boys who are possibly below the age of consent" ("Reddit"). Legality was maintained by ensuring images posted were "non nude" and included only "what you can see on a public beach in the US" ("Reddit"). R/creepshots featured images of scantily clad women and the subreddit encouraged contributors to "use stealth, cunning and deviousness to capture the beauty of your unsuspecting, chosen target" ("Reddit"). Finally r/beatimgwomen featured images and content focused on beating women. The contents posted in these subreddits were often taken without the woman's consent, and in the case of r/creepshots this was the central premise of the subreddit. Despite the large outcry that developed against these subreddits within and outside of

⁵ Moderators are users who are given the right to moderate their peers' contributions. They are either chosen by the community at random or are chosen based on seniority. (Bruns 4) Moderators often determine the overall theme or the tone of a subreddit and then moderate submissions to make sure posts remain within guidelines.

the Reddit community, r/jailbait and r/creepshots saw rising popularity: in September 2012 r/jailbait had around eleven thousand users, and in January 2012 r/creepshots had around thirteen thousand users (“Reddit”). Furthermore, the general manager of Reddit (Erik Martin) defended the subreddits, remarking that such controversial pages were a consequence of “allowing free speech on the site” (Fernando). In 2008, r/jailbait was even named “subreddit of the year” in a Reddit poll (Chen). As the popularity of Violentacrez’ subreddit continued to grow, Violentacrez and the Reddit staff maintained a laissez-faire attitude. In a 2011 interview with Daily Dot, Violentacrez commented, “people take things way too seriously [on Reddit]” (Fernando). A lead programmer at Reddit until 2010, Chris Slowe described the relationship between Brusch and the Reddit staff: “We just stayed out and let him do his thing and we knew at least he was getting rid of a lot of stuff that wasn’t particularly legal” (Chen). Violentacrez’s controversial status within mainstream media and the Reddit community compounded by the laissez-faire attitude of Reddit (as can be seen in their privacy policy) led to the conditions under which a mainstream media controversy erupted in October of 2012.

Relevance and Larger Context

Rather than analyze issues of privacy, morality, norms and regulations on SN sites in the abstract, this MRP focuses on a particular controversy involving a specific platform. Controversial, disruptive events can reveal aspects of platform structure and user actions that might otherwise be difficult to detect. First, a controversy gives rise to a large variety of opinions expressed around a particular topic. Second, a large and diverse range of users respond to a major controversy within a short time-span. Third, a major controversy involves extreme actions that reveal or test the limits both of the platform structure and of user action. This particular

scandal fostered modifications to the Reddit doxxing policy, for example. Fourth, a highly disruptive controversy causes users to comment and reflect on structures or actions that were previously ignored or taken for granted. In short, this approach offers insight into the actions that SN site users are utilizing and validating. This MRP will show that users are engaging in collaborative, iterative and alternative practices--creating multi-layered documents and building upon the work of their predecessors--that Braun and Gillespie indicate are not currently emphasized in mainstream media (383). As well as offering insight into user action, an analysis of Reddit discussion will show the kinds of meanings being created within this online community.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding Critical Realism

Critical realism, associated with the work of Bhaskar and Archer emphasizes the duality, or the interplay of action and structure, which makes this theoretical framework ideal for this study. First, critical realism looks at social and cultural structures or the “broader historical and contemporary formations” that envelop and shape people’s options for action (Daymon & Holloway). Second, critical realism looks at action, or “people’s actions, including communication” (Daymon & Holloway). Critical Realism agrees with interpretive scholars that society is comprised of “thinking and feeling human beings who socially construct their realities” (Daymon & Holloway). However, along with positivists, critical realists claim that there is an “observable world that is independent of human consciousness” (Daymon & Holloway). Since the early 2000s, critical realism has gained prominence within various social sciences, challenging the ‘postmodern climate’ of social science research (Lau). According to Daymon and Holloway, the application of critical realism in public relations and marketing communications is rare, although they indicate “it is increasing popular in media studies” (103). Critical realism is not a theoretical framework traditionally associated with communication studies, but the recent works of Lau 2004; MacLennan and Thomas 2003; and Sims-Schouten, Riley and Willig 2007 are beginning to fill this gap. These authors discuss the application of critical realism to fields related to communication studies: cultural studies, mass media studies and gender studies. Their work thus provides essential background to apply the critical realist approach to the present study.

Rationale for use of Critical Realism

Controversies like the Violentacrez' doxxing draw attention to the interplay between action and structure. The *structure* of Reddit as a platform allowed Violentacrez to *act* outside the laws of society and exploit the website; but in the end it was those laws that led to his doxxing in October of 2012. The norms, markets and architecture of the Reddit platform as well as the laws that shape it (such as child pornography laws) structured the actions available to Violentacrez and the Reddit community. The *actions* that occurred in this scandal—Adrien Chen's doxxing of Violentacrez in Reddit, the negative consequences on Michael Brutsch's 'real life' and career; the subsequent discussion raised on Reddit and users' ability to collaborate and discuss the events that occurred—were shaped and influenced by Reddit's structure.

Critical Realism, Cyberspace and Structure

In his work "*Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*," Lawrence Lessig explains four constraints that work together, yet have distinct effects in regulating behavior in cyberspace (124). Within the guiding framework of critical realism, Lessig's model to describe the regulation of behavior in cyberspace provides a meaningful conceptual framework to analyze the *structure* of Reddit. This model further breaks down *structure* in online communities by introducing four constraints that regulate behavior in cyberspace: law, norms, markets and architecture (code) (See *Fig 0*). These four regulating mechanisms will be explored in greater detail within the literature review of this MRP.

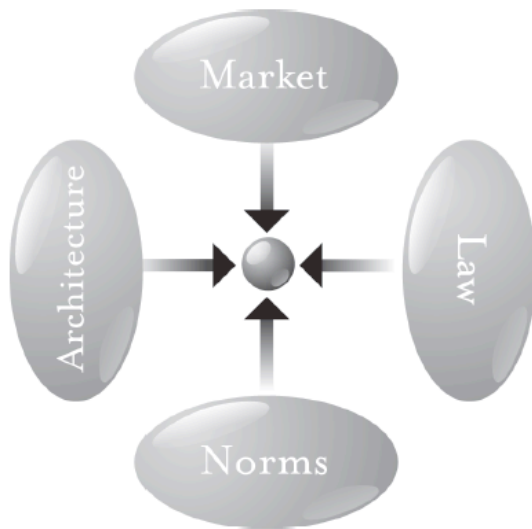


Figure 1: Lawrence Lessig's Four Constraints of Regulation

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this MRP draws from a range of research contributions within communication studies focusing on online communities, Social News sites, privacy, morality and social norms. First, this literature review will explore Reddit as both an online community and SN site. Toward this end, it is helpful to establish that Reddit is in fact an online community and what kind of online community it is. In order to do so, it is necessary to review how previous scholars have defined community. Second, this literature review will look at Reddit's *structure*. Using Lessig's model, further aspects of architecture, markets, norms and laws will be explored. Third, this literature review will look at user *action* on Reddit. This topic is important for this MRP because it relates directly to the actions in which users participate in online communities such as Reddit. Finally, existing studies on Reddit will be discussed.

Is Reddit an Online Community?

Historically, the term *community* is associated with place-based and rural connotations. Baym explains that three elements (alone or in combination) are usually present in the historical understanding of *community*: “a collection of people with a particular social structure”, “a sense of belonging or community spirit” (Conrad 3), and “a self-containment of sorts” that is predominantly geographical (Baym 79). With the advent of asynchronous virtual connectivity in contemporary culture, however, community in the strict sense has become increasingly difficult to define. Garton, Haythornthwaite and Wellman define our contemporary sense of community as “maintained through ties, rather than through geographical proximity” (6). The discussion of Reddit will draw from all of these definitions in its use of community as a concept.

Following a historical definition of community, an important question is how community exists online. *Community* as a theoretical construct has been acknowledged as integral to the study of online environments (Baym). Nancy Baym's book "*Personal Connections in the Digital Age*" provides an overview of prevailing theories on virtual communities. Baym indicates that the "combination of interactivity and reach" in an online community allows people "to come together around shared interests, transcending local communities in ways that may be personally empowering but potentially polarizing" (97). In "*Community Technology and Democratic Rationalization*" Barkadijeva and Feenburg outline four conditions for an effective online community--conditions that Reddit meets: *Bounding*, the forming of closed social groups (ie. subreddits on Reddit). *Tracking*, the listing of how far each participant has read in community discussions (ie. user pages that track a user's posts and comments). *Archiving*, the maintenance of accessible records of community discussion (ie. Reddit's search function). And *warranting*, the ensuring of stable and genuine participant identities (ie. Reddit pseudonymous usernames). This research is useful in analyzing how the structure of a website, such as Reddit, encourages or precludes a sense of community. As an online community, Reddit is not entirely separate from the offline (real) world. Instead, users form groups, their activities are archived and stored, their profiles are searchable, and their online accounts are connected to their 'real life' identities, even if the latter are not revealed to other community members. Overall, it is important to discuss Reddit in the context of online community to highlight that the only use of Reddit is not just to share content, but instead that the social community on Reddit is equally important.

Reddit as a Social News Site

Social news sites (SN sites), sometimes referred to as social news aggregators, emerged with the birth of Web 2.0. According to Purcell et al., by 2010 more than 37% of internet users have had experience in sharing stories on SN sites. Popular examples of such sites include *Digg*, *Wikipedia*, *Delicious* and *Reddit*. SN sites remain distinct “in platform and purpose” from other online communities, such as microblogs and social networking sites, which have dominated the literature (Leavitt and Clarke 3). Unlike the latter, the structure of SN sites attract users to “share to an unknown mass audience” (Leavitt and Clarke 3). SN sites allow users to access previously published online contents that are filtered based on the collective opinion of the community. Contents can include images, videos, or texts published by mass media organizations as well as that of citizen journalists (Szabo 59). SN sites use a ‘publish-then-filter’ system as opposed to a ‘filter-then-publish’ approach used by mass media. A ‘publish-then-filter’ system allows users to upload content without requiring it to be verified before being publically visible. After the content is published, it is then filtered by moderators or other users. Reddit’s ‘publish-then-filter’ structure results in content that is sometimes unreliable or unverified. As a result, moderation, commenting and user-participation through voting is necessary to ensure that popular content is reliable.

The Structure of Reddit

Having established how scholars have defined community both online and offline, and having identified Reddit as a SN site, it is also important to consider four factors that Lessig suggests regulate user action in virtual communities and on SN sites in particular: architecture, norms, markets and laws. In line with the critical realist framework I will then establish how

scholars have discussed user *actions* on social news sites, in particular Goode and Szabo's use of the term "metajournalism" to explain the activity of users on SN sites.

Reddit: The Architecture

Lessig observes, "an analog for architecture regulates behavior in cyberspace" (124). This cyber architecture, realized in the form of code, includes rules and protocols of access and use. In the following section, this MRP will outline the 'architecture' of Reddit and how it regulates user behavior.

Statistics of Use

Founded in June 2005 by Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, Reddit is a massively popular SN site that depends on both mass media and user-generated content to populate its vast networks (Macale). The relative prominence given to a story depends upon a complex algorithm that considers user upvotes, downvotes (also known as karma⁶) and submission time (newer stories will rank higher) (Mills 2). Reddit has seen massive growth in the past years, surpassing social news website Digg.com in 2010 (Mills 2). By 2012, Reddit had reached 400 million unique visitors and 37 billion page views (hueypriest, 2013). Most of its visitors reside in the USA (45.7%), followed by India (15.6%), and Canada (5.0%). Additionally, the site is popular in the UK, Australia, Pakistan, Brazil and the Netherlands ("Reddit.com Site info", 2012). These data suggest that Reddit is an international phenomenon. The site is skewed towards a particular demographic--young (18-34), male, educated and predominantly American (Alexa).

⁶ All users on Reddit are given a Karma score based on the overall performance of their posts and comments. For example, users whose posts and comments consistently rank high on the site will have a positive Karma score.

User Interface (UI)

Aesthetically, Reddit has the simple, straightforward ‘look and feel’ associated with “many Web 2.0 initiatives” (Goode 1296). The visual expression of a page on Reddit may be divided into three main parts, a header, a post column and a sidebar (see *Fig. 2*).

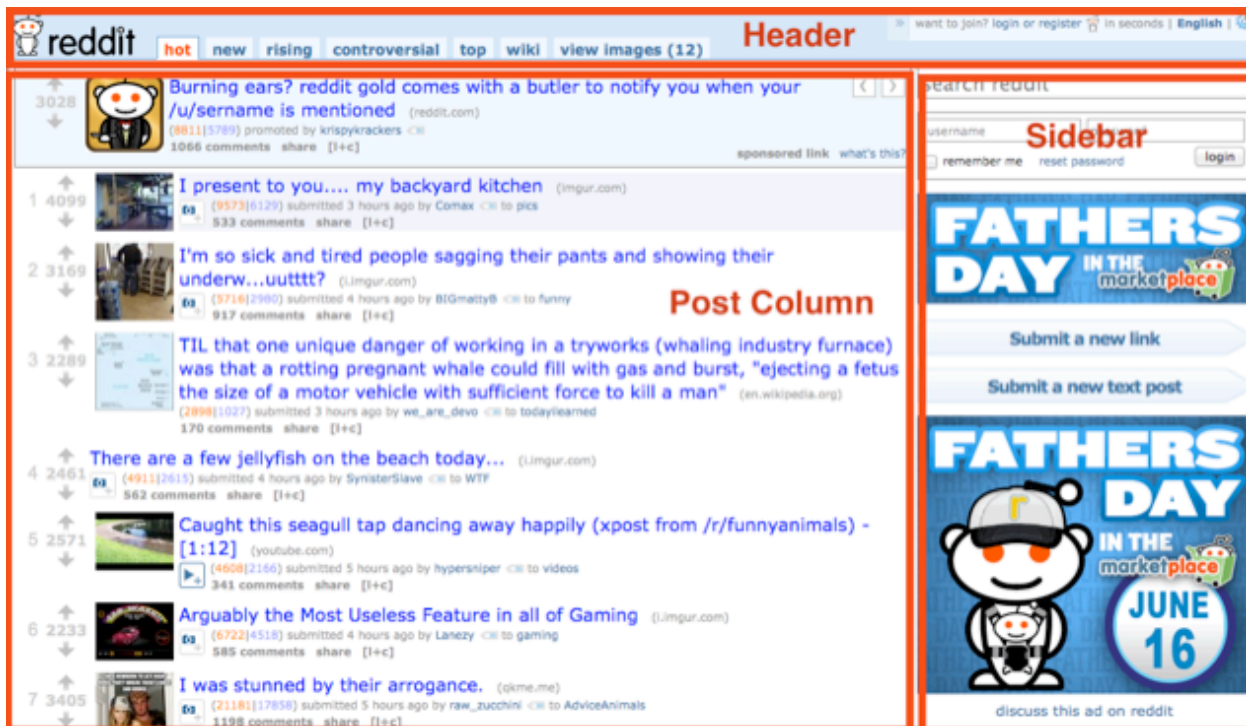


Figure 2: The Layout of a Reddit Page

The Header

The header appears at the top of each page on Reddit. It contains a sorting option for the content being viewed. The content within each page can be sorted in four different ways (‘Hot’, ‘New’, ‘Rising’, and ‘Controversial’). The sorting option for posts places preference on posts with a large amount of upvotes (hot, rising, top) while ignoring posts that receive mostly downvotes. As a result, Reddit posters are striving for upvotes (i.e. to produce content the community deems interesting or valid) to then reach the front page. The header also includes

Reddit's alien mascot 'Snoo'. When viewing the page of a particular subreddit the header often modifies the alien to fit with the theme of the subreddit (see *Fig. 3*) Depending on the subreddit, the header may also contain an image or a graphical element.



Figure 3: A header on the r/Aww subreddit that includes a modified Snoo to fit the Subreddit theme

The Post Column

Reddit allows users to submit content in the form of either a link or a text post. Users vote the submission up or down, which is then used to determine the post's position on the site. Contents submitted on Reddit (regardless of source) are visually presented in the exact same manner. There are no typographical elements highlighting particular articles. Therefore, all the pages on the site look identical, with every posted item consisting merely of a headline of text and on occasion a small indicative picture (see *Fig. 4*). The pages of Reddit are essentially textual lists of articles, sorted according to their popularity (Szabo 361). For example, one headline might contain a link to a *Wall Street Journal* article, and another a photograph taken by an amateur artist; visually and typographically, the two headlines will look just the same. In this way, Reddit's architecture levels the playing field between mass media content and average users in their competition for attention (Szabo 361). What matters is the content itself not where it comes from or how it is presented. For all content posted, the Reddit user can see the number of upvotes or downvotes, date of upload, author, subreddit and title of the video.

When users share a post on Reddit, they are required to give the post a title. Reddit guidelines suggest that the title reflects the content of the post. In reality, however, the title gives

the Redditor⁷ room to comment on the post. Titles are often witty, timely and occasionally reflect Reddit's idiosyncratic values (Mills 3).



Figure 4: An example of a Posted item. This particular post includes a picture.

Sidebar

Reddit content can be viewed in two different ways. The first way is through the front page which presents a tallied list of the content from all subreddits. Alternately, users can subscribe to specific subreddits (separate forums). Subreddits include a wide variety of content: from pictures of pets on r/aww, to memes on r/adviceanimals, to perplexing and disturbing photographs on r/wtf. When visiting a subreddit (forum) page, the sidebar will often include an FAQ and the rules of that particular subreddit (see Fig 5). As well, the sidebar will indicate any moderators of the subreddit. The architecture of the particular subreddit emphasises the importance of understanding the norms and values of the given community. There is a list of twenty default subreddits (out of 5400 active subreddits) that all new Reddit users are automatically subscribed to. As such, the architecture of Reddit regulates the subreddits new users are able to join and participate in. The deliberate choice of twenty topics (and the exclusion of others) plays an important role in shaping the actions and experiences of the average Reddit user. New users can only find out about other subreddits by familiarising themselves with the site and interacting with other users.

⁷ Reddit user



Figure 5: Example of the FAQ on the subreddit r/TIL

Pseudonymity

Online communities operate at various points on the spectrum of anonymity—from 4chan where users are completely anonymous to Facebook where real names are both embraced and enforced (Bernstein 2). In previous literature, a popular argument for the enforcement of identity-based reputation online is that maintaining positive behavior in online communities is established through identity-based reputation systems and that “anonymity may make communication impersonal and undermine credibility” (Millen and Patterson; Baym; Bernstein et al.). For example, Bernstein et al. argues that users on Facebook are less likely to engage in negative behaviors because their Facebook identity is linked to their real-world identity. In his work “*4chan and /b/*,” Bernstein disproves the popular argument that identity based reputation systems are required for positive online behavior. In an analysis of anonymity and ephemerality on the /b/ board of 4chan, Bernstein characterizes the actions of users in anonymous communities. He indicates that credibility is maintained through “textual, linguistic and visual cues. In many communities... slang plays a role in delineating group membership” (7). Reddit is similar to the 4chan /b/ board in that Reddit users are not required to be connected to their ‘real

world' identity to submit content and comment. Instead, Reddit functions as a pseudonymous community where participants use usernames to build a reputation that stays within the ecosystem of the platform.

The architecture of Reddit as a pseudonymous community regulates the kind of discussions that take place on the SN site and can even (as Bernstein argues) foster open, uninhibited discussion. Although scholars argue that anonymity encourages "a lack of integrity", Bernstein believes that anonymity may in fact "foster stronger communal identity" (2). For example, disinhibition can "provide a cover for more intimate and open conversations" (6). As well, Bernstein indicates that anonymity masks failure, "softening the blow of being ignored or explicitly chastised" (6). Overall, discussions on Reddit must be analyzed through the lens of pseudonymity as it structures user actions. Although it is established that message senders in anonymous communities might feel more comfortable, those who receive the message may perceive an anonymous source as less competent or credible than they would if he or she was identified. According to Rains, receivers feel that anonymous senders "are not willing to be held accountable for their contributions" (Rains 101).

The effect of doxxing on user action must be understood in relation to structures of anonymity that are built into Reddit. 'Doxxing' is web slang for "revealing personally-identifying information" (full name, home address, workplace information) without the consent of someone "who had previously [only] existed online anonymously or pseudonymously under various nicknames" (Jurgenson and Rey 69). It is also a tactic commonly used by and associated with members of Anonymous (Amanda b. "Doxing"). Use of the term 'doxxing' in association with the leaking of personal information only emerged in the early to mid-2000s and therefore scholarship on the topic is limited (Rehof et. al; Jurgenson and Rey; Norris; Shelke and Badiye).

In the contemporary online environment and on Reddit in particular, the threat of doxxing functions as a barrier to participation (Rehof 45). So while the pseudonymous structure of Reddit provides the “cover for more intimate and open conversations”, doxxing gives these discussions a real-world dimension by potentially holding users accountable for their actions online (Bernstein 6).

Reddit: The Market

Markets regulate behavior in cyberspace. Lessig explains that low-bandwidth access can constrain access and advertisers reward popular sites. Generally people think of ‘markets’ as places where people buy and sell products. On Reddit, upvotes and the quest to be on the front page regulates the content users share. Viewing upvotes as part of a market means that Reddit is an alternate kind of market, internal to Reddit, where the quest to increase social status regulates user action. In a sense, moderation could also be considered part of the market on Reddit: Violentacrez was working as a moderator and his payment was the freedom to participate in disturbing behavior.

Upvote/Downvote

The goal of Reddit as a “source for what is new and popular on the web” is to promote only the most interesting and important of submitted content, and it relies on the power of its users to identify such content ([Reddit FAQ](#)). A user submission is given a score based on the number of upvotes minus the number of downvotes. Eventually, as a post gains more upvotes it will reach the front page of the site. An upvote, however, is not simply a ‘like’—within each subreddit, upvoting a post can potentially have a different meaning. For example, in r/aww an upvote means that the post “make[s] you go AWW! – like puppies, and bunnies”, in r/news an upvote means that the post is an interesting news item free of editorialization, and in r/funny

upvotes are given to posts that make you laugh. As a result, Reddit becomes a unique online platform as it combines the voting of large-scale SN sites while maintaining the “topic-oriented categorization” of online message and image forums (Leavitt and Clark 2).

Moderators

In large-scale online communities such as Reddit, with low barriers to entry and millions of participants, governance is problematic (Lampe and Resnick 1). Expressions such as trolling, flaming, spamming and doxxing are used to describe the disruptive actions some users decide to engage in. Each subreddit has moderators that help carry out day-to-day operations and combat disruptive behavior. Reddit as a whole subscribes to ‘distributed moderation’(DM), in other words, Reddit staff believes that Reddit as a community can “self-moderate and collectively decide what’s appropriate and inappropriate behavior” (Everything in Moderation; Mills). According to Mills, the principle behind DM is that “some dimension of user activity is taken as a measure of an item’s quality or relevance” (1). In their study of DM on the SN site *Slashdot*, Lampe and Resnick determined that DM is beneficial to online communities because it allows “broad, though not perfect consensus about which comments [or posts] deserve to be moderated” (8). However, with closer analysis they reveal that sometimes “incorrect moderations [are] not reversed.” (8). As a result, for DM to be effective there must be focus on “timeliness, accuracy, limiting the influence of individual moderation and minimizing the effort required by individual moderators” (8).

Although some subreddits fit quite neatly into a conventional understanding of a topic (ie, the ‘r/funny’ subreddit is populated by funny pictures and jokes), other subreddits “cater to forms of interaction which rely on being situated within a DM environment” (Mills 3). For example,

‘AskReddit’ posts ask a question of the Reddit community, and users answer by making comments. By upvoting, users determine the most popular answer. Overall, Reddit has instituted what Bruns defines as a “heterarchical form” of moderation “replete with overlap, multiplicity, and divergent-but-coexistent relationship patterns” (4).

Reddit: The Laws

Lessig indicates that law regulates behavior in cyberspace. On Reddit, privacy law, copyright law, and obscenity law regulate user action. For example, on May 24, 2011 Reddit staff blogged about an “unacceptable surge” in postings that revealed users’ personal information (doxxing). In response to this surge, Reddit updated its rules on June 4, 2011, announcing that the sharing of personal information would result in a site-wide ban (“Reddit Rules”, 2011).

Rules & Structure

Governmental law as well as site-wide rules regulate user behavior on Reddit. In “*Law and Borders - The Rise of Law in Cyberspace*,” Johnson and Post discuss the emergence of new laws in a variety of online spaces “separated from territorial jurisdictions” (1). Although the government can regulate content posted online, Johnson and Post argue that cyberspace *radically undermines* the relationship between geographical location and the ability of a local government to enforce rules. In response to their inability to control the creation of content posted online, “some authorities” unsuccessfully attempt to create boundaries through “filtering mechanisms and the establishment of electronic barriers” (Johnson and Post Part B). The impotence of national governments to regulate online content creates a structure where users believe their online actions will not have enforceable legal consequences. In addition, Reddit staff have made it publicly clear that Reddit is centered around free speech. In an interview with CNN in the

wake of the Violentacrez scandal, Reddit CEO Yishan Wong commented, “we stand for free speech...we are not going to ban distasteful subreddits” (“BBC”). Johnson and Post indicate that when government regulation is impossible, the rules of Cyberspace will “emerge from consensually based rule sets” (Part VI). In addition, they suggest that law will be “defined as a thoughtful group conversation about core values” (Johnson & Post, Part VI). On Reddit it is possible to observe such actions occurring. In June of 2012 Reddit, as a community, implemented five site-wide ‘rules of reddit’ that supersede free speech for the greater good of the community: “don’t spam”, “don’t ask for votes or engage in vote manipulation”, “don’t post personal information”, “no child pornography or sexually suggestive content featuring minors”, “don’t break the site or do anything that interferes with normal use of the site” (Rules of Reddit). These rules have been developed through arduous discussion between staff, users and moderators for several months and across various subreddits and the Reddit blog. Other issues such as slander, libel, or intellectual property have not been addressed in the Rules of Reddit.

Reddit: The Norms

Norms also regulate behavior in cyberspace. Lessig explains that “a set of understandings constrain behavior...through the threat of ex post sanctions imposed by a community” (1999, p. 124). On Reddit, these norms are enacted in the various subreddits and are outlined in the site’s rediquette, understood as “an expression of reddit’s community values as written by the community itself” (“Reddit Rules”, 2011).

From Laws to Social Norms

In addition to laws, societies require intensive coordination to function efficiently and productively. This is particularly true with complex and extensive modern industrial societies,

but is also the case with much smaller groups of people and within online communities (Kooti et. al 1). Institutions sometimes solve these communication problems; however, “often there are not established institutional codes or even an institution” (Kooti et. al 1). In these cases, *social norms* emerge to guide organized groups through complex interactions, for example: dinner etiquette (differing between cultures) or using the escalator (on which side of the escalator you stand or walk). Accepted definitions of *social norms* suggest “a behavior must occur with regularity and be common to at least some of the members of society to be considered a social norm” (Kooti et. Al via Delgado; Shoham and Tennenhotlz).

On pseudonymous SN sites such as Reddit, social norms are central to maintaining identity and communal bonds (Bernstein 7). Bakardjieva and Feenburg indicate, “netiquettes encode social practices for regulating behavior in newsgroups, but they are voluntary and have had only limited success” (183). Despite this, the authors cite studies which show that “participants create dynamic and rich communities by inventing new forms of expression through interactive negotiation of meanings, norms, and values” and that “different online communities demonstrate distinctive normative orientations established and maintained through written ethical codes (‘netiquettes’) and through ‘metacommunication.’” (Bakardjieva and Feenburg 185). On Reddit, the site-wide social norms are enforced through the written ‘rediquette,’ (See *Figure 6*) and norms particular to each subreddit are indicated in the sidebar of the various subreddits or through “textual, linguistic, and visual cues” (Bernstein 7).

Please do

- **Remember the human.** When you communicate online, all you see is a computer screen. When talking to someone you might want to ask yourself "Would I say it to the person's face?" or "Would I get jumped if I said this to a buddy?"
- **Adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life.**
- **Read the rules of a community before making a submission.** These are usually found in the sidebar.
- **Read the reddiquette.** Read it again every once in a while. Reddiquette is a living, breathing, working document which may change over time as the community faces new problems in its growth.
- **Moderate based on quality, not opinion.** Well written and interesting content can be worthwhile, even if you disagree with it.
- **Use proper grammar and spelling.** Intelligent discourse requires a standard system of communication. Be open for gentle corrections.
- **Keep your submission titles factual and opinion free.** If it is an outrageous topic, share your crazy outrage in the comment section.
- **Look for the original source of content,** and submit that. Often, a blog will reference another blog, which references another, and so on with everyone displaying ads along the way. Dig through those references and submit a link to the creator, who actually deserves the traffic.
- **Post to the most appropriate community possible.** Also, consider cross posting if the contents fits more communities.
- **Vote.** If you think something contributes to conversation, upvote it. If you think it does not contribute to the subreddit it is posted in or is off-topic in a particular community, downvote it.
- **Search for duplicates before posting.** Redundancy posts add nothing new to previous conversations. That said, sometimes bad timing, a bad title, or just plain bad luck can cause an interesting story to fail to get noticed. Feel free to post something again if you feel that the earlier posting didn't get the attention it deserved and you think you can do better.
- **Link to the direct version of a media file** when the page it was found on doesn't add any value.
- **Link to canonical and persistent URLs where possible,** not temporary pages that might disappear. In particular, use the "permalink" for blog entries, not the blog's index page.
- **Consider posting constructive criticism / an explanation when you downvote something,** and do so carefully and tactfully.
- **Report** any spam you find.
- **Browse the new submissions page and vote on it.** Regard it, perhaps, as a public service.
- **Actually read an article before you vote on it** (as opposed to just basing your vote on the title).
- **Feel free to post links to your own content** (within reason). But if that's all you ever post, and it always seems to get voted down, take a good hard look in the mirror — you just might be a spammer. A widely used rule of thumb is the 9:1 ratio, i.e. only 1 out of every 10 of your submissions should be your own content.
- **Posts containing explicit material such as nudity, horrible injury etc,** add NSFW (Not Safe For Work) for nudity, and tag. However, if something IS safe for work, but has a risqué title, tag as SFW (Safe for Work). Additionally, use your best judgement when adding these tags, in order for everything to go swimmingly.
- **State your reason for any editing of posts.** Edited submissions are marked by an asterisk (*) at the end of the timestamp after three minutes. For example; a simple "Edit: spelling" will help explain. This avoids confusion when a post is edited after a conversation breaks off from it. If you have another thing to add to your original comment, say "Edit: And I also think..." or something along those lines.
- **Use an "Innocent until proven guilty" mentality.** Unless there is obvious proof that a submission is fake, or is whoring karma, please don't say it is. It ruins the experience for not only you, but the millions of people that browse reddit every day.
- **Read over your submission for mistakes before submitting,** especially the title of the submission. Comments and the content of self posts can be edited after being submitted, however, the title of a post can't be. Make sure the facts you provide are accurate to avoid any confusion down the line.

Try to manipulate the voting mechanism
In regard to new submissions
In regard to comments

Figure 6: Site-wide Rediquette

Social Norms and Morality

An additional aspect of structural research into the Reddit community is whether a SN site can function within an acceptable moral code, in particular due to the lack of oversight based on user-generated moderation, loose reddiquette, and the influence of anonymity ("Discursive Communities"). Bakardijeva and Feenburg come to the conclusion, "the online environment is neither inherently inimical nor conducive to community. Rather, certain groups under specific circumstances manage to add a new sociotechnical 'layer' to the computer network in order to build community there" (187). Soukup draws a similar conclusion stating,

“technology is virtually never ‘inherently’ a panacea ensuring a utopian future and technology is virtually never ‘inherently’ a cancerous growth destroying all cultural traditions in its path. Nonetheless, with creativity, thoughtfulness and vigilance, communication technologies can often accentuate and recreate constructive cultural patterns, values, and institutions” (437).

Therefore, Soukup, Bakardijeva and Feenburg conclude that although SN sites do not ‘inherently’ lend themselves to the creation of moral communities, it is possible that a moral community could form with the proper structures in place.

User Action on Reddit and SN Sites

Now that the architecture, laws, markets and norms that regulate SN sites have been established, it is necessary to discuss what previous scholars have argued concerning *actions* on SN sites.

Metajournalism

Scholars suggest that users on SN sites are taking part in metajournalistic practices. Whereas journalism concerns itself with presenting cohesive, original forms of text, metajournalism is defined as the subsequent treatment of these original pieces of text: “their repackaging, redistribution, reinterpretation, expansion, alteration, correction and putting into context” (Szabo 59). Metajournalism thus includes user activities such as reposting, linking, ‘tagging’ (label with keywords), rating, modifying, and commenting on contents posted by other users or by professional news outlets (Goode 1288). Since they are not necessarily content creators, users on SN sites are sometimes seen as tangential to the news-making process. The metajournalistic work of users on SN sites, however, should not be seen as unrelated to the “‘real’ business of journalism or news-making” (Goode 1291). Journalism involves a “complex

and multilayered chain of communication and sense-making” and meta-journalism allows average users to participate in the process in a meaningful way. The user response to the Violentacrez controversy on Reddit involves active metajournalistic practices that will be discussed in the data analysis. Thus, analysis of user discussion surrounding the Violentacrez doxxing controversy should take account of the significance of collaborative, engaged, evolutionary user-led content production.

Social News Sites and Democracy

Due to their encouragement of active user participation and because they foster the *promise* for news and journalism to become part of a conversation, SN sites are often considered to have democratic potential (Szabo 60). SN sites give the impression that news content can become a product that is no longer merely consumed. By giving users the tools to “archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content,” SN sites decentralise the flow of information and provide a space for speculation, rumour and even subversion of network control (Jenkins 93). The democratic potential of SN sites however, might just be an illusion. According to Lerman, in her article analysing user participation on SN sites and in particular on Digg, user participation is “non-uniformly distributed, with a few users contributing a disproportionate fraction of the content” (1). According to Lerman’s study, 3% of the top one thousand users on Digg created 60% of the stories promoted to the front page (3). On Reddit, however, this type of “tail-heavy distribution” is counteracted by the weighting of comments and posts according to the voting behaviour of users--if users do not wish to participate by producing content, they can participate through rating content (Lerman 3). According to Mills, this structure has the effect of producing a kind of “democratically mediated discussion” (2).

Although many scholars argue for the democratic potential of SN sites and of Reddit in particular, an additional darker perspective on Reddit user action is that of the ‘hive mind’. According to Mills, Reddit’s voting system contains a number of “positive feedback loops” whereby positive votes for a post are “associated with increased visibility” (11). In an interview with *beatbeat*, Reddit general manager Erik Martin explains, “[the hive mind] is a very fast, sort of reactionary thing, and that has had results sometimes, results where people are not as sceptical as maybe they should be” (Roy par. 8). Is it not possible, however, that the same feedback loops “implicated in the negatives of the ‘hivemind’” can potentially allow Reddit’s users to self-regulate “the behaviour of their community” (Mills 11)? Mills asks, “if Reddit empowers a ‘hive mind’, could it also be said to facilitate the expression of a collective consciousness?” (11). According to Mills, although it is common to see a larger number of “posts on Reddit’s front page about a particular trend” he notes that this is generally “alongside a post criticising the current popularity of said topic/trend” (11). Therefore, both sides of the argument are endorsed by the community.

Existing Studies on Reddit

This MRP builds upon research on the Reddit community (Leavitt and Clark; Mills) and on SN sites in general (Bernstein; Lerman and Galstyan; Braun and Gillespie; Szabo; Goode). Overall, this MRP is trying to demonstrate the idea that the *structure* of SN sites affects the *actions* available to users. Since there has not yet been much research on the Reddit platform, the materials that are to be analyzed have not been covered by scholars, although one could argue that Reddit ‘simply’ forms a part of the SN site/Web 2.0 culture, a phenomenon that has already been discussed extensively by academics. It is true that Reddit is based on the very same

platform-type that forms the basis of most Web 2.0 service. It must be acknowledged, however, that this specific SN site has several unique attributes that need to be taken into consideration. These differences can easily be understood by a simple comparison in terms of content and architecture.

A similar study, conducted by Leavitt and Clark, discussed event based news production within a particular news-based subreddit (Leavitt and Clark 1). This study, however, contributes to an understanding of user action within a cross-section of the entire Reddit platform. In looking at several subreddits that have radically different norms, characteristics and rediquette, the actions observed will be potentially be more varied (*See* Table 4). This research builds on the study of Leavitt and Clark in both theory and methodology. This study also differs significantly from theirs, however, as it implements an approach (focusing on a major controversy) that allows us to form a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of metajournalism and user actions on SN sites.

In their study, Leavitt and Clark come to the conclusion that information shared in a social news setting focuses on perspective-based citizen journalism and that user experience does not affect the types of content users shared (1). When discussing ‘user experience’, Leavitt and Clark are looking at whether users account age, karma score, and previous posting patterns affects user participation in a ‘niche subreddit’. Instead of analyzing specific user characteristics in relation to user action, this MRP is premised on the view that is more valuable to study the *structure* of Reddit and the Internet as it relates to user action.

Leavitt and Clark focus their discussion on the *actions* users participate in on Reddit. In addition to looking at user *actions*, this MRP will analyze discourses within the *content* users are posting. Although many of the studies on SN sites focus on user *actions* (Mills; Bernstein;

Leavitt and Clark; Lerman and Galstyan) it is important for scholars to analyze the content of SN site discussion as well.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The preceding review of research on laws, norms, market and architecture constraints that regulate SN sites helps to frame the empirical research questions that guide this MRP. These questions include the following:

1. What actions did users undertake on Reddit during the eight-day period at the height of the Violentacrez doxxing controversy (from October 11, 2012 - October 19, 2012)?
2. How were these actions regulated by Reddit's structure and the greater structure of the internet (laws, norms, architecture and market)?
3. Based on an analysis of 'self posts', what types of conclusions did users reach about the controversy based on the discourse contained within their actions and comments?

METHOD

The central concern of critical realism is the analysis of user actions relating to a particular controversy, complemented by observations and interpretations of the surrounding historical and social structures. In order to further understand the relationship between action and structure on Reddit and the greater structure of the internet, this paper presents an analysis of a selection of user comments from Reddit. This section provides an argument for the choice of qualitative methods, the research design employed for data selection and a contextualization of the dataset.

Qualitative Content Analysis

What, then, are the actions Reddit users are participating in? The method chosen to analyze the texts is qualitative content analysis (Daymon and Holloway). A qualitative method was chosen because at the current stage of the research on Reddit, it is beneficial to approach these ‘new’ or ‘unique’ materials with a method that is sensitive and allows flexibility in interpreting the data. A quantitative method would be more useful when used as a tool for analyzing a more exhaustive dataset which has been “gathered on scientific grounds that has already been theorized and understood by scholars to give meaningful results” (Bakony 23).

Critical Realism

Within the critical realist framework, the discussion section will bring in new literature to show how these findings relate to the findings of others. The analysis also takes into account who produced the texts, what platform was involved, and the character and aims of the texts. This dual approach will indicate how actions and structures are interacting.

Research Design

I chose *Reddit* as my research site for the following reasons: although the Violentacrez doxxing scandal was discussed extensively in mainstream media, *Reddit* was selected because its users were either directly or indirectly affected by the scandal. As well, the unique structure of Reddit as a news aggregator *and* a social community make it an important area of study. As of May of 2013, Reddit is ranked 116th on Alexa's list of most trafficked websites worldwide (Alexa). One of the most popular sites in North America, Reddit is ranked 51st in the list of most visited websites in the USA and 52nd in Canada. By choosing a data source that has a widespread, international readership, I sought to collect as wide a variety of comments as possible.

Data Collection and Analysis: Phase I

In the wake of the Violentacrez doxxing controversy, more than fifteen thousand posts about Violentacrez appeared on Reddit. Phase I of the data collection involved looking at the top user-voted posts found by searching the 'Violentacrez' in Reddit using the 'full site search' function. As Reddit has a 'no-doxxing' policy in place on many of its subreddits, I excluded a search for Michael Brutsch (Violentacrez's real life identity) in the data collection. The coding and analysis of the selection of posts is intended to show the wide array of actions Reddit users are engaged in and how the posts are regulated by norms, laws, architecture and market. The search was conducted on April 1, 2012. As I only considered posts that were created from October 10 – 18, 2012 the date the search was conducted does not affect the ranking of the posts.

In Phase I of the data collection, the top ten user-voted posts and the top ten user-voted comments under each post (for a total of one hundred and ten posts and associated comments)

were selected (See Table 1). Table 1 provides an overview of the post title, author, subreddit, points, number of comments and date posted to provide relevant context to each post. All the posts collected contain at least 100 comments. While this study is limited, in that the dataset does not include all of the posts and comments that the Violentacrez doxxing scandal generated, I considered the ten top posts and comments to constitute a large enough sample to discern the actions users were engaging in on Reddit because it provided enough data points for a full analysis. The posts were collected by taking screenshots. These texts are artifacts of social communication created by individuals for public consumption. My access to the posts on Reddit did not require REB (Research Ethics Board) approval because the site is public and the posts are anonymized.

Table 1: Post Information						
Short Form	Post Title	Author	Subreddit	Points	Comments	Date Posted
Thread 1	[Mod Post] A tribute to Violentacrez, who was doxxed and was being threatened in real life, and an important message to ALL subscribers (please upvote this self post)	POTATO_IN_MY_ANUS	NSFW	2997	1709	2012-10-10
Thread 2	Violentacrez on CNN	rstr1212	News	1817	3745	2012-10-18
Thread 3	Scumbag Reddit moderators and the doxxing of Violentacrez, who had his personal information given to a news website	POTATO_IN_MY_ANUS	AdviceAnimals	1489	304	2012-10-10
Thread 4	The real reason why Violentacrez deleted his account: Adrian Chen, Gawker Media, Creepshots, PM's and real-life doxxing.	POTATO_IN_MY_ANUS	SubredditDrama	1053	1094	2012-10-10
Thread 5	/r/Creepshots and /r/violentacrez taken over by SRS by blackmailing with doxxing info. Apparently r/MensRights is next.	ignatiusloyola	MensRights	943	626	2012-10-10
Thread 6	[Recap]The Great Dox of 2012 or DOXGATE: a recap of this week's doxxing of violentacrez and r/CreepShots users, Part I - violentacrez	hippiemachine	SubredditDrama	675	145	2012-10-11
Thread 7	What does everyone think of violentacrez's interview on CNN?	Sarge_Sarcasm	AskReddit	604	1637	2012-10-18

Thread 8	[Recap]The Great Dox of 2012 or DOXGATE: a recap of this week's doxxing of violentacrez and r/CreepShots users, Part II - CreepShots	hippiemachine	SubredditDr ama	507	312	2012-10-11
Thread 9	[Project PANDA] ViolentAcrez: "I really didn't delete my account because of the doxxing. I deleted it because of the admins' support of SRS and the way they behave. As much as I love reddit and the people here, I just don't want to be associated with a site that's managed this way."	ArchangelleStrudays elle	ShitRedditS	425	335	2012-10-11
Thread 10	[Recap] Doxtober Part III: violentacrez and gawker, SRS, reddit admins, and SRD.	theempireisalie	SubredditDr ama	315	455	2012-10-14

All posts and their comments were contained within the roughly one-week period (October 10 - 18, 2012) following the release of Adrien Chen's Gawker article doxxing Violentacrez. Phase I of the data analysis involved examining the one hundred and ten selected comments and identify the recurring themes among them. The data-texts were coded and categorized to find key words, themes, issues, and patterns. Initially, the codes were taken directly from the data. For example, *In vivo* codes such as JOKE, MEME and IRL (in real life) were taken directly from the data (although they were eventually grouped into larger categories). At the beginning of the process, upwards of 40 codes were noted before broader categories were established. Using the comment function in Pages, the data were coded and re-coded. The process was inductive—that is, the coding categories were developed by comparing and drawing generalizations from the empirical evidence. For example, the codes *JOKE* and *MEME* were seen to fit within a larger category of *FUNNY*. As well, *FUNNY*, *TIPS* and *METADISCUSSION* were all seen to fit into the larger category of *COMMUNITY RELATED ACTIONS*. Once identified, the frequency of occurrence of each theme was counted. Shaped by literature and initial rounds of exploratory coding, two broad themes (See *Table 2*) with seven categories emerged (See *Table 3*). Table 3

presents user actions taking place in Reddit threads⁸.

Table 2: Themes of User Action

Theme	Definition	Example
Content Related Actions	Actions whose primary purpose is contributing to external content located on Reddit and often contains links to outside sources	“Link? More information?”
Community Related Actions	Actions whose primary purpose is to discuss the functioning of the Reddit community or to make fun of the community	“Finally, someone’s started to compile everything. This will let us be more thorough in our popcorn enjoyment. Thank you”

Table 3: User actions taking place in Reddit Threads

Category	Definition	Example
News	The posting of mainstream, professional news	“Found it http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6pl1jdaVGA ”
Metajournalism	User generated news reporting (unbiased & linking to sources)	<i>NEW STUFF(28h later)</i> The Guardian writes about reddit and free speech and hits the front page[1] . (21h later) Violentacrez, on his 5-year old "clean account", reveals that he was fired Saturday morning[2] .
Self	Content focused on user opinion and perspective. The name ‘self’ was chosen because Reddit posts that do not contain links to outside sources are colloquially called ‘self’ posts.	“You can take issue with some of the content he posted - some of it was distasteful and much of it was intended to purposefully offend and shock people. Despite all that, he was/is an extremely kind and generous person who went out of his way to help people - even people he had previously had public disagreements with. I really hope we hear from VA again but no website is worth having your personal life ruined.”
Question	Questions or requests	“You say Adrian <i>was</i> going to run an article on him. Are you saying now that Adrian has abandoned the idea now simply because VA has deleted his primary account(s)?”
Funny	Jokes or memes	“Not since being born Jewish have I been a part of a group blamed for so much unhappiness”
Tip	Advice or suggestions	“Perhaps we should go the way of SRS - replace all the moderators with anonymous accounts that are operated through proxies and never used anywhere else. Obviously this would involve mixing up the order in which moderators appear, since iganatiusloyola would still be a target if he was the top mod. Also, we should organise and publicise a fallback forum that is immune to influence from corrupt reddit admins.”

⁸ Thread is a larger umbrella term that comprises of comments and posts related to a certain topic

Metadiscussion	Discussion related to the rules & norms of a subreddit or Reddit as a whole	<p>“Despite PIMA’s broad-brushed treatment of this issue, it is worth everyone knowing that the <i>vast</i> majority of Reddit moderators, including those on /r/AdviceAnimals, have absolutely zero involvement with whatever is going on.</p> <p>The moderators at /r/AdviceAnimals have always been and remain strictly opposed to the release of personal information on Reddit, as we demonstrate on a daily basis by removing the violating posts that you report.”</p>
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News Category

User actions are classified as *NEWS* in three posts linking to mainstream, professional news reports without any opinion or commentary. For example, in thread seven ‘Sarge_Sarcasm’ asks users to share their opinions of Violentacrez’s interview on CNN. In response ‘adamdenterkin’ shares a news post and links to the original CNN interview:

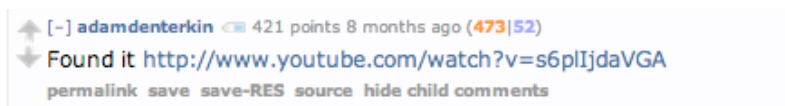


Figure 7: Adamdenterkin's News Post

Metajournalism Category

To be classified as *METAJOURNALISM* the posts must be unbiased reports on the events surrounding the doxxing of Violentacrez with links to posts, images, or outside sources to provide sourced information. An example of the *METAJOURNALISM* action occurs in thread ten. The post, published by ‘theempireisalie’ is a recap of what has occurred in the Violentacrez doxxing scandal:

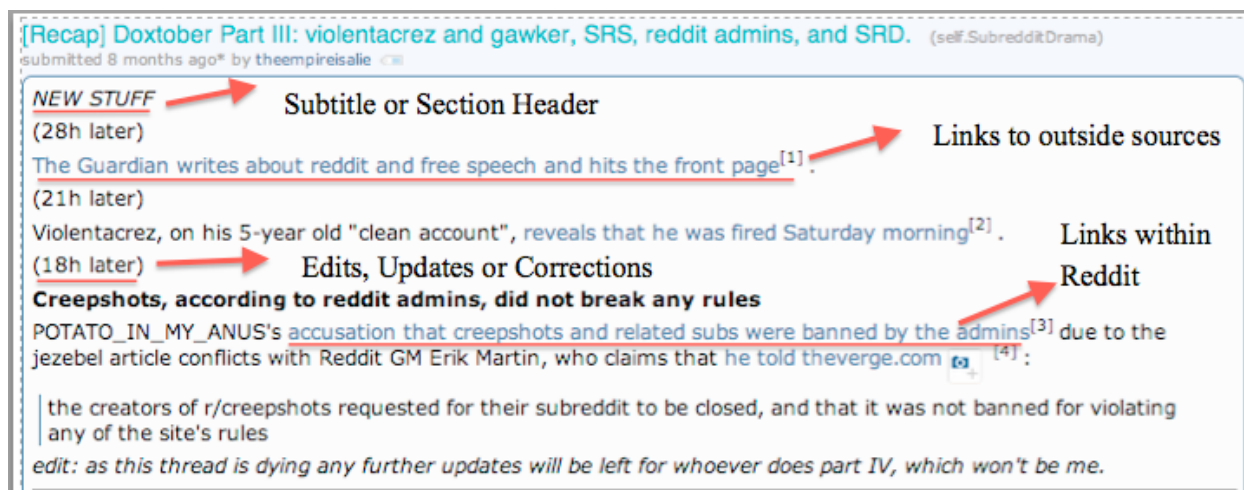


Figure 8: An excerpt from Theempresalie's Metajournalistic Post

Self Category

A post with the *SELF* action is defined as having content primarily focused on personal opinions and perspectives. The name *SELF* was chosen because Reddit posts that do not contain links to outside sources are colloquially called *SELF* posts. Posts within this category ranged from being extremely pro-Violentacrez to being entirely against him and the people who supported him. Occasionally, overlap occurred between *SELF* actions and *HUMOR* or *QUESTION* actions; however, if the primary purpose of the post was to share a personal opinion it was categorized as a *SELF* action.

Question Category

A *QUESTION* post is defined as an action where the primary purpose is to ask a question or make a request that expands the content or concepts within the thread. For example, in thread four 'HardwareLust' asks:

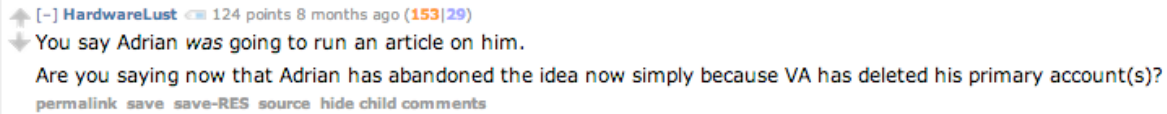


Figure 9: HarwareLust's Question Post

Posts that contained QUESTION actions with the purpose of humor were categorized as FUNNY.

Funny Category

Posts sharing jokes and memes were categorized as *FUNNY*. For example, in thread nine ‘Aleastoricism’ comments:



Figure 10: Aleastoricism's Funny post and Imthecityexplorer and (deleted)'s responses

Aleastoricism was given 308 upvotes for this post (a high number in general on Reddit and an especially large number for a subreddit with around thirty eight thousand users). Furthermore, ‘Imthecityexplorer’ and [deleted]’s responses “The best thing I ever read” (62 upvotes) and “Laughing so hard I’m snorting a little” (69 upvotes) indicate a large percent of the community agrees that this post is humorous.

Tips Category

The purpose of posts categorized as *TIPS* was to provide other Reddit users with advice or suggestions. In light of the Violentacrez controversy, many other users involved in controversial subreddits also feared being doxxed. For example, in response to fear of being doxxed ‘EvilPundit’ provides a *TIP* in thread five:



Figure 11: EvilPundit's Tip Post

Of the one hundred and ten posts collected, only four provided *TIPS*.

Metadiscussion Category

METADISCUSSION posts are defined as discussion related to operation of the subreddit or Reddit as a whole. Of the one hundred and ten posts observed ten are *METADISCUSSION* posts. For example, in thread three ‘24601G’ explains:

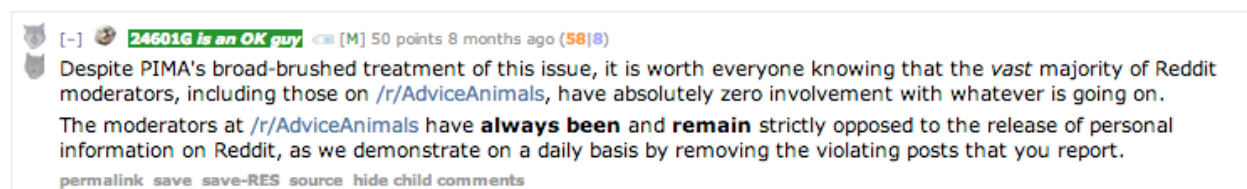


Figure 12: 24601G's Metadiscussion Post

In the final stage of the data analysis for Phase 1, each of the seven categories were considered in relation to Lawrence Lessig’s four regulators to determine if in fact these actions were regulated by Reddit’s structure or the greater structure of the internet.

Data Analysis: Phase II

To assess the general feelings among Reddit users on the Violentacrez doxxing scandal, a basic sentiment analysis was conducted on the threads within the *SELF* category (*See* Table 4). As *SELF* posts are defined as content that focuses on user opinion and perspective, it is within these posts that users are talking about their opinions on the Violentacrez doxxing scandal. According to Wilson, Wiebe, & Hoffmann, sentiment analysis is a “type of subjectivity analysis that focuses on identifying positive and negative opinions, emotions, and evaluations expressed in natural language” (1). In this initial coding process, comments were categorized as “supportive” (of Violentacrez as a member of the Reddit community). When comments were not clearly indicative of whether they supported or criticized Violentacrez, they were coded as “neutral.” Finally, when a post criticized Violentacrez and supported the doxxing of him, it was coded as “critical.”

Table 4: User Opinion on Violentacrez within Self Posts		
Response	Total	Percentage
Positive	11	24%
Critical	20	43%
Neutral	15	33%

Contextualizing the Data Set

To further contextualize the dataset within the social structure of Reddit, included are the characteristics of the subreddits in which the data were found. *Table 5* lists the descriptions pulled from the FAQs available in the sidebar of each subreddit. There are no data available on the number of people who have viewed each post, but the posts are contained within subreddits

that have between thirty eight thousand and three and a half million users each (*See Table 5*).

Table 5: Characteristics of Subreddits in October of 2012			
Subreddit	Size	Subreddit Description	Doxxing Policy
NSFW	306,705	Regular content is adult photos/videos NSFW stands for Not Safe for Work 18+ subreddit No sexually suggestive photos of minors	Posts with titles like "Who is this person?" and general blogspam are removed or left in the spam filter to rot.
News	583,953	/r/news - real news articles only The only exception is posts maturely discussing the /r/news community. Self-posts aggregating news data and "independent reporting" each count as "news items," but are not an excuse for editorialization.	None
Advice Animals	2,524,453	Sound advice from animals anything! We're here to have a laugh, don't get too serious.	Don't make memes about your friends in real life. Ever.
Subreddit Drama	62,793	The place where people can come and talk about internet fights and other dramatic happenings from other subreddits.	Personal information is grounds for site-wide ban ...Any user found "doxxing" will be banned without warning from SRD and will be reported to the admins.
Mens Rights	70,750	The Men's Rights subreddit is a place for those who wish to discuss men's rights and the ways said rights are infringed upon.	Absolutely no doxxing will be tolerated... News stories from actual news organizations (not just private blogs) containing personal information is not considered doxxing.
Ask Reddit	3,570,919	Ask a question!	Posting any personal information will result in a ban. This includes linking to pictures hosted on Facebook as they can be linked back to an account.
Shit Reddit Says	38,396	Have you recently read an upvoted Reddit comment that was bigoted, creepy, misogynistic, transphobic, racist, homophobic, or just reeking of unexamined, toxic privilege? Of course you have! Post it here	None

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Main Themes

In Phase I of the data analysis seven categories of user action were identified within the ten threads⁹: *NEWS*, *METAJOURNALISM*, *SELF*, *HUMOR*, *TIPS*, *QUESTIONS* and *METADISCUSSION*. The most frequently occurring theme was *SELF* with 46 or 41% of all posts falling into this category. Other frequently occurring themes include *QUESTION* at 18 or 16%, *FUNNY* at 16 or 15%, and *METAJOURNALISM* at 13 or 12% (See Table 6).

Table 6: Types of Posts Divided by Topic												%
	Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4	Topic 5	Topic 6	Topic 7	Topic 8	Topic 9	Topic 10	Total	
News	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	3	3%
Metajournalism	1	0	0	2	2	1	1	2	1	3	13	12%
Self	7	9	4	4	3	5	7	3	1	3	46	41%
Question	2	1	1	3	2	1	1	4	2	1	18	16%
Funny	0	0	4	1	2	1	1	0	4	3	16	15%
Tips	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	4%
Metadiscussion	0	0	1	0	1	3	0	2	2	1	10	9%

Content-Related Actions

The first broad theme the actions occurring around the Violentacrez controversy fell into was *CONTENT*. *CONTENT* actions were defined as contributing to external content located on Reddit and often included posts linking to outside sources. *CONTENT* posts focused on the Violentacrez doxxing scandal rather than on issues relating to the Reddit community. Of the total one hundred and ten posts, eighty (or XX%) were categorized as *CONTENT* actions. The themes within *CONTENT* actions included *NEWS*, *METAJOURNALISM*, *SELF* and *QUESTION* posts.

⁹ Thread is a larger umbrella term that comprises of comments and posts related to a certain topic

News Actions

Comments classified as *NEWS* were found in the r/News, r/AskReddit and r/ShitRedditSays subreddits (See Table 7). The architecture, rules and norms of these subreddits lend themselves to *NEWS* posts. As well, the architecture of Reddit structures the news actions Reddit users were able to participate in. For example, the *NEWS* posts collected visually look the same as posts found within the other six categories. As such, the architecture of Reddit creates the condition in which *NEWS* posts are visually weighted the same as other posts collected thereby “leveling the playing field between mass media content and average users” (Szabo 361). For example, the highest rated *NEWS* post received only 1817 points. On the other hand, the highest rated *METAJOURNALISM* post received 2997 points.

Table 7: Types of Posts Divided by Subreddit

	NSFW	News	AdviceAnimals	Subreddit Drama	AskReddit	Mens Rights	Shit Reddit Says
News	0	1	0	0	1	0	1
Metajournalism	1	0	0	7	1	2	1
Self	6	8	4	14	7	3	1
Funny	0	0	4	5	1	2	4
Tip	1	0	1	1	0	1	0
Question	2	1	1	9	1	2	2
Edit	1	1	0	2	0	0	0
Metadiscussion	0	0	1	6	0	1	2

Another reason for the lower point score awarded to *NEWS* posts is the effect of the Reddit market on user action. Reddit’s market is more receptive of sources from internal to the Reddit website and some posts even called for the boycott of outside news sources that do not follow Reddit’s rules and norms. One user asks, “Can you please take out the Gawker link? Replace it with a screenshot or something.” Another user says, “if you want it to stop then have a site wide ban for Gawker Media.” Finally, a third user says, “I would like to see the reddit admin ban

gawker media sites for a third time, like they did to the Atlantic, for abusing the system.”

Of the three *NEWS* posts collected, two linked to the CNN interview on October 18, 2012 between Anderson Cooper and Violentacrez and the third linked to a blog post from the Reddit blog. The two posts from CNN received more points (1887 and 417 respectively) than the post linking to the Reddit blog (184 points). Within the *NEWS* category, it is possible that mainstream news reports are valued higher than news reports from a smaller blog.

Metajournalism

Twelve instances of user-generated news reporting actions are classified as *METAJOURNALISM*. This user action was observed at much higher levels in threads on r/subredditdrama (See Table 7). The architecture of r/subredditdrama (as outlined in their FAQ) leans toward *METAJOURNALISM* posts as it describes itself as “the place where people can come and talk about Internet fights and other dramatic happenings from other subreddits.” Therefore, the architecture can influence the type of content that is posted on a particular subreddit.

METAJOURNALISM posts are also structured by the rules and norms of the Reddit platform. Reddit allows users to ‘Edit’ posts after they are originally shared with the community. If a post is edited, however, Reddit rules state that a star (*) will appear next to the posting date. Furthermore, Rediquette asks that a user include “Edit:”, “New Stuff” or a similar phrase to indicate new content; and standard practice is to include a timestamp for new information. Of the thirteen posts categorized as *METAJOURNALISM*, eight (or 62% of the *METAJOURNALISM* posts) were edited. This amount is much higher than posts collected within the other categories (See Table 8). This demonstrates that the rules and norms of Reddit encourage and allow users to

engage in certain kinds of actions.

Table 8: Number of Posts Edited by Theme		
	Number of Posts Edited	Percentage of Posts Edited in Theme
News	0	0%
Metajournalism	8	62%
Self	7	15%
Question	3	17%
Funny	1	6%
Tips	0	0%
Metadiscussion	3	30%

Through a content analysis of *METAJOURNALISM* actions it was determined that they are structured by several norms making them consistent across the various subreddits (see *Table 9*). For example, all posts featured links or screenshots of other threads within Reddit. Furthermore, as *METAJOURNALISM* posts tended to be of a longer length (eight of the twelve posts were over five hundred words long) they consistently featured sub-titles or section headers to organize the content. The number of posts linking to outside sources could potentially be lower as Gawker and other mainstream news sources were banned on several subreddits within Reddit following the doxxing of Violentacrez.

Table 9: Consistent features across METAJOURNALISM actions	
Feature	# of Posts with this Feature
Links to outside sources	7
Links or Screenshots of other threads within Reddit	12
Edit or Correction	8
Sub-titles or Section headers	8

Self

Of the total one hundred and ten posts observed, forty-six posts were *SELF* actions making it by far the most popular user action. These posts were found most commonly in

r/Subredditdrama, r/news and r/AskReddit (See Table 7). Once again, the architecture and norms of the subreddit lends itself to certain user actions. For example, r/Askreddit describes itself as a “place for thought-provoking, discussion-inspiring questions.” The structure of the r/Askreddit subreddit lends itself to the “open, honest discussion” that Bernstein presents in his discussion of pseudonymous communities (Bernstein et. al., 1). Users are not afraid to share their opinion on this very controversial topic and responses ranged from extremely positive to very negative.

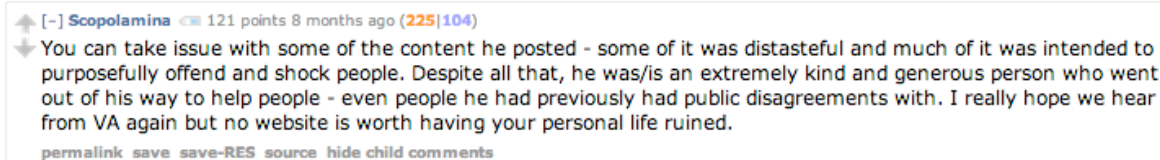
An additional consideration addressed by Bernstein is how users communicate “high status” within a pseudonymous online community (6). Bernstein indicates, “most users turn to textual, linguistic, or visual clues” and that in many communities “slang plays a large role” (6). Such behavior can be witnessed in the *SELF* posts analyzed within this study. Of the forty-six *SELF* posts collected, twenty-eight included slang such as VA [Violentacrez], IMO [In my opinion], TL;DR [Too long didn’t read], Trolls [Internet pranksters], doxxgate [doxxing and a reference to Watergate scandal], admin [administrator].

Within the umbrella category of *SELF* posts, a number of recurring sentiments about the Violentacrez doxxing scandal were identified (See Table 10). Of the forty-six *SELF* posts, eleven (24%) were supportive of Violentacrez, twenty (43%) criticized Violentacrez and fifteen (33%) were neutral.

Table 10: User Opinion on Violentacrez within Self Posts		
Response	Total	Percentage
Positive	11	24%
Critical	20	43%
Neutral	15	33%

The most common elements among posts that expressed support for Violentacrez were Michael Brutsch’s kind/generous real life persona and the legality of his actions under US government law. For example, in thread one ‘Scopolamina’ shares his positive opinion of

Violentacrez character:



A screenshot of a Reddit post by user Scopolamina. The post has 121 points and was made 8 months ago. The text of the post is: "You can take issue with some of the content he posted - some of it was distasteful and much of it was intended to purposefully offend and shock people. Despite all that, he was/is an extremely kind and generous person who went out of his way to help people - even people he had previously had public disagreements with. I really hope we hear from VA again but no website is worth having your personal life ruined." Below the text are links for permalink, save, save-RES, source, and hide child comments.

Figure 13: Scopolamina's pro-Violentacrez self-post

As well, in thread five 'dumbguyscene28' explains that because Violentacrez's action fall under free speech, Violentacrez should be left alone under the law:



A screenshot of a Reddit post by user dumbguyscene28. The post has 85 points and was made 9 months ago. The text of the post is: "Just sent to Dacvak and the Admin team
Please read this:
http://www.reddit.com/r/MensRights/comments/119k8j/rcreeptshots_and_rviolentacrez_taken_over_by_srs/
And read this: <http://i.imgur.com/Lscan.jpg>
The Reddit Admins need to make an official statement about this.
There is nothing ignatiusloyola has done that should leave him frightened or worried from doxxing or bullying of from SRS.
This is not free speech, this is crushing of dissent and crushing of free speech, and permitting a heckler's veto.
If Reddit does not take a stand for ignatiusloyola (or /r/mensrights) and allows SRS to make these threats, then Reddit AND YOU cannot be considered any sort of free speech portal.
This is bullshit, and it deserves much more than having it just handled silently in the background.
If you and Reddit don't speak out against it, and take positive steps, you and Reddit will deserve any harmful press that comes your way.
Thank you

Figure 14: dumbguyscene28's pro-Violentacrez self-post

What became apparent throughout the sentiment analysis was that the majority of the comments that were pro- Violentacrez came from subreddits that Violentacrez was involved in. Norms of particular subreddits (as outlined in their FAQs) were found to influence the content of the posts within that subreddit. For example, posts within the 'seedy' r/MensRights subreddit (see *Table 5*) were more aligned with Violentacrez and posts within the mainstream r/AskReddit subreddit (see *Table 5*) were more anti-Violentacrez. In thread two, on the other hand, 'reizden' provides his negative opinion of Violentacrez's character:



Figure 15: Reizden's anti-Violentacrez self-post

Question

Throughout the data collected there were eighteen instances of *QUESTION* posts. *QUESTION* posts occurred most frequently in r/SubredditDrama (See Table 7). When analyzing *QUESTION* an important dimension of the *METAJOURNALISM* action became evident: it is not enough to know the facts that are written in mainstream newspapers. Users want to make sense of the facts to see them in a larger framework of meaning and relevance, and to do this they may need more information. For example, in thread three user Sunny4Life asks, “Link? More information?” and in thread four user Rampandissonance asks, “This isn’t exactly related, but I’m curious. Correct me if I’m wrong about any of this, but don’t you post in SRS? And you’re a mod of creepshots? That’s kind of an uneasy blend of hobbies.” Both of these posts were answered thoroughly by other Reddit users. This shows that community is co-operative and is engaging in sense-making (Soukoup). At the very least, asking a question suggests a desire to weigh evidence (or not rush to judgment) and the ability to undertake this action is structured by Reddit’s status as a pseudonymous community.

Community Related Actions

Actions categorized as *COMMUNITY* related actions are defined as actions whose primary purpose is to discuss the functioning of the Reddit community or to make fun of the community. Of the one hundred and ten posts observed, thirty were community related. The themes

determined to be *COMMUNITY* related are *FUNNY*, *TIPS* and *METADISCUSSION* posts.

Funny

Within sixteen of the one hundred and ten posts collected the main purpose of the post was humor. Posts sharing jokes and memes were categorized as *FUNNY*. Half of the *FUNNY* posts were located in the r/Shitredditsays and r/Adviceanimals subreddits. These two subreddits are more centered on humor than the other subreddits observed. The subreddit r/Shitredditsays describes itself as a circlejerk¹⁰ with the purpose of ridiculing “upvoted Reddit comment[s] that [are] bigoted, creepy, misogynistic, transphobic, racist, homophobic, or just reeking of unexamined, toxic privilege.”

R/AdviceAnimals is a subreddit where users share memes¹¹. In their rules, r/AdviceAnimals outlines its guiding principle: “we’re here to have a laugh, don't get too serious.” An example of a *FUNNY* action observed in data collected from this subreddit is the Scumbag Steve meme featuring the Reddit logo. According to knowyourmeme, Scumbag Steve is an image macro featuring a kid with a sideways fitted cap, “the overlaid text generally centers around unethical behavior regarding drugs, partying, and other hedonistic behaviors.” In this particular meme, the user is poking fun at Reddit moderators for sharing Violentacrez personal information:

¹⁰ A circlejerk is “the positive feedback loop that can occur when ideas and beliefs are reinforced within a group or subculture’s enclosed space” (Knowyourmeme)

¹¹ A meme is defined as “a concept that spreads from person to person via the Internet.” Furthermore “an internet meme may take the form of an image, hyperlink, video, picture, website or hashtag” (Schubert)

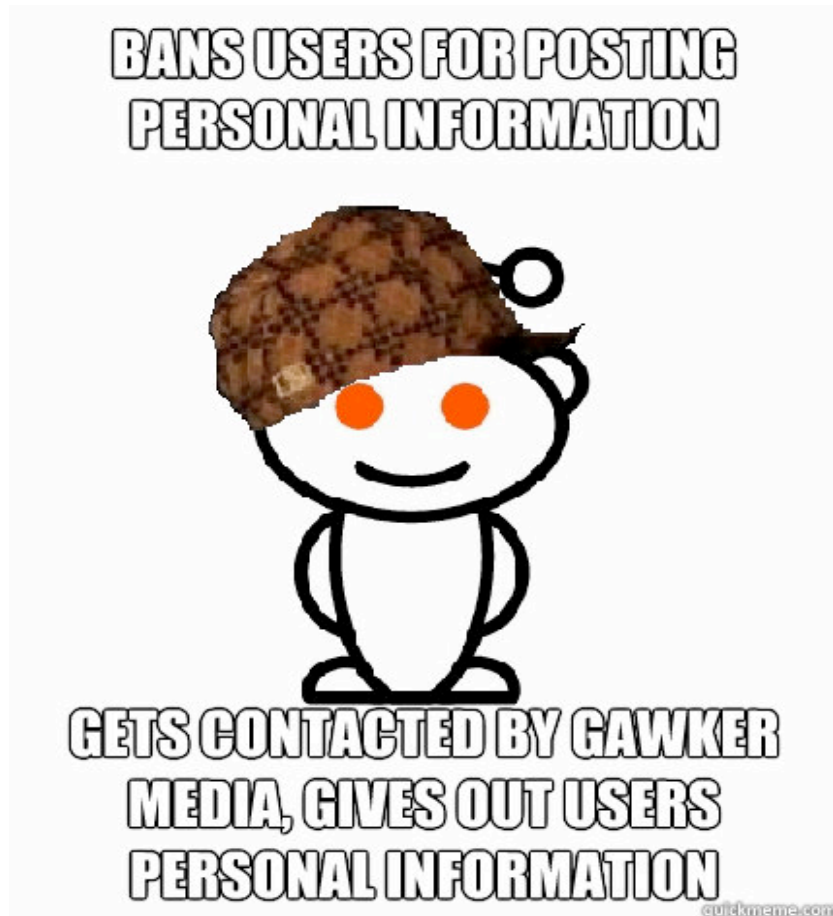


Figure 16: Example of FUNNY post on Reddit

The architecture and norms on Reddit structure the content and visibility of memes. For example, there is no software internal to Reddit where users are able to create memes. Instead, users are required to go off the site to websites such as quickmeme.com and memegenerator.com to create a meme and then upload it on Reddit. As such, users with less technical skills or with less experience on Reddit will not necessarily be able to create and share memes with other users.

It is necessary to mention the important functions of humor in general and on Reddit. *FUNNY* actions can provide a vehicle to explore moral themes that would otherwise be tricky, tedious or controversial to explore directly in a more 'serious' way. This meme, for example, is dealing with the very real (and serious) problems of hypocrisy and opportunism. Also, humor

often acts like a kind of back-door. Why make fun of certain behaviors if not to suggest that they are inappropriate, or to apply moral pressure about how the community should behave?

According to Hubler and Bell, humor plays an important role in online communities. They indicate humor can “emphasize identity of a group by negatively contrasting it with other groups”, it can build the reputation of individuals “by denigrating other members” and finally, that is can “flatten hierarchy of the group and de-emphasize the authority of individuals” (292). As such, it can be seen that humor is used to regulate the role of individuals within a community and to deal with more serious moral issues. Of the sixteen *HUMOR* posts analyzed, five posts negatively contrasted other groups, eight posts targeted particular users (seven targeted Violentacrez and one targeted Adrien Chen), and 3 posts flattened hierarchy (See *Table 11*).

Table 11: Categories of HUMOR posts		
Type	Total	Example
Negative Contrast	5	“Not since being born Jewish have I been a part of a group blamed for so much unhappiness”
Particular Target	8	“HEY/HEY VIOLENTACREZ/DUDE/ YOU CAN’T BE A MARTYR IF YOU’RE STILL FUCKING HERE ”
Flatten Hierarchy	3	“I don’t even know who we are pitchforking now”

Tips

The purpose of posts categorized as *TIPS* was to provide other Reddit users with advice or suggestions. In light of the Violentacrez controversy, many other users involved in controversial subreddits also feared being doxxed. Of the one hundred and ten posts observed, only four provided *TIPS*. A possible reason for this number being low is that *TIPS* were often included in longer posts whose main purpose was to share user opinions (such as self posts). *TIPS* often referred to the rules, boundaries and real-life intersections of Reddit. For example, two of the four *TIPS* discussed the real life implications of doxxing and how to avoid it. In thread three user

‘Vee_Vee’ comments:

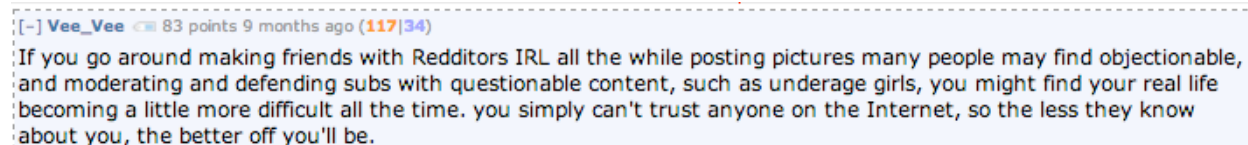


Figure 17: Vee_Vee's Tips Post

What seems implicit in such comments is the desire to find ways to keep online life separated from real life; it also embodies a theory of human behavior (no one can be trusted), and it expresses a view that people should keep their lives secret from one another.

Metadiscussion

The final action observed in the data collected was *METADISCUSSION* posts. For example, in thread three ‘24601G’ explains:

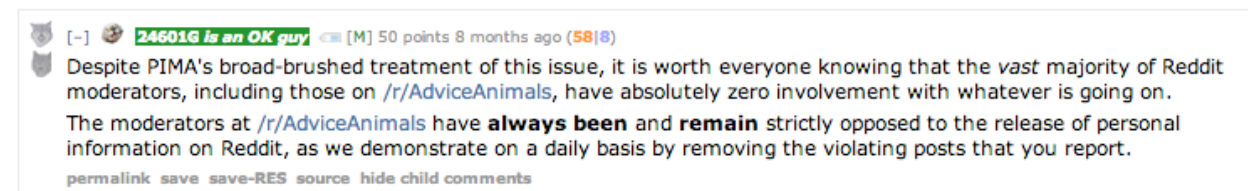


Figure 18: 24601G's Community Post

It is important to note that 24601G is a moderator (This can be determined by looking at his username, which is highlighted in green). As a moderator of r/Adviceanimals, 24601G’s post holds more weight than the average Redditor’s. Rather than share content with other Redditors the purpose of such posts are to regulate and establish social norms within the Reddit community.

As evidenced in the aftermath of the Violentacrez doxxing scandal, *METADISCUSSION* posts (not necessarily the ones in question) did have an effect in changing the rules, norms and behaviors of Reddit and its users. Not only were the subreddits Violentacrez moderated banned

from the site, but many other subreddits developed or reworked their doxxing policy in the wake of the scandal.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to reveal and compare user actions on SN site Reddit through analysis of discussion surrounding the Violentacrez doxxing controversy and assessment of the structures that regulate the platform. Similar to Leavitt and Clark's analysis of event-based news production on Reddit, the result of this research shows that users are participating in a wide variety of actions centering on content production and community building. This MRP, however, also showed how the architecture, market, norms and laws of the Reddit platform structured these actions. This work shows how action-structure evolves organically in a kind of linked interaction. Structures limit, channel and control actions, but actions shift, alter, and test the limits of structures. The approach undertaken in this MRP might be applied to further understand the new ways that people are getting, absorbing, acting on, and challenging news of all sorts.

Analysis within this MRP revealed seven user actions that are shaped by the structure of Reddit. Despite the utility of this approach, there are nevertheless issues that hindered this research. Additional data analysis could help to further give insight into the role of structure on user action on SN sites like Reddit. For example, additional analysis could have analyzed user response to the scandal by comparing all posts on Violentacrez within two separate subreddits. An investigation of the spectrum of posts on a specific topic within an entire subreddit could further highlight the discrepancies between content types (ie., looking at the least popular content as well as the most popular).

Reddit is simultaneously a simple news aggregator and a complex social community. It is a group of unique individuals, but one that operates with certain cohesion due to community-regulating rules and structures. Although it has certain cohesive tendencies, Reddit also has potential for tension and controversy. Episodes of tension and controversy such as the

Violentacrez doxxing scandal lead to the development new rules, norms and architectures and occasionally change the market. Rather than being a separate, contained environment, the web is increasingly moving toward being an integral facet of our 'real', networked lives. We can understand the Violentacrez controversy in part as a debate about the modes of regulation appropriate to a partly self-governing online community this is connected in important and complex ways with politics and society at large.

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