

# **The SAGES University Seminar Essay Awards**

**2014-2015**

*The SAGES University Seminar Essay Awards  
highlight the best student writing produced in SAGES  
University Seminars each year.*

*The essays included in this booklet were selected  
from those nominated by SAGES faculty for this  
award in academic year 2014-2015.*

December 4, 2015



# Table of Contents

## **“Setting the Internet on Fire: #GamerGate, New Games Journalism, and the Discourse Surrounding Sexism in the Gaming Industry”**

Adam Gleichsner..... 7

*Written for USSO 290H, “The Social World of YouTube”; Georgia Cowart (Seminar Leader)*

**Assignment Description:** 10 - 15 page research paper treating a cultural issue involving YouTube and/or 21st-century New Media. Set forth a clear argument with a debatable claim, an engagement with existing literature on the topic, credible and persuasive evidence, and sound citation and documentation.

**Instructor’s Nomination:** The #GamerGate controversy, the subject of an incendiary media controversy, has received little substantial analysis, especially in its relationship to an acknowledged prejudice against women in the gaming industry and to New Games Journalism, a recent form of journalism that has begun to expose and analyze this prejudice. I especially liked the way the student dissects the confusing elements of #GamerGate (pro-ethics but anti-women) and the controversy to uncover the hitherto unrecognized role of New Games Journalism and the real threat posed by #GamerGate: the quashing of an emerging discourse on the role of women in gaming and the gaming industry. Thoroughly researched and elegantly written, the essay offers a scholarly and objective look at a topic that holds significance for the place of New Media in 21<sup>st</sup>-century culture.

**“America Against the Islamic World: Creating a Radicalized Other in the Minds of U.S. Citizens”**  
Rana Ullman.....22

*Written for USSY 290Z, “Secularization and the Culture of Belief”; Scott Dill (Seminar Leader)*

**Assignment Description:** The assignment was an end of the semester final research essay. It was to be about 12 pp in length and demonstrate thoughtful consideration of the existing literature on the proposed topic in order to teach the class something new (i.e not covered in class) about secularization and the meaning of secularism in contemporary society.

**Instructor’s Nomination:** When Rana told me she wanted to write about the American media I balked—why would such a bright student pick such a dull topic? Nonetheless, she worked hard to get past generalizations to make an argument about how American and international Muslims are portrayed differently in the US news media and the possible cultural, political, and psychological explanations for praising blue jean buying American Muslims and vilifying the violence carried out in the name of Islam in other countries. It is a sophisticated ideological analysis that managed to find a coherent structure for an amorphous subject and concrete examples from which to argue.

**“Fair Use in a New Cultural Paradigm: Amateur-Produced Appropriative Works on YouTube”**  
Lauren Whitehouse .....32

*Written for USSO 290H, “The Social World of YouTube”; Georgia Cowart (Seminar Leader)*

**Assignment Description:** 10 - 15 page research paper treating a cultural issue involving YouTube and/or 21st-century New Media. Set forth a clear argument with a debatable claim, an engagement with existing literature on the topic, credible and persuasive evidence, and sound citation and documentation.

**Instructor's Nomination:** I especially liked the trajectory of the paper, which moved from an incident on YouTube in which the student was involved to the cogent analysis of a new cultural paradigm in which the traditional meaning and application of Fair Use, as she argues, needs to be expanded to apply to the widespread and creative treatment of appropriation on YouTube.



**Setting the Internet on Fire: #GamerGate, New  
Games Journalism, and the Discourse Surrounding  
Sexism in the Gaming Industry  
By Adam Gleichsner**

On August 16, 2014, a man by the name of Eron Gjoni chronicled the tale of a relationship gone awry and incidentally set the internet ablaze. His blog post, known as “thezoepost,” details his experiences dating indie game developer Zoe Quinn and his accusations of her numerous instances of infidelity (Gjoni). It was not Gjoni’s heartbreak that angered many readers, but rather an apparent violation of ethics; one of Quinn’s affairs was allegedly with a writer named Nathan Grayson who works at the popular gaming news website, Kotaku, and had supposedly published favorable articles about Quinn’s games in return for sexual favors (Sales). Feeling misled and slighted, hordes of consumers cried foul and took to the internet in protest, initiating the online consumer revolt known today as “#GamerGate.” GamerGate, despite later attempts to refashion it as a non-violent remonstrance against games journalists and publishers who participated in unethical practices, did not begin as such. Instead of directing their anger at the writers and news sites, activists targeted their retribution at Quinn with rape and death threats (Heron).

Many members from both the gaming and games journalism industries spoke against this harassment, but they too soon became targets. After publicly shaming and mocking GamerGate, fellow game developer Brianna Wu received violent death threats that contained her home address and was forced to flee her home for her own safety (Wu). Another protester of the harassment was feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian. Sarkeesian, who started the online video series Tropes vs Women in Video Games, is not unfamiliar with online bullying after facing similar reactions during her Kickstarter campaign for this series (Goldman); however, she was still forced to leave her home for her own safety as well as to cancel her talk at Utah State University after an anonymous student threatened to massacre the crowd if she took the stage. The rapid increase in the quantity and intensity of these threats prompted mainstream news publications such as The Guardian (Hern), The Washington Post (Dewey), and Time Magazine (Leigh), as well as Congresswoman Katherine Clark (Robertson) to denounce GamerGate as a misogynistic hate group.

As I will argue in this essay, these ad hominem attacks fail to address the social context within which #Gamergate arose, namely,

a deep-seated sexism within the gaming industry, and a rising forum for opposition in a style of commentary called New Games Journalism. My intent is not to argue the existence of ethics violations or to determine a more appropriate form of retribution. Instead, I will identify GamerGate's main objectives, review the issue of sexism within the gaming world and its critique in modern games journalism, and explain how, even as a movement for the betterment of ethics in gaming journalism, GamerGate's intended reforms put them in direct conflict with today's gaming journalism, and its existence as a forum for the critically needed discussion about sexism in the gaming world.

When actor Adam Baldwin coined the Twitter hashtag "#GamerGate" (Wagner), he opened up a platform to allow any individual to speak not only about but also on behalf of the movement, regardless of personal intentions or social agenda. The origination of the movement, as well as the lack of any central leading figure or clear definition of party platform, has made GamerGate difficult to define. What can be said is that GamerGate is a consumer revolt that has become a multifaceted entity comprised of many agendas ranging from progressive to malicious. Information regarding the inner organization and workings of the movement is difficult to find; the best description of GamerGate's critique and desired reformations are found in the community-maintained wiki. The largest identifiable group within the movement advocates for changes in gaming journalism for the ostensible sake of improving ethics. Its platform is centered on the believed wrongdoings of the industry, categorized as the "Three Cs": corruption, collusion, and censorship (GamerGate Wiki). After the initial incident involving Zoe Quinn, activists in the movement began searching for other violations of journalistic integrity. They discovered a multitude of different offenses, namely, journalists not disclosing their monetary investments in the works they reviewed (Patreon), large-scale collusion with other journalists to cover certain major events in a biased manner (Yiannopoulos), and the promotion of social or political views in their critiques of video games (Petit). In some cases, anti-GamerGate site moderators censored the discussion about the incriminating evidence (The Verge), leading to further discord between the pro- and anti-GamerGaters across the Internet.

GamerGate, despite its complexity and lack of a central figurehead, has still taken aggressive action against gaming journalism sites. Active members of the movement have proposed and organized large-scale consumer protests, referred to as operations, by collaborating on message boards online. The



majority of these operations focus on undermining the financial support of gaming news sites that have been accused of unethical practices. These actions, albeit less violent than the rape and death threats mentioned above, still have a negative intent: by removing financial stability, successful operations would force gaming journalism sites to either comply to GamerGate's agenda and remove all commentary or slowly lose revenue until they were forced to close. "Operation Disrespectful Nod," for example, was an email campaign targeting major gaming news sites such as Kotaku, Polygon, and Gawker. GamerGaters sent messages to the ad providers, asking them to remove ad content after the news sites published articles that insulted pro-GamerGaters and "slander[ed] their own customers" (GamerGate Wiki). One such offensive article was Leigh Alexander's "Gamers' are over," which attacked gamer culture as an antiquated demographic of "people who know so little about how social interaction and professional life works [sic]," people who are too absorbed in the sexist purity of their subculture that they lash out at whatever may threaten it (Alexander). Despite the brashness of Alexander's article, she does address an issue that appears within GamerGate's agenda: social and political commentary in game reviews. Reviews that contain commentary regarding offensive content in a video game will often meet heated opposition from readers who not only believe the offending content is acceptable, but that readers should also not be subjected to the author's social beliefs.

Games journalism was not always laden with this kind of personalized commentary. In 2004, Kieron Gillen, a games journalist, outlined the dismal state of the industry. He argued that, with Internet journalism at the cusp of exploding, paper gaming magazines must revolutionize both their distribution and their content in order to continue to be profitable. Coining the term "New Games Journalism," Gillen proposed eliminating the formulaic game preview, a dry, factual review of what appears in the game's content, and replacing it with an adapted form of "New Journalism," created by journalist Tom Wolfe. The new style would be derivative of "gonzo journalism," the trademark characteristic of reporters like Hunter S. Thompson and Truman Capote. Game journalists would write less about the game content and more about the experience of playing the game, allowing for personalized commentary and at times social or political critique (Gillen). Paper magazines began to implement a mild form of this journalistic style in the following year, with a new editorial section in PC Gamer (Stuart). New Games Journalism's true destination, however, was

the Internet, where blogs such as Kotaku and Destructoid shone as innovative gaming news sources (Carless).

The shift from purely objective reporting to a more subjective style centered on the author's experience served as a strong foundation for the introduction of social and political commentary into games journalism. Although modern games journalism often does not strictly adhere to the narrative style of gonzo journalism as seen in the more iconic examples of New Games Journalism (Shanahan), modern game reviews often feature the reviewer's commentary and experiences. Stephen Totilo, in his article entitled "Grand Theft Auto V and Women," reviews his experience playing the game in light of many other reporters' claims of the game's sexism. He begins by recalling his encounter with a female character who, despite being an auxiliary character lacking the depth and development of the playable characters, was a well-rounded, strong, relatable female. Breaking away from his narrative, Totilo addresses the concerns of sexist tropes within the game by characterizing Grand Theft Auto V as a game that accentuates the often stereotypical negative qualities of a race or gender. During the gameplay, Totilo only had three character options to choose, and, despite their differences, each one of them was male. To address the lack of fully developed female playable characters, Totilo returns to the story about his in-game encounter, pondering an alternate game-reality in which one would play as the "rough and tough woman" from the beginning of GTA V who instead happens upon one of the originally playable characters (Totilo).

In an article for The New York Times, Chris Suellentrop reviews his experience playing the post-apocalyptic game The Last of Us. For the majority of the game, the player controls a fatherly male protagonist, Joel, accompanied by a young girl, Ellie, as they navigate obstacles and enemies in order to survive. Despite its masterful storytelling, as the author explains, the game still utilizes the common trope of using women as auxiliary characters, or "background decoration." At one point, he even began "rooting for Joel to die so that The Last of Us would become [Ellie's] game, a story about a lost young girl instead of another look inside the plight of her brooding, monosyllabic father figure." Even with the focus on the main character Joel, The Last of Us managed to develop Ellie's character well enough to create a connection with its players. Such a high caliber of work may appear forgivable, but as Suellentrop reveals, there was a disparaging lack of female representation in both video games and in conferences that year.

When the best female character of the year is a video game side kick, no settling can be afforded (Suellentrop).

Much of GamerGate's quarrel with the content found in gaming journalism results from this progression from factual reviews into a commentary-style format influenced by New Games Journalism; however, we see in articles such as Totilo's and Suellentrop's how this style of journalism can be harnessed as a tool for discussing critical issues in gaming, such as sexism and the treatment of women throughout the gaming industry. By calling for the removal of this content and a reversion to the old style of journalism, GamerGate is removing the main avenue for debate on these issues.

The discussion on sexism in gaming is long overdue. A survey of the history of gaming reveals repeated instances of sexist game content. As early as 1982, the video game entitled *Custer's Revenge* drew heavy criticism for its offensive gameplay, in which the user plays as a naked cavalryman who rapes a Native American bound to a wooden stake (Milwaukee Journal, B1). In the three decades since, the embedded sexism within the field has persisted; in addition, as the industry grew, sexism also infiltrated the working industry and the communities surrounding these games.

On November 26, 2012, one Twitter user asked the user base why there were so few women in the video game industry (Plunkett). An overwhelming response from dozens of women and men within the industry recounted tales of sexism, harassment, and fear in the workplace. One response tells of a manager who refused to hire women because "they're more trouble than they're worth," while another user states that she is afraid to attend game developer conventions after having been groped by other attendees. Unfortunately, discrimination does not end at workplace behavior. A survey conducted by *Game Developer Magazine* in 2013 shows a disparaging pay gap between male and female coworkers (Matulef). In Figure 1, the reported salaries in some fields reveal percentage differences up to 65% in Audio Developing, with the smallest gap of 4.5% in Game Programming. Matulef proposes that this small percentage of gap in programmer wages may actually be attributed to the miniscule representation of women in the industry instead of improved equality in the field.

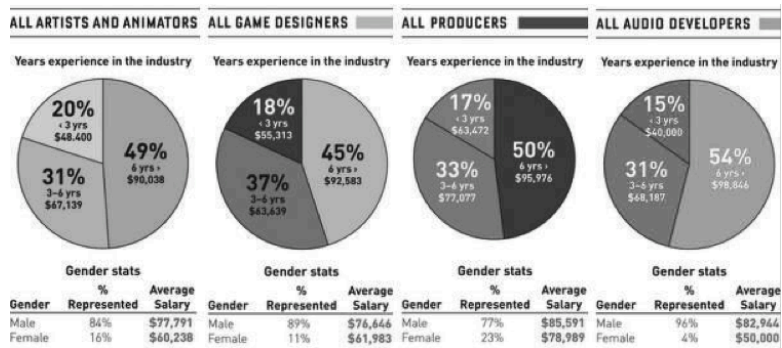


Figure 1: Graphical representation of the Game Developer Magazine study on gender pay gaps in the video game industry in 2013. Not only do we see percent differences up to 65% difference in Audio Developing and 23.6% difference in Game Developing, but we also see a massive representation gap between male and female employees.

Previously comprised of a younger male population, the video game audience now reflects an almost equal split of women and men who actively game; 48% women, 52% men (Sullivan). The communities surrounding these games, however, remain a predominantly discriminatory space, as evidenced in Braithwaite’s descriptions of incidents regarding the popular online multiplayer game, World of Warcraft, colloquially referred to as WoW. The author reveals a predominant trope in online forums known as the “feminist killjoy,” a person who addresses sexist content in a game but is seen by the male members as a woman who both misunderstands the tenets of feminism and possesses misplaced priorities and time (708-9). In a specific incident within the WoW community, a female game tester encountered a character whose dialogue was sexualized and discomfoting. She reported the incident, and the game’s development company, Blizzard, replaced the offensive line of dialogue. This transaction sparked an outcry from members of the community, who saw the line as acceptable. One objector complained that the tester’s actions decreased the enjoyment of the game, while another accused her of inappropriately applying feminism to blameless subject matter. The overall response to the incident was not directed at Blizzard for changing the game, but rather at the game tester. The community did not resent the change as much as they did the

person who effected it, and, in an attempt to prevent future killjoys from spoiling the game, lashed out to belittle the tester's opinions and experiences.

Harassment and alienation within gaming communities not only target feminists who speak out against sexist content, but also the general female population. As Gray relates in her piece on racism and sexism in the online gaming platform Xbox Live, video games empower the "default gamer, the white male"; content is not only intended for an audience comprised of these default gamers, but is expected to promote masculinity and dominance (261-66). The result is a gendered space in which players not only feel threatened by women, but also verbally attack them in an attempt to intimidate and frighten them out of the community. Foul language and offensive remarks freely target any woman who dares invade this male space or refuses to conform to the expectations of the default audience.

Parallel to the sexual harassment and misogyny within the workplace and gaming communities, the content in the games themselves also offend by representing women poorly and by reinforcing sexist tropes. As a study on the prevalence of female characters in major games has revealed, nearly all game content lacks a female presence. This study, conducted by EEDA (Electronic Entertainment Design and Research), found that out of a sample group of 669 video games with discernible, gender-descript protagonists, only 4% contained exclusively female protagonists and 45% allowed for a female-playable option. While the report also notes that an examination of the first three months of a game's sale lifetime shows the outstanding success of male-protagonist-only games versus female-only games, Kuchera suggests an underlying reason for these numbers: budget. Games with heroines as the playable characters received on average half the development budget allocated to dual-gender games and only half the marketing budget given to male-protagonist games (Kuchera).

In her YouTube series *Tropes vs Women in Video Games*, social media critic Anita Sarkeesian describes three dominant roles and tropes that women fill in videogames, the first of which is the "damsel in distress." This trope embodies a male power fantasy, in which a female character is entrapped by some means and is rendered powerless to save herself. She becomes the primary objective of the main protagonist, usually a male character. Instead of the damsel being a real character, she is now an object used as a token of power that is tossed between two opposing characters ("Damsel in Distress," 2014). A common example is the character Princess Peach from the Super Mario Bros. franchise, who is often

kidnapped by a villain named Bowser and must be rescued by an Italian plumber, Mario. Sarkeesian refers to the next trope as the “Ms. Male Character” trope, where a character is simply the female version of a preexisting male character and is only differentiated by visual cues or her role in a story. In this trope, there are two main issues: enforcing an antiquated binary gender dichotomy via the propagation of gendered signifiers, such as a bow, lipstick, or the colors pink or purple, and the lack of character definition outside her relation to a man (“Ms. Male Character,” 2014). Sarkeesian’s third major trope is the “Women as Background Decoration” trope.

Characterization	Frequencies	
	Male (%)	Female (%)
Aggressive	82.6	62.2
Sexualized	.8	59.9
Scantly clad	8.1	38.7
Sex role stereotype <sup>a</sup>	33.1	62.6
Sexualized and aggressive	.8	39.2

Figure 2: Frequencies of male versus female characterizations in video games (Dill et. al., 858)

<sup>a</sup>Sex role here is the attractiveness of a character, in this case beauty for women and hypermasculinity for men

Here, non-playable female characters are exploited, usually as player-interactive sex objects, in order to enhance or emphasize their surrounding environment. The inherent problem with this trope is that it puts the gamer in the role of sexually objectifying the female character through his or her interactions, encouraging the player to obtain pleasure through using the woman as an object (“Women as Background Decoration,” 2014).

Providing a thorough analysis of the characterizations of women in games, Dill and Thill propose a collection of popular stereotypical depictions: sexualized, scantily clad, and erotically aggressive. Like the analysis in Sarkesian’s critiques, the comparison between male and female frequency of these characterizations, seen in Figure 2, reveals the lack of female inclusion in games without a sexual purpose. In each characterization, the difference is statistically significant (p-value of .0001), indicating that women are objectified in games far more often than men (Dill et al., 851-58).

This evidence leaves no doubt regarding the existence of sexism throughout the video game industry, whether in the

companies that develop the games, the communities who play them, or the games themselves. Sexist acts in the workplace or on internet forums can directly impact individuals and propagate a harmful subculture where such actions are accepted. There is strong evidence supporting the negative implications of games that include sexist tropes, sexualized content, and enforced masculine norms. In addition, studies have found significant correlations between exposure to such games and the increase of a player's tolerance of chauvinistic behavior as well as their likelihood that to perform sexist acts (Fox, 315-19) (Dill, 5-7). The negative impact of these games supports the need for a lively discussion on sexism in gaming. Gaming journalism gives writers and critics a means to begin this dialogue, and there are those who are already actively speaking out against the major offenders within the industry. With the introduction of the GamerGate movement, however, there is now organized opposition against these social justice advocates. By campaigning for the removal of social and political commentary from gaming journalism, GamerGate is stifling the discussion on these issues and slowly removing the avenues for this dialogue. Without these channels, it becomes unlikely that the gaming industry will be able to progress beyond the harmful tropes that are prominent within not only these games but also society, leaving journalists, developers, and gamers stuck in an antiquated rut of damaging sexist conventions.

#### Reference List

- Alexander, L. (2014, August 28). "Gamers" don't have to be your audience. "Gamers" are over. Retrieved May 6, 2015, from [http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers\\_don\\_t\\_have\\_to\\_be\\_your\\_audience\\_Gamers\\_are\\_over.php?utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=tumblr](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers_don_t_have_to_be_your_audience_Gamers_are_over.php?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=tumblr)
- Alexander, L., & McSpadden, K. (2014, September 5). Everybody Is Losing in the Culture War Over Video Games. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://time.com/3274247/video-game-culture-war/>
- Baribeau, T. (2013, April 3). The 2013 Game Developer Gender Wage Gap |. Retrieved from <http://borderhouseblog.com/?p=10567>
- Braithwaite, A. (2014). "Seriously, get out": Feminists on the forums and the War(craft) on women. *New Media & Society*, 16(5), 703-718. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813489503>

- Carless, S. (2007, April 12). The Future of Fair, Balanced Game Editorial.
- Censoring of comments in regard to subjective facts. (2014, October 3). Retrieved May 6, 2015, from <http://www.theverge.com/2014/10/3/6906233/censoring-of-comments-in-regard-to-subjective-facts>
- Damsel in Distress: Part 1 - Tropes vs Women in Video Games. (2013). Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6p5AZp7r\\_Q&feature=youtu.be\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6p5AZp7r_Q&feature=youtu.be_gdata_player)
- Dewey, C. (2015, January 13). This is what happens when you create an online community without any rules. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/01/13/this-is-what-happens-when-you-create-an-online-community-without-any-rules/>
- Dill, K. E., Brown, B. P., & Collins, M. A. (2008). Effects of exposure to sex-stereotyped video game characters on tolerance of sexual harassment. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 44(5), 1402-1408. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2008.06.002>
- Dill, K. E., & Thill, K. P. (2007). Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles: Young People's Perceptions Mirror Sexist Media Depictions. *Sex Roles*, 57(11-12), 851-864. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9278-1>
- Fox, J., & Tang, W. Y. (2014). Sexism in online video games: The role of conformity to masculine norms and social dominance orientation. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 33, 314-320. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.07.014>
- Gamergate controversy. (2015, February 19). In Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Gamergate\\_controversy&oldid=647874519](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Gamergate_controversy&oldid=647874519)
- Gillen, K. (2003, March 24). Kieron Gillen's Workblog » The New Games Journalism. Retrieved from



[http://gillen.cream.org/wordpress\\_html/assorted-essays/the-new-games-journalism/](http://gillen.cream.org/wordpress_html/assorted-essays/the-new-games-journalism/)

Gittleson, K., & York, N. (2014, June 13). Why does sexism persist in the video games industry? Retrieved May 6, 2015, from <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-27824701>

Gjoni, E. (2014, August 16). thezoepost. Retrieved May 6, 2015, from <https://thezoepost.wordpress.com/>

Goldman, A. (2014, September 5). Against our better judgment, we wrote about Gamergate - by @TLDR. Retrieved May 6, 2015, from [http://www.onthemedial.org/story/my-attempt-write-about-gamergate/?utm\\_source=sharedUrl&utm\\_medium=metatag&utm\\_campaign=sharedUrl](http://www.onthemedial.org/story/my-attempt-write-about-gamergate/?utm_source=sharedUrl&utm_medium=metatag&utm_campaign=sharedUrl)

Gray, K. L. (2012). Deviant bodies, stigmatized identities, and racist acts: examining the experiences of African-American gamers in Xbox Live. *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*, 18(4), 261-276. <http://doi.org/10.1080/13614568.2012.746740>

Halleck, G. (n.d.). A People's History of GamerGate. Retrieved May 6, 2015, from <http://www.historyofgamergate.com/>

Hamilton, M. (2012, November 28). #1reasonwhy: the hashtag that exposed games industry sexism. Retrieved May 6, 2015, from <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2012/nov/28/games-industry-sexism-on-twitter>

Hern, A. (2015, January 13). Gamergate hits new low with attempts to send Swat teams to critics. Retrieved April 27, 2015, from <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jan/13/gamergate-hits-new-low-with-attempts-to-send-swat-teams-to-critics>

Heron, M. J., Belford, P., & Goker, A. (2014). Sexism in the circuitry. *ACM SIGCAS Computers and Society*, 44(4), 18-29. <http://doi.org/10.1145/2695577.2695582>

Ip, C. (2014, September 23). How do we know what we know about #Gamergate? Retrieved March 16, 2015, from [http://www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/gamergate.php](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/gamergate.php)

- Kaplan, S. (2014, September 12). With #GamerGate, the video-game industry's growing pains go viral. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/09/12/with-gamergate-the-video-game-industrys-growing-pains-go-viral/>
- Kuchera, B. (2013, March 21). The PA Report - Games with exclusively female heroes don't sell (because publishers don't support them) [The Penny Arcade Report]. Retrieved May 6, 2015, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20130321064024/http://www.penny-arcade.com/report/article/games-with-female-heroes-dont-sell-because-publishers-dont-support-them>
- Locker, M. (2012, November 27). #1ReasonWhy: Women Take to Twitter to Talk about Sexism in Video Game Industry. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/11/27/1reasonwhy-women-take-to-twitter-to-talk-about-sexism-in-video-game-industry/>
- Matulef, J. (2013, May 4). The video game industry's gender wage gap is worse than you think. Retrieved March 31, 2015, from <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-04-04-the-video-game-industrys-gender-wage-gap-is-worse-than-you-think>
- McCormick, R. (2014, October 30). Stephen Colbert takes on Gamergate with Anita Sarkeesian. Retrieved February 19, 2015, from <http://www.theverge.com/2014/10/30/7130191/stephen-colbert-takes-on-gamergate-with-anita-sarkeesian>
- Miller, M., & Summers, A. (2007). Gender Differences in Video Game Characters' Roles, Appearances, and Attire as Portrayed in Video Game Magazines. *Sex Roles*, (57), 733-42.
- Ms. Male Character - Tropes vs Women in Video Games. (2013). Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYqYLfm1rWA&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYqYLfm1rWA&feature=youtube_gdata_player)
- Patreon of Mitu Khandaker-Kokoris. (n.d.). Retrieved May 6, 2015, from <https://archive.is/0KuBW>

- Plunkett, L. (2012, November 27). Here's a Devastating Account of the Crap Women in the Games Business Have to Deal With. In 2012. Retrieved March 31, 2015, from <http://kotaku.com/5963528/heres-a-devastating-account-of-the-crap-women-in-the-games-business-have-to-deal-with-in-2012>
- Plunkett, L. (2014, August 28). We Might Be Witnessing The "Death of An Identity." Retrieved May 6, 2015, from <http://kotaku.com/we-might-be-witnessing-the-death-of-an-identity-1628203079>
- Rignall, J. (2014, December 10). A Brief History of Games Journalism. Retrieved May 6, 2015, from <http://www.usgamer.net/articles/a-brief-history-of-games-journalism>
- Robertson, A. (2015, April 11). Rep. Katherine Clark wants the FBI to crack down on Gamergate and online threats. Retrieved April 27, 2015, from <http://www.theverge.com/2015/3/11/8191033/representative-katherine-clark-letter-congress-gamergate>
- Romano, A. (2014, December 21). The battle of Gamergate and the future of video games. *The Kernel*.
- Sales, S. (2014a, August 19). Kotaku and Zoe Quinn Accused of Exchanging Positive Press for Sex. Retrieved May 19, 2015, from <http://www.gamerheadlines.com/2014/08/kotaku-and-zoe-quinn-accused-of-exchanging-positive-press-for-sex/>
- Sales, S. (2014b, August 22). The Kotaku / Zoe Quinn scandal: The Aftermath and Thoughts. Retrieved May 19, 2015, from <http://www.gamerheadlines.com/2014/08/the-kotaku-zoe-quinn-scandal-the-aftermath-and-thoughts/>
- Shanahan, I. (2014, May 2). Bow Nigger. Retrieved May 6, 2015, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20140502012602/http://www.alwaysblack.com/blackbox/bownigger.html>
- Sinor, J. (2014). Guns on Campus Have Already Curtailed Free Speech. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 61(10), 2.

- Stermer, S. P., & Burkley, M. (2012). SeX-Box. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 999(999). <http://doi.org/10.1037/a0028397>
- Stuart, K. (2005, February 22). State of play: is there a role for the New Games Journalism? Retrieved May 6, 2015, from <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2005/feb/22/stateofplayi>
- Suellentrop, C. (2013, June 14). In the Video Game The Last of Us, Survival Favors the Man. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/14/arts/video-games/in-the-video-game-the-last-of-us-survival-favors-the-man.html>
- Sullivan, G. (2014, August 22). Study: More women than teenage boys are gamers. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/08/22/adult-women-gamers-outnumber-teenage-boys/>
- Totilo, S. (2013, September 18). Grand Theft Auto V and Women. Retrieved May 6, 2015, from <http://kotaku.com/grand-theft-auto-v-and-women-1344112808>
- Totilo, S. (2014, October 11). Another Woman In Gaming Flees Home Following Death Threats. Retrieved May 20, 2015, from <http://kotaku.com/another-woman-in-gaming-flees-home-following-death-thre-1645280338>
- Wagner, K. (2014, October 14). The Future Of The Culture Wars Is Here, And It's Gamergate. Retrieved April 26, 2015, from <http://deadspin.com/the-future-of-the-culture-wars-is-here-and-its-gamerga-1646145844>
- Women as Background Decoration: Part 1 - Tropes vs Women in Video Games. (2014). Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZPSrvedvsg&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZPSrvedvsg&feature=youtube_gdata_player)
- Wu, B. (2014, October 20). Rape and death threats are terrorizing female gamers. Why haven't men in tech spoken out? *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/10/20/rape-and-death-threats-are-terrorizing-female-gamers-why-havent-men-in-tech-spoken-out/>

0/20/rape-and-death-threats-are-terrorizing-female-gamers-why-havent-men-in-tech-spoken-out/

Yiannopolis, M. (2014, October 10). GameJournoPros: Joking about Paid Reviews and Mocking Phil Fish. Retrieved May 6, 2015, from <http://www.breitbart.com/london/2014/10/10/gamejourno-pros-joking-about-paid-reviews-and-mocking-phil-fish/>

## **America Against the Islamic World: Creating a Radicalized Other in the Minds of U.S. Citizens**

**By Rana Ullhman**

Founded on principles of equality under the law and freedom of expression and religion, the United States of America is likely even more an amalgamation of different cultures, religions, and peoples than at its founding. While this growing diversity has benefited the country culturally and economically, it creates a constant struggle between retaining individual authenticity and creating a unifying concept of shared American identity. According to the prominent political philosopher Carl Schmitt, one of the most commonly accepted ways to unite a population is over a shared animosity towards an outside, dissimilar group. Contemporary US society is no exception. In a quest to maintain a cohesive American identity, the response to the threat of terrorism in both political and media spheres has transformed a simple correlation into a commonly used characterization of Islam as a violent, radicalized religion.

While popular conceptions of the Middle East by Americans are largely informed by recent media coverage of 9/11 type terrorist attacks, the negative connotations of Islam first began with U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. The United States has a long history of involvement in the Middle East, often taking the paternal role of peace-keeper and stepping in to stabilize conflict stricken nations. This pattern begun as early as 1919 with the King Crane Commission intending to place an American Mandate in Syria, for which American forces would mediate conflict between Arab and Zionist groups in the region (Baxter 18). While this involvement seems noble, America's intentions have been questionable, as interventions often happen in areas of economic and political interest, and could be seen as a post-colonial quest for oil, territory, or political power. These interventions have ranged from under the table aid (supplying guns to Al Qaeda to fight the Soviet Union) to full-scale invasions (coalition forces in the Gulf War or the bombing of Iraq in 1998) and have created polarizing views by both opposing parties. The constant involvement has fueled an anti-American sentiment within the resident populations in the Middle East as they see the United States' motivations being primarily "to control Middle Eastern oil, world domination, a vendetta against Muslim states and an attempt to protect Israel" (Baxter 170). In the United States, this involvement is perceived quite differently; the constant state of turmoil and military conflict

serves to characterize Middle Eastern nations as ill-formed volatile bodies and this combined with the anti-American sentiment described above puts America and its forces in the morally superior position, working against the odds to respond to global threats. Thus, any over generalized views concerning the Middle East that surfaced in the wake of the 9/11 attacks were perfectly aligned with this simplistic view of Middle Eastern affairs as provided by U.S. foreign policy.

Though that foreign policy stood to better justify itself should Americans have the impression that it was, Islam is actually not the root cause of terrorism. Although religious fanaticism does prove to be a binding factor for many terrorist groups, territorial occupation by foreign powers is the true underlying cause of the majority of attacks. This fact holds true regardless of geographic location: of the 2,188 terrorist attacks from 1980 to 2009, 96% of them were motivated not by religion (some agents were secular), but by the goal to get an occupying democratic state to withdraw their troops from the local territory (Pape 10). This explanation isn't simply a case of retrospective analysis, but was cited by the infamous leader of the terrorist organization Al Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, as his primary motive for organizing the 9/11 attacks. In a videotaped speech sent to Al-Jeezera four years after the 2001 attacks, Bin Laden explicitly references this line of thinking: "I say to you, Allah knows that it had never occurred to us to strike the towers. But after it became unbearable and we witnessed the oppression and tyranny of the American/Israeli coalition against our people in Palestine and Lebanon, it came to my mind." He continued, commenting on the justification of continued terrorism in general, "Is defending oneself and punishing the aggressor in kind, objectionable terrorism? If it is such, then it is unavoidable for us" (Bin Laden). The United States' response to terrorism after 9/11, which was to declare a "War on Terror" and become militarily involved in the Middle East, ironically led to motivate more anti-American terrorist attacks. This shows that the U.S. media's association of "the Middle East" with "anti-American sentiment" is in some instances true, although it has a great deal more to do with U.S. foreign policy than with the teachings of a holy book.

Though some Americans might have been aware of these conclusions, a much more attractive and popular attribution for this violence focused on the unifying and easily distinguishable characteristic of the perpetrators: Muslim identity. Considered the main differentiating factor between the Western and Eastern realms, Islam's sphere of influence was seen by Westerners as

controlling all aspects of Middle Eastern life, including individual motivation and thought. Numerous academic papers note the “homogenizing characteristics” of Islam, and a report from the U.S. Government’s Psychological Strategy Board explicitly advised, “No consideration of the traditional Arab mind is possible without taking into consideration the all-pervading influence of the Muslim faith on Arab thinking” (quoted in Jacobs 56). This commonly accepted line of reasoning only encouraged the linkage of Islam and violence: if Islamic faith is such a pervasive and all-encompassing aspect of their lives, then their violent actions must stem from this faith.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack by the radical Islamic group Al Qaeda catapulted extremism and Islam into the center of American media coverage and brought forth conflicting messages from the U.S. Government. The attempts to define the dangerous other were complicated by the domestic presence of American Muslims, resulting in two seemingly contradictory responses to Muslim identity. Nine days after the initial attack, President George W. Bush addressed Congress, continuing to condemn the actions of the terrorists and those that support them but drawing the important distinction that these actions are that of a select minority and don’t characterize the entire Islamic faith. He is quoted as saying, “[Islam’s] teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself. The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them” (Bush). Outwardly, Bush and the government he stands for is displaying impressive tolerance and distinguishing for the American public how the Islamic “other” abroad is a world apart from the Muslim Americans among us while simultaneously addressing the need to fight back against this attack. Not only does this stance work to stymie hate crimes against Muslim Americans, but it unifies and prepares America for an offensive attack against the newly defined forces of evil.

These two official messages regarding Muslims’ relation to the conflict, toleration at home and retaliation abroad, were reported in varying proportions by the media. Dina Ibrahim’s research on the media framing of Islam on network news (defined as ABC, NBC and CBS channels) found that for the initial two weeks after the attack, the views promoted by the broadcasted material reiterated the government’s standpoint in efforts to promote a unified American front and prevent a backlash against local American



Muslims (Ibrahim 116). As the number of local hate crimes increased and were subsequently condemned by the Bush administration, coverage of normal Americans who were Muslim increased as well. While the U.S. Justice Department conducted large-scale investigations into the terrorist potential of Islamic institutions across the country, the network news worked to humanize these Muslim citizens and counter their threatening Muslim status with examples of patriotism such as waving the American flag or donating blood (Ibrahim 117). While this may have changed perspectives for some toward domestic Muslims, the message that Islam has the potential to be peaceful does not leave American soil as these individualized American Muslims are simply seen as an exception to the association of Islam and violence. American Muslims are good; foreign Muslims, dangerous.

When dealing with international Islam, both the government and media added to associations between Islam and violence. These two influential groups dominated the popular discourse regarding the terrorists' link to Islam and popularized misconceptions about the violent nature of Islam itself. A popular piece of evidence that Islam is inherently violent is a misinterpretation of one of the religion's five pillars: Jihad. In the previously mentioned study of network news by Ibrahim, there is a recurrence of Jihad being translated into English as "holy war" (Ibrahim 119). Although Jihad is more appropriately equated to the "struggle to overcome the forces of evil" and would be similar to a Christian overcoming temptation to sin, the media's presentation "conveys the impression that since Islam requires Jihad of all Muslims, it therefore follows that Islam must be a violent and confrontational religion" (Ibrahim 119). In on-site coverage of religious schools in Islamabad, Pakistan, ABC correspondent Bob Woodruff's commentary notes that while impoverished students are given free education, "In some there is no science or math or literature. They study the Koran and they learn about Jihad, or Holy War" (Quoted in Ibrahim 119). Not only does this reiterate the mistranslation of the term "Jihad", but it also implies that this preparation for a Holy War is the predominant message of the Koran, and that studying the holy book won't provide a holistic education but will instead be used to brainwash unsuspecting children. The perpetuated misrepresentation of Jihad and its perceived violent connotations holds great weight among the American population as it appears to stem directly from fact about Islam's values and requirements. With that, Islam as a whole is rendered extremist and thus serves as adequate justification for

the terrorist acts, which themselves feed back into this violent association.

Media framing of terrorist events contribute to the public's association between Islam and radicalism. By emphasizing or inferring certain aspects of the story, mass media paints a consistent portrait of Islam as being a sufficient motivator for destruction. An analysis of 1,638 news studies of national media outlets' coverage of post 9/11 terrorist attacks found that in an effort to sensationalize and tap into popular terrorism discourse, conclusions on the perpetrator's background and motivations stemmed from negative portrayals of Islam, even if no such link existed (Powell 95). An example given was that of mass shooter Hesham Hayadet, whose media profile noted the fact that "People who answered phones at four mosques in the Irvine area said that they did not know Mr. Hadayet and that to their knowledge he had never prayed there" (Powell 97). Thus, although this would be considered non-information in a completely objective portrayal, the inclusion of references to Muslim identity in the article leads the reader to infer that a religious connection continues to exist despite the actual included content.

This linkage of Islam and violent acts is furthered by the lack of explorative depth of the international perpetrator's motive when covering these stories. The terrorism narrative has become cliché and expected: once the suspect is confirmed to be Muslim, the implied anti-American hatred is motive enough to commit these acts. If it is suggested that religious fundamentalism might play a role, mainstream media fixates upon this, ignoring any underlying social, economic or political causational factors. Powell's research on the media portrayal of terrorism and Islam showed that when describing domestic agents (U.S. Citizens) the underlying motives described as being nonviolent and simply expressed violently, where as foreign agents' motives were portrayed as violent on both levels and often labeled as the result of "radicalization" by Islam, resulting in either a reactionary strike for damage done by U.S. Troops or pure anti-American hatred (Powell 101). This reductionist view is readily taken up by the American public, for it is compatible with their concept of the one-dimensional other, and fuels the "common stereotype that religion determines and steers all decisions made by Muslims or Muslim communities" (Christensen 31).

Inversely, when the perpetrator is a U.S. Citizen, the media profiling takes on an individualized focus, thus reducing implications of a threat. This humanizing of the agent involves expending considerable effort in attempts to find a rational

motivation for their attack. Powell's analysis of media coverage of terrorism identified three common motives that are attributed to these domestic perpetrators: creating fear, sending an anti-government message, or seeking attention (Powell 100). Although this first motive, creating fear, is also associated with international terrorism, it doesn't carry the same clout in the hands of U.S. Domestic as without the affiliation to a larger Anti-American network or organization, this individual's acts are simply seen as symptomatic of individual social and/or mental issues. Similarly, anti-government motivation in domestic individuals isn't interpreted as the same attack on the American way of life that international terrorism supposedly is, but is instead either viewed as an individual using violent means to express otherwise rational ideas about the government's actions or as a psychotic break from mental sanity. Finally, the attack that was interpreted as merely a bid for attention is attributed to the individual's questionable psychological state, and begins a slew of theories about life struggles, upbringing, or social conflicts that could have caused this action in the perpetrator. In all three instances, the media takes an active role in humanizing the perpetrator and separating them from their violent act through means of rationalization. This also results in the elimination of the possibility of a long term threat, as their individual status is emphasized and any possibilities of violence that they could have inflicted upon the population ended when they were apprehended by the police.

In the rare case that domestic perpetrators are deemed too fanatical to fit the above model of rationalization, the media fixates instead on the responses elicited by the individual. One key example is the domestic and international response to the radical actions of Florida pastor Terry Jones who publically burned the Koran. After a jury found the Koran guilty of "crimes against humanity" in a mock trial setting and subsequently burned it, riots ensued in multiple cities in Afghanistan resulting in at least 20 deaths over a two-day period (Schifrin). While there was considerable condemnation of Jones' actions, the focus soon became the extent of the violence in the Middle East which was seen as a testament to the strength of conviction that Muslim's hold for their holy book and by extension, the radical lengths that they would go to protect it.

Instances like these offer individual examples of how the generalization of this terror conflict can move from the sweeping categories of America versus Terrorism into Christianity versus Islam. With the characterization of Muslim identity as the identifying trait of international terrorism comes the juxtaposition

of predominant faiths and the portrayal of Muslim and Christian as killer and killed (Powell 107). Although by law the United States practices freedom of religion, there is an innate favoritism towards its historical basis in Christianity with the first Protestant settlers. This tradition is maintained both in religious practice and popular American culture, as the Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter are celebrated by more than just the 78.4% of adults that are practicing Christians, and “under God” was only recently removed from the National Pledge of Allegiance (Pew 5). This image of a culturally Christian nation is capitalized in terrorism discourse, as it furthers the easy identification of a unified and morally-grounded America versus an Islamic other. Powell notes that media emphasis on differences of religion demonizes Muslims and humanizes Christians by portraying victims of terror attacks as “innocent, praying, Christian, and/or spiritual in some way, being killed, hurt or scared by evil Muslim terrorists” (Powell 107). Once again, the fact that religion is such a cornerstone of American society and is simultaneously the most distinctive trait between these clashing groups results in perpetuation of a negative, inherently un-American sentiment associated with Islam.

Surprisingly enough, this seemingly ignorant and grossly oversimplified view of Islam has its roots not in American bigotry but in universal human nature. Psychology has proved humans’ predisposition towards assuming generalizing similarities of an external group in what is termed the “outgroup homogeneity effect”. This principle states that when individuals perceive themselves as part of a certain group, it activates the belief that their in-group harbors more variability across many characteristics, whereas the outgroup is seen as lacking this same variability. In one of many experiments illustrating this principle, researchers at UC Santa Barbara assigned subjects to a group and supplied facts about both in- and outgroups, half of which pointed to similarities, and half of which alluded to varying characteristics. Despite equal presentation of the internal similarities and differences of the two groups, subjects consistently rated the outgroup as more homogenous, reaching the same conclusion as another test condition which had been explicitly told that the outgroup was more homogenous (Worth). This suggests that this ingrained processing track promotes a generalizing perception of outgroups and would explain American’s reliance on Islam to characterize the Middle East.

This linkage of Islam and the Middle East allowed for an identification and distancing of this violent “other” from predominantly Christian American society. The unique nature of

the anti-American terrorist attacks left America struggling to define their enemy, and the establishment of Islam as violent and controlling helped them to categorize who they were fighting against. Previous conflicts in the Middle East had been tied to a geographic or political locale in which the opposition were of a certain nationality or party affiliation. Yet a new brand of war, suicide attacks executed by transnational individuals, left the United States at a loss when it came to a combatting strategy. The established linkage of Islam and violent acts gave the U.S. Government a means to identify and understand this new enemy but also presented a complication, namely the fact that although America is historically and culturally a predominantly Christian nation, Muslims were present within the American community and no longer simply an exotic other. This meant that a distinction had to be made between the violent, fanatical Muslims abroad, and the integrated, patriotic Muslim citizens at home.

Terrorism created a unique challenge for the United States, forcing them to grapple with a nebulous enemy that posed both external and internal threats. With the identification and association of Islam with this anti-American threat came the challenge of differentiating between those who followed the faith on domestic soil and those who were poised to use religion as an instrument to wreak havoc on the United States. The subsequent generalizing and compartmentalization of Islam's association with violence and the differentiation of domestic peace-mongers from international terror cells served not only to define America's enemy in this War on Terror but unify the home front in the face of this opposition and thus make the nation stronger. Was this extensive demonization of the "other" the only means by which to achieve this unity? America is founded on the idea of being a safe haven for persecuted minorities, so an American identity should ideally rest on this inclusiveness rather than the isolationist values of a majority group. It is already within human nature to recognize our internal variability, and as such, the formation of unity based on these contemporary and diversity-based values would ultimately form a stronger, more resilient nation instead of one fixated on sensationalized stereotypes.

### **Works Cited**

Baxter, Kylie, and Shahram Akbarzadeh. *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Roots of Anti-Americanism*. London: Routledge, 2008. Print.

- Ben-Yehuda, Nachman. *Theocratic Democracy: The Social Construction of Religious and Secular Extremism*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Bin Laden, Osama. "Full Transcript of Bin Laden's Speech." 01 Nov. 2004. *Aljazeera*. Web. 30 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2004/11/200849163336457223.html>> .
- Bush, George W. "Address to Joint Session of Congress Following 9/11 Attacks". Capitol Building, Washington D.C. 20 September, 2001.
- Christensen, Christian. *ISLAM IN THE MEDIA: CARTOONS AND CONTEXT*. Melbourne: The Australian Teachers of Media Inc, 2006.
- Jacobs, Matthew F. *Imagining the Middle East the Building of an American Foreign Policy, 1918-1967*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2011. Print.
- "Koran Burned after Fla. Church "Trial"" *CBS News*. CBS Interactive Inc., 1 Jan. 2011. Web. 5 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/koran-burned-after-fla-church-trial/>>.
- Pape, Robert Anthony, and James K. Feldman. "Introduction: Why Focus on Suicide Terrorism." *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2010. 1-15. Print
- "Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life: Summary of Key Findings." *Choice Reviews Online*: 45-4326. Web. 1 May 2015.
- Powell, Kimberly. "Framing Islam: An Analysis of U.S. Media Coverage of Terrorism Since 9/11." *Communication Studies* 62.1 (2011): 90-112. *EbscoHost*. Web. 4 Mar. 2015.
- Schifrin, Nick, Agha Aleem, Lee Ferran, and Matt Gutman. "Afghan Violence Spreads Over Terry Jones' Quran Burning." *ABC News*. ABC News Network, 2 Apr. 2011. Web. 13 Apr. 2015. <<http://abcnews.go.com/International/afghan-violence-spreads-terry-jones-quran-burning/story?id=13281689>>.

Worth, Leila Tiffany. "The Outgroup Homogeneity Effect: Information Processing Causes and Consequences." Order No. 8910219 University of California, Santa Barbara, 1988. Ann Arbor: *ProQuest*. Web. 28 Apr. 2015.

## **Fair Use in a New Cultural Paradigm: Amateur-Produced Appropriative Works on YouTube**

**By Lauren Whitehouse**

Since its inception, YouTube has allowed users at a variety of skill levels to create and share video, and to express themselves through these films, regardless of quality. As a member of the “YouTube generation,” I have witnessed and have partaken in the rise of a participatory online community and YouTube’s mission to “Make yourself heard. During my senior year at Archbishop Hoban High School in Akron, Ohio, a small group of students coordinated a school-wide production of a “lip dub,” an unedited music video of approximately seven minutes, showcasing various individuals lip syncing popular songs. Creation of the video required several rehearsals, coordination with numerous student organizations, and an afternoon of setup and filming. The production received local news coverage and over 80,000 views on YouTube.

Unfortunately, YouTube removed the video two months later due to claims of copyright infringement with regard to the music used for lip syncing. Though the creators intended the video to be an expression of the Hoban spirit and the collective identity and diversity of the student body, they lost their work due to a fair use dispute regarding one of the songs used to enhance the film (“What I Like About You,” by The Romantics), a situation not uncommon on YouTube due to the rise of amateur remix video. (For an updated version of the video, reposted to YouTube on 15 August 2013 after making edits to avoid infringement, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqestUg6NpE>)

Though initially home to content preponderantly in the style of low-quality home video, YouTube now hosts a growing number of appropriative works, or videos that incorporate media that the user did not originally create. Appropriations on YouTube include unedited clips of television and film, fan-made music videos, YouTube “poops,” (a poorly edited mashup of video and audio clips to create a new story) reviews, and numerous other remixes of traditional media available to any amateur YouTuber. Content owners and internet critics question the cultural quality and legality of these derivative works, arguing that third-party appropriation robs and dilutes established culture. As I will argue in suggest in this essay, These claims find their basis in the constructs of traditional media, but have yet to adapt to global changes in the culture of the internet. To understand these



changes, one must understand the cultural and artistic paradigm shift made possible by YouTube and similar websites, as well as the legal obstacles to appropriation posed by the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998, which prohibits the use or creation of technologies that circumvent copyright. I will argue that as host to amateur works, YouTube facilitates the appreciation of third-party content and the longevity of cultural memory through appropriation. In its current form, however, copyright law impedes this expression due to pressure from original owners concerned with monetization of content. I do not claim, however, that copyright law is obsolete and that artists' works should not be protected, rather that fair use should be extended to appropriation meant to appreciate an artist's property through criticism, commentary, and other videos that use third-party content as a foundation for new work.

Some critics argue that the use and abuse of third-party content in the amateur production of derivative works contributes to the intellectual and economic dilution of culture. In *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture*, Andrew Keen claims that the rise of the amateur user threatens conventional cultural gatekeepers and institutions by filling the web with mediocre art, video, and information (36-37). According to Keen, the accessibility of this "free," amateur-generated material acts to the detriment of professionals and users alike, by putting professionals out of work and lowering the intellectual development of users, now required to sift through masses of second-rate information and art in order to find credible, higher quality content (45) (For Keen's Tedx talk, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dT35dTpcPMY>). Kevin Mattson, supporting this assertion, observes how the rise of "free" culture and easy access to information reduces the significance of experts such as journalists and educators who serve to generate credible information (69). In Mattson's opinion, elimination of these "professional cultural producers" for the sake of free information threatens the construct of civilized society and reduces cultural production by destabilizing the professions, (73).

The assertions of Keen and Mattson find their roots in traditional media prevalent before the digital age. In his argument against the "noble amateur," Keen likens the digitization of cultural production to "the triumph . . . of romanticism over the commonsense wisdom of the Enlightenment" (36), in that the amateur's approach introduces chaos into established media by

cutting and splicing videos into new works which are then claimed by the user. The comparison to the rationalism of the Enlightenment characterizes the traditionalism advocated by Keen in his argument against the amateur and the internet, a sort of reluctance towards the digital revolution purported by “Web 2.0.”

Contrary to these opinions, I maintain that the internet neither bolsters nor destroys traditional culture, but rather promotes a new philosophy of creative expression conducive to the digitization of daily life. As I will propose, the use of appropriative work on YouTube represents a paradigm shift enhancing not only third-party content, but also our culture as a whole. The rise of amateur video and third-party appropriations exemplifies a cultural migration from the realm of the “listening masses” to one of participation fueled by the accessibility of cyberspace. As a home to a virtually endless collection of content, YouTube facilitates both a cultural convergence and an emergence of the remix genre. Fagerjord notes that the digitization and mass storage of culture encourages the remixing of various genres by removing older technological barriers (199). The homogenization of this cultural medium, along with easily available video templates and editing software, allows amateur users to select and recompile clips as desired. Easy access to content encourages the generation of appropriative works and the storage of popular culture beyond the immediate collective memory of society (Fagerjord 195). As Keen asserts, the power of the amateur does challenge the meaning of professionalism and encourage a blurring of the line between the traditional media provider and the passive consumer; however, the empowerment of the user as consumer, producer, and director allows for the democratization of culture, a shift made possible by the participatory nature of the internet and YouTube.

Besides facilitating videos reacting to and reinforcing popular culture through appropriation, YouTube acts as an archive of older culture, expanding and enriching the breadth of cultural memory rather than destroying it. Hilderbrand observes that the online amassing of “classic moments” in television improves the dynamic of cultural history, making “small-scale ephemera” easier to find for either scholarly or nostalgic uses (50). Fagerjord notes that YouTube’s “rip-culture” films, a collection of videos that uses clips from television shows or films for any purpose, often constitute the most viewed material on the site. According to Fagerjord, websites such as YouTube and Google derive their worth from the “linkability of information,” an interconnectedness of popular

culture that traditional media, namely film and television, often lack (197).

Though the true cultural impact made by digital media remains to be seen, the progression of the paradigm shift has the potential to define and mature proper uses for technology in order to promote cultural enrichment. The internet is a new tool that society has yet to fully explore and understand. As a result, the world is still experimenting with its capabilities, determining what it physically can do with technology before determining what it ethically should do in order to encourage artistic and scientific growth. Discovering the internet's potential helps us as a society define the parameters of acceptable use, established through laws which, alongside digital cultural expansion, still require refinement.

Along with instigating debate regarding the dilution of culture, appropriative works on YouTube also raise concerns about the role and legality of fair use of third-party content.

Defining fair use with respect to copyrighted material, section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 reads as follows:

[T]he fair use of a copyrighted work, including such use by reproduction in copies or phonorecords or by any other means specified by that section, for purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use), scholarship, or research, is not an infringement of copyright (Copyright).

When used to analyze cases of questionable fair use, copyright law also incorporates considerations of intended use (whether it is commercial or not), the amount of third-party content being utilized, and the impact upon the source material's worth (Copyright). Due to the vagueness and uncertainty surrounding this amendment and the qualifiers specified, a court decision is frequently required to determine the legality of the work in question (Collins 99).

In cases of copyright infringement, content owners defend material ownership in order to protect their intellectual property and monetary assets. In the web series *Crash Course* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQOJgEA5e1k>), Stan Muller defines intellectual property as "Non-physical property that stems from, is identified as, and whose value is based on an idea or some ideas" (Muller). From this definition come the physical embodiments, the third-party content under discussion. Intellectual property law grants exceptions to copying works though fair use in order to promote individual engagement with

science and art characteristic of digital participatory culture. By encouraging the freedom to create within existing works, fair use creates a dialogue between the owner and the consumer, fostering the growth of the owner through increasing recognition and the consumer through enrichment of skill and knowledge with regard to the material in question. (Muller); I would add, however, that the qualitative ambiguity of fair use allows potential abuse by original content owners in the interest of protecting monetary assets, discouraging legal appropriation as well as illicit copied works.

Since both the DMCA and the Copyright Act of 1976 fail to concretely define the parameters for appropriative works, conflicting interpretations from users and content owners often lead to legal disputes that question the extent of fair use on YouTube. Generally, appropriative works on YouTube exist as commentary on and appreciation for the source material as opposed to advocacy of “free” culture or attempted monetization of the original content. As a result, derivative works that contribute to popular culture in this manner and fit the legal qualifiers generally qualify for fair-use protection. Nevertheless, protected appropriative works frequently fall victim to censorship as a result of automated identification of third party content, an approach necessitated by the massive quantity of video uploaded regularly to YouTube’s server. By systematically and mechanically approaching the elimination of copyright infringement, YouTube and original content owners frequently censor protected items, thus infringing upon the definition of fair use with respect to appropriative works. content owners often demand that YouTube flag appropriative works or issue takedown notices without discretion as to whether or not fair use protects the user’s video. This blanket censorship stems from the protection of the intellectual and economic integrity of the third-party media in question (Collins 102-103), defending the owner’s claim on his/her ideas and profits.

As an example of unlawful media removal, Johnathan McIntosh’s dialogue and debate with YouTube and the entertainment company Lionsgate demonstrates the economic drive behind YouTube’s quantitative approach to copyright infringement cases. In the fall of 2012, McIntosh entered a fair use dispute with Lionsgate over his video entitled “Buffy vs. Edward: Twilight Remixed,” a film that the YouTuber describes as “transformative storytelling which serves as a visual critique of gender roles and representations in modern pop culture vampire media” (Collins 98). Over the course of four months, Lionsgate

issued two takedown notices: one for the audio taken from Twilight and another for the visual content. Following punitive measures taken by YouTube against McIntosh, Lionsgate disclosed that they had claimed copyright infringement only because McIntosh refused to allow advertising alongside the video (98-99).

Similar to the internet's cultural uses, regulation of digital content resides in its early stages, still defining the proper parameters of online media and their derivative works. In order to hone the use of the internet, copyright law is paramount in the protection of original content and intellectual property. Current legislation on fair use needs reworking to better encapsulate the magnitude of the internet and directly define and approach the divide between appropriation and theft.

Along with reflecting the audio-visual component and interoperability of the Web 2.0, then, YouTube represents a shift in our culture's values, and a shift in our understanding and approach to art. Rather than passively consuming art objects as fetishized transcendental masterpieces, the YouTube generation seeks to embrace art as active participants in the creative process. The rise of the internet encourages the amateur's creative growth accentuated by online community and appreciation.

Appropriations promote the universality of popular culture by paying homage to and drawing new meaning from their source material. As a result, the rise of derivative works may represent the decline of traditional art as society begins to value online media more than that of cultural objects from the past. The transition of artistic media to the internet parallels that of printed works with the invention of the printing press, which provided a readily available means for transcription of oral and manuscript tradition. Websites such as YouTube continue this evolution and shift in cultural form. Regardless of the technical means, our culture can endure and thrive through the internet, since the premise of appropriation still expresses the transient identity of a collective culture. Much like Archbishop Hoban's lip dub, the internet and its amateur content hold the potential to represent a celebration of humanity and diversity of character.

### **Works Cited (Annotated)**

Collins, S. (2014). YouTube and limitations of fair use in remix videos. *Journal of Media Practice*, 15(2), 92-106.

Collins discusses YouTube's struggle to distinguish fair use from copyright violation. With regards to copyright infringement cases, Collins observes that YouTube aggressively censors derivative content on behalf of the original owners, who seek to prevent monetization of any appropriations. This approach indiscriminately censors material protected by fair use, resulting in numerous lawsuits attempting to differentiate between protected and illegal content. Collins notes that this dispute, a contest between traditional industries fighting for exclusive rights to content and amateur users reacting to the content artistically and socially, still requires a solution that balances freedom of speech with protection of media ownership.

Fagerjord, A. (2010). After Convergence: YouTube and Remix Culture. In J. Hunsinger (ed.), *The international handbook of internet research*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Fagerjord identifies YouTube and the internet as the end of cultural convergence, the collection of cultural content in a singular database, and the beginning of remixing due to the ease with which the tools necessary to download and edit content can be obtained. According to Fagerjord, this new genre facilitated by YouTube encourages individual creativity and generates new works of art that give the amateur user a voice on the internet. It also preserves and restates the value of third-party content through rip culture.

Hilderbrand, L. (2007). YouTube: Where Cultural Memory And Copyright Converge. *Film Quarterly*, 61(1), 48-57.

Hilderbrand discusses how the web video demographic on YouTube and "the culture of the clip" represent a merging of traditional media with amateur internet user practices, often leading to fair use disputes. He divides YouTube content into three categories: original, adaptive, and copied. The latter two categories bring into question the extent of fair use on YouTube, which Hilderbrand believes should reflect the Supreme Court's ruling on recording material instigated by the rise of VCRs.

Keen, A. (2007). The Noble Amateur. In *The Cult of the Amateur: How today's internet is killing our culture* (pp. 35-63). New York, NY: Doubleday/Currency.

In chapter 2 of *The Cult of the Amateur*, Keen discusses the threat to intellectualism and objectivity posed by the rise of the internet amateur and the loss of content ownership. He argues that by placing information in the hands of the average internet user, society loses the authority and input of experts and 'cultural gatekeepers,' thereby diluting the quality of collective knowledge. In his opinion, increased accessibility and power of information through media such as Wikipedia and blogs accelerate the generation of subjective and substandard material. Keen also suggests that along with general knowledge, intellectual property and art stand to suffer from subjective parsing and mediocre amateur takeover due to accessibility and loss of possession.

Mattson, K. (2011). Paying the Piper: Is Culture Ever Free? *Dissent*, 58(2), 69-73.

Mattson discusses the economic implications of "free culture" as promoted and demanded by illegal content sharing online. Mattson notes that producers of culture suffer online due to free and easy access of information and lack of monetary compensation available for material provided. He argues that the internet lacks the stability necessary for long term cultural production, reducing cultural quality overall.

Muller, S. [CrashCourse]. (2015, April 23). Introduction to Intellectual Property. Crash Course IP 1 [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQOJgEA5e1k>

In this introduction to intellectual property, Muller defines and discusses its parameters as outlined by copyright law. He discusses the origin of the phrase "Information wants to free," the rallying cry behind fair use of third-party content. Muller identifies the growing tension between content generators and digital advocates due to intellectual property, a concept that gets harder to regulate as technology advances and control over content lessens due to accessibility.

Seidenberg, S. (2009). Copyright in the Age of You Tube. *ABA Journal*, 95(2).

Seidenberg discusses the implications of fair use online and the difficulty behind identifying and removing illicit content. Using *Lenz vs. Universal Music Group* as an example of the fine line between infringement and fair use, Seidenberg observes that traditional media (“media” is a plural noun) attempt to attack copyright infringements on an individual level using automated systems that frequently flag fair-use-protected videos. Since attacking individual cases proves fruitless and the content can be downloaded and reposted elsewhere, large media companies have turned to attacking the companies, such as YouTube, that act as facilitators of these illicit exchanges.

### **Works Consulted**

Copyright Law of the United States of America. (n.d.). Retrieved March 24, 2015, from <http://www.copyright.gov/title17/92chap1.html#107>

Jones, A. (2007, November 1). YouTube's Legal Issues Grow. *EContent*.

McIntosh, J. (2013, January 8). Buffy vs Edward Remix Unfairly Removed by Lionsgate. Retrieved March 24, 2015, from <http://www.rebelliouspixels.com/2013/buffy-vs-edward-remix-unfairly-removed-by-lionsgate>

Pike, G. (2007). Google, YouTube, Copyright, and Privacy. *Information Today* 24(4), 15-16. Rosenbaum, S. (2012). Unfair use? *Columbia Journalism Review*, 51(2), 35-36.