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Clea Patrick

Leah Hollis

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Contentious Cloud Chatter: A Comparative Analysis of Aggressive Speech

Clea Patrick

Leah Hollis

Abstract

This essay argues that while harassment and aggression are continually present in the postmodern cyberspace age, such behaviors have been present within humanity throughout both modern and postmodern periods. During modernity, a privileged few controlled expression and aggression. However, the postmodern period's fractured state, which often sidesteps empathy and human frailty, has unleashed largely unfettered aggression *en masse* on the Internet. In short, many, not a privileged few, express aggression. This essay will consider some historical examples of controlled aggression in the modern period. Then the essay will compare how postmodern aggression is more prolific, as the public must witness and participate in aggressive, constant self-expression.

Communication controls civilization, its rules and structures. Gurevitch and Blumler (1990) remarked that communication was structured by a few media outlets and manipulated by a web of powerful political and economic influences. Consequently, communication, regardless of its modality, has a significant influence on the governance of society, contemporary activities, and the socialization of its citizens. Historically, those in power shape the style, tone, and mode of communication. The evidence of the power and privilege in controlling communication is best shown in the grand scale of communication through national broadcasts, newspaper editors, and other traditional gatekeepers of news and entertainment.

Thinkers such as Locke, Rousseau, and Hobbes considered the rights of the individual straining within the aggression of sovereign or presumably divine power structures (Dubas, Dubas, & Mehta, 2014; Hicks, 2004). In modernity, the general population sought intellectual advice, empowering and recognizing those with presumed intellectual superiority, like lords, bishops, and even chiefs and medicine men in some cultures. Some people turned to the church for centralized authority, and others turned to the individual who had amassed the most wealth, often accumulated through the taxation of lower classes. Rousseau and Voltaire used reason to ponder political and philosophical problems. Modernism championed scientific and technological advances, which were structured and centered with specific reason and process; postmodern thinking welcomed that which was out of bounds, steeped in anarchy, and amorously decentered (Powell, 2007). Hence, the right to free speech, the pursuit of happiness and other individual rights burgeoned forth against modernity's formal structures of sovereignty.

Modernity

Modern ideology waned at the beginning of the nineteenth century. One of the more salient markers of the shift in ideology came following the First World War with Yeats' 1919 poem, *The Second Coming*. Yeats wrote that "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold," (Yeats, 2003, p. 10), signaling a decentering or erosion of society and civilization (Dean, 1995; Harrison, 1995). Postmodern scholars such as Foucault (1988) and Derrida (1994) noted this fragmentation and forecast a center-less society, one no longer totally managed by the church or other formal structures. The center of authority and power had shifted, or perhaps disintegrated. Privileges were no longer centralized among a favored few. Instead, power and authority flourished among the citizens of most civilizations, emerging from a social structure and the cultural expectations of the many (Heizman & Olsson, 2015).

Arguably, when comparing modern and postmodern communications, one might consider the focus on the individual -- that is, individualism -- as the new center of this center-less postmodernism. Such individualism would lead to more aggression, harassment, and violence. Self-centered ideologies presumably would serve self, not the greater community. In the absence of structure and with the emergence of self, all people could engage in their once suppressed aggression. As postmodernism yielded to the decentralized and individualized, it also yielded to the aggression and dissatisfaction within such individuals. The sovereign who once cultivated the tempered control and structure that harnessed aggression for a powerful few instead became the expression and dissemination of a powerful many. The communication structures, once guided by dominant culture, aristocracy, and the church, were part of a modern concept in which the structures typically silenced and squashed the common man. If such uprising occurred for the common man, modern times would have to thwart the common expression and regain control for those privileged classes who managed the production and dissemination of communication.

Those with Permission

Given this modern frame, we consider those who were permitted to speak without cultural censoring. The historical figures outside of aristocratic bloodline who were permitted expression in Western and other civilizations were politically astute jesters, griots, and social commentators who had tacit permission from a powerful structured establishment. Society allowed such anomalies.

One of those age-old answers from wishful celebrities and rising beauty queens is to bring about world peace, to end aggression and violence. Modernizations and technology were to bring a more peaceful and convenient world. A more hopeful world dawned with the end of the Cold War when the Berlin Wall crashed down; it was a symbol along with a reality for Eastern Europe that everyone could have access to freedom and peace (Shkliarevsky, 2015). The dream for peace was fractured by the shocking violence of September 11, 2001 and the rise of a decentralized and shifting terrorism network. The violence and aggression apparently ever-present arose in another form (Shkliarevsky, 2015).

Whether politics, philosophy, or cultural communication were structured and governed by the church, sovereign despots, or even the chief of a tribe, controlled communication. Civilizations have built and rebuilt structures to control the population's action, thought, social mores, and eventually finances. Though working within such discourse, artists, politicians, and the privileged still operated with these structures. Patterson wrote that "many authors of the seventeenth century, such as Thomas Carew, John Donne, William Shakespeare, and Ben Jonson, used a "highly sophisticated system of oblique communication whereby writers could communicate with readers or audience ... without producing a direct confrontation"(Patterson, 1984, p.45).

An example from the political spheres is the use of fools and jesters in medieval periods who were used to bring levity and political commentary to an otherwise ominous court. One famous court jester, Will Somers, fool for Queen Elizabeth, was praised for capturing the imagination far better than any of his contemporaries or even those who followed. Somers, like other fools, could be "plain" and "tell the truth of purpose" (Welsford, 1935). In addition, this fool apparently could even venture to be facetious, yet he was still accepted into "the companies of all men." Somers was loved by all and summarized as the following:

He was no carry-tale, nor whisperer, nor flattering insinuator, to breed discord and dissension, but an honest plain, down-right, that would speak home without halting, and tell the truth of purpose to pain the devil, so that his plainness mixed with a kind of facetiousness and tartness with pleasantness made him very acceptable into the companies of all men (Welsford, 1935, p. 170).

Somers, within this presumed latitude, was still oppressed within Queen Elizabeth's permission and space. In addition, this fool apparently had been given enough expressive latitude that he could even venture to be facetious, yet he was still accepted into "the companies of all men." These figures of the court were often showered with gifts, money, and the power of unabashed expression. In one instance, a noble threatened a court jester, Archy, with hanging. With a bold confidence, Archy simply replied, "No one has ever heard of a fool being hanged for talking, but many dukes have been beheaded for the insolence" (Welsford, 1935, p.174).

These accounts of Archy align with other scholars who deemed the jester as a subversive character; “They stand at or wholly outside the margin of any organized system while challenging those within to see things differently” (Rosen, 2012, p. 311). In a world where free speech was not an inalienable right, the court jester or fool could speak the truth and be dismissed as an idiot or nonsensical character. He was an entertainer; yet with his foppish wardrobe and ridiculous banter, he had the opportunity to speak the truth (Rosen, 2012).

In *Volpone*, Ben Jonson (1988) utilized these elements and created powerful “fool” characters that signaled the aggression from the masses in a period where the aristocratic were enhancing power. As a part of his household, like a royal court, *Volpone* had three deformed fools. They were Nano the dwarf, Castrone the eunuch, and Androgyno the Hermaphrodite. As characters who are historically able to speak the truth, the three were representative of the man's deformity and aggression. They could speak in a civilization that censored dissenting views.

Dissenting view and disagreement, when couched in comedy and foolishness, was an expression reserved for the court jester. Those within the margins, within the formal structure dare not speak against said structure. Such communications, thoughts, and mores were governed by monarchies. Though the structures squelched and subverted communication, the court jester and fool signified dissenting views that existed under the guise of tomfoolery. The advent of the fool being the unwitting one in the room to talk has continued into postmodern communication.

Not that these figures are truly foolish; to the contrary; they use the guise of being underestimated to say the things that cannot be said or offer the wish and actions that are unheard.

Culture of Communication in Modern Structures

Various cultures also used structures to govern social mores and cultural expectations. The gypsies, descendants of India roaming the European continent, were storytellers and the begging classes. Though poorly treated, often whipped or hanged, they were permitted to engage in palm reading. Other fortunetellers, Moors and Bohemians, transmitted stories and information (Voss, 2011).

African American griots and storytellers also functioned within a structure that quashed direct and transparent communication. Like the aforementioned examples, griots used the fool and trickster image to convey morals and values in a situation that overtly limited open communication.

Slave masters took pain-staking precautions to prevent communication amongst slaves. For example, African people, even of different languages and dialects, could communicate across miles via the “talking drums” that were used to announce harvest time, worship, weddings, funerals, and to call warriors to battle. Hence, once Africans arrived in America, slave masters, to control the slaves, outlawed their use of drums. These slave masters realized the significance of the drum and the potential danger inherent in the ability to communicate (Harding, 1983, p. 27). Operating quietly within the controlling hegemonic culture, griots or storytellers remained as centralized communication figures operating with a restricted space.

Whether through the playwrights, dwarfs, gypsies, Bohemians, the court jesters, or griots, these forms of communication and entertainment were bound by a structure. A dominant expectation continued regardless of the culture operating within the centralized dominant structure. Both the Enlightenment, which sought to eradicate myths with reason and the subsequent modernity, which relied upon the creation and building of a new structure to replace a mythical one, needed structure. Nonetheless, lurking beneath both Enlightenment and Modernity structures were the aggressions of the commoners. Revolution, spawned by the aggression of underclasses, was an attempt to equalize access and resources reserved for privileged classes. Revolutionaries were active in striving past group oppression, imposed by monarchies, and formalized structures.

Controlling the Narrative

An example of controlled speech and suppressed aggression of the masses is woven into the United States industrialized development that simultaneously oppressed scores of disenfranchised people. Whether it was the government taking Native Americans’ land through a trail of tears, abuse of Chinese immigrants, or the Jim Crow south, the United States historically ignored the individual civil liberties for people without means or upward mobility. Women also toiled in sweatshops with unsafe conditions, working long hours with meager wages (Takaki, 2001). Those being removed, imprisoned, or impoverished seldom had a voice to resist, even as they sought to build mechanisms that would facilitate such.

However, in contrast, in this same historical era, the national leadership offered a controlled narrative of the universal nature of the United States, erasing the differences that underpinned disenfranchised experiences. Thus, Franklin Delano Roosevelt wrote in his 1920 campaign speech in Seattle Washington:

There is, after all, very little difference between us Americans, no matter from which state we come. It is something for us to be very thankful for that we have not merely a common language, but that we have also the same general standards in life and the same ideals of thought. It makes very little difference whether one is in the manufacturing districts of the Middle West, or in the grain fields of the Dakotas, or in the mining camps of Montana, or in extraordinary rich valleys of your own State... in all of these parts, we find the same type of rugged forward-thinking Americans... (Roosevelt, 1920, p. B).

While Roosevelt was beloved as one of the great American presidents, his speech truly ignored the racial and socioeconomic diversity facing America at that time. At no time was America homogenously comprised of “the same type of rugged forward-thinking Americans.” For example, the 1919 race riots in East St. Louis were sparked by racism and labor conflict, when white factory workers were angry with black factory workers migrating north for jobs (McLaughlin, 2007).

Further, immigrant women were crammed into deplorable sweatshops with horrible work conditions. “We are so crowded together that there is not an inch of space...The machines are so close together, there is no way to escape in case of immergansie [sic]” (Glenn, 1981, p. 138-139). In March of 1911, a tragic emergency occurred at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, trapping over 800 women. One hundred and forty-six died, mostly Jewish and Italian immigrants (Takaki, 1993). In a third example, in 1934, President Roosevelt signed the Indian Reorganization Act, which the Navaho tribe met with opposition. Even though the Indian Reorganization Act presumably returned tribal authority to the Indian people, 172 tribes voted for the act, and 73 tribes such as the Navajos voted against it (Takaki, 1993). The Navajos, for example, wanted to control their own decisions regarding livestock and their way of life. These voices outside the dominant culture are just a few examples of the diversity of Americans who were obscured by national expansion and industrialization. Those in leadership, with privilege and resources, controlled communication and what was acceptable in the relocation and reallocation of the human experience.

Those disenfranchised in modern society were without voice or access to readily express their opinions. Now, in a postmodern society, they do have unprecedented opportunity to wield once concealed aggression through cyberspace. The postmodern public has access to the same acts and speech and verbal aggression formerly reserved in the public spaces for dukes and knights. Previously, aggression had been managed; aggressions that would strive to maintain structures of power were permitted. Not only has the center eroded, but the formal structure is gone as well. Equal opportunity to express and achieve is considered a right (Hollis, 1998). Anyone can write – publish, tweet, “friend,” or post; the postmodern modes of communication are not controlled, but instead are available for everyone’s participation, good or bad.

Postmodern Aggression

In postmodern civilization, the individual is freer, with more access to communicate and express malcontent; hence, aggression, bullying, badgering and harassment that were once curtailed and reserved for those in power instead now are free and more readily available for public consumption. The postmodern application is the individual striving against various establishments. This presents a fractured decentralized cacophony of voices on the Internet.

The Internet, Snapchat, email, blogs, Facebook, and Twitter give an unrestricted voice to civilians in this postmodern civilization, voices that were once silenced in modern structures. Blumler and Kavanaugh (1999) commented that communication is less structured, more accessible, and turbulent; it is more difficult to control. A revised discussion on aggressive communication and analysis shows the fragmented shift of postmodernism. Communication has become uncentered and defragmented, allowing aggression to emerge from all people, not just the aristocrats. Centuries of silence have not made civilization less aggressive.

Kurth (2013) wrote of the historical decline in faith, a decline foretold by modern scholars such as Weber and Freud. Specifically, Nietzsche announced that “God is dead,” an idea forecasting how science and pursuit of knowledge would change the center. Mankind’s secular pursuits lead to what Wilson (1999) denotes as God’s funeral. Secular thinking eroded faith. To Eberstadt (2013) the erosion of faith harms the patriarchal family unit and the decline of the faith is connected to the decline in the family (Kurth, 2013, p. 481).

Breaking from modernist philosophies, which relied on the church and formal structures at the center of thinking, postmodern thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, Fish, and Lacan advanced the concept that civilization and its structures have been exploded and disintegrated (Hicks, 2004). The individual prevailed without power structures and conventions. As Fish wrote, this thought “Relieves me of the obligation to be right... and demands only that I be interesting” (Fish, 1980, p. 192). These postmodern philosophers and contemporary thinkers have a general suspicion of reason and an acute sensitivity to ideologies gaining political power. Such postmodern ideas have challenged the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries that were on the wane in the twentieth century. Postmodern thinking did not align well with previous conventions of reasoned knowledge, religion, and science. Instead, the church, monarchies and other formal conventions lost footing in civilization through independent human beings telling society how to think, instead of powerful aristocratic society telling individuals how to think.

This fracturing advanced the notion that the ideas such as truth, justice, reason, and equality were merely facades built on myth. “Truth is a myth; Reason a white male Eurocentric construct, equality is a mask of oppression” (Hicks, 2004, p. 20). Postmodern discussions on peace and progress are instead reflections of the power structures that oppressed individual ideas (Hicks, 2004).

Postmodernism is absent of community and continuity; instead, it is about the individual self (McCarthy, 2003). Perhaps society has moved from the adage of “all for one and one for all” to instead considering every man for himself. O’Dea (2015) reflected on the nebulous postmodern period in civilization which allows for people to experience and witness violence with more intensity and frequency. Unlike in the Enlightenment period and modernist period, the average person in this postmodern civilization has more access and opportunity for free speech, and more access to the opportunity to express aggression and dissent.

Within the postmodern rupture of the religious and ideological center, individuals flooding the public discourse undermine and eroded civilization’s formal scaffolding. People are apparently not governed by a sense of the social mores, commonly held values, or expectations for decorum. Further, within this milieu of mixed sensibilities, anyone can write, publish; tweet, or post, because the postmodern civilization is the dawn of *en masse* yet individualized engagement, regardless of one’s pedigree or political affiliation.

Resentment Theory

Society has experienced strain, with a growing population seeking safety and security amidst constantly changing environments. Economic change and the recent recession have challenged civilization with higher rates of unemployment, soaring debt, and more poverty. During such periods, the survival of the fittest becomes more acute (Hollis, 2017). Humans become more aggressive, seeking to protect their individual space in the world. Upon reflection, West in many ways was prophetic in his thought about postmodern society. In 1993 he pointed to postmodernism as a crisis; humanity in this period is decentralized, broken up. His foreshowing remarks from the early 1990s told of the impact of automation, one that fragments the human experience. Many industries, whether education, corporate, or medical, have shifted to being more sensitive to market strengths and failures, instead of making humanity the central focus (Elias, 2016; Hollis, 2015; Whittington, 2014).

Close to 25 years later, humanity is indeed more decentralized, with smartphones, emails, and texts, which while convenient, have enabled interpersonal connections and experiences to crumble. The lightning speed in which we can work and produce also can be applied to the lightning speed by which we can torment each other.

With diminished interpersonal connections, it is easier to forget the pain which comes with hastily sending an obnoxious message to a group email or online bulletin board. Regarding this postmodern civilization, Hicks stated, “if you hate someone and want to hurt him, then hit him where it counts” (Hicks, 2004, p. 199). The splintered nature of our postmodern community allows for anonymity and dehumanization; it allows for less accountability because we do not see firsthand the impact of nasty words and insults on our fellows. Instead, the postmodern modalities allow and encourage verbal daggers to be released from behind the sterile computer screen or smartphone.

The scrim of civility and sophistication that was once offered by those wealthy, genteel classes has been eaten away in cyber-bytes on Internet, Snapchat, and Instagram. The proverbial man behind the curtain is gone, the one who used to sanitize or prop up the aggression as necessary evils to save the world. However, behind that same curtain is the fact that aggression is ever present. These high-tech and ever ready electronic structures have a shattered continuum of the frank and transparent for everyday people. The gatekeepers, otherwise known as producers and publishers, no longer block such access to communication.

The Internet: Postmodern Communication Paradigm

Using a Foucaultian lens, power is co-produced in our society, not through multiple and officially elected leaders but through the voice most people have through social media. Social media’s loose organizational structures permit the public to come and go, enter at will, and speak without abandon. Instead of being endorsed by a list of official rules and bylaws, the free flow of membership and social expectations undergird the online culture, not a king banishing those who speak out of turn. This cyber-network built of individuals is empowered by the mass. Power is shared repeatedly when the network retweets and reposts messages. Foucault commented that power and knowledge are extended through the historical and cultural context (Heizmann & Olsson, 2015). The online context empowers everyone.

We would move further to say that aggression is also accepted and extended through the postmodern historical context online. The many, not the privileged few, set the terms of acceptability, civility, and the inappropriate.

Consequently, aggression is not wrapped in the cloak of national security or some rationale that it supports a greater good. Instead, aggression from the public is unadulterated, raw, and even anonymous. Nonetheless, as the examples in this essay contend, aggression has been there all along; the Internet is just a release valve from which aggressive steam and *angst* emerge. Regarding aggression and bullying, such behavior is more pervasive in the postmodern Internet given this free play of contentious chatter in the cloud.

Postmodern Internet activity has led to the transparent participation of anyone with a smartphone, laptop, or tablet. In turn, the Internet is now a tool for protest, aggression, and bullying. Cyber-aggression and bullying include the unauthorized use of people's images and likeness, revenge pornography, the release of private information, and even false online accounts (Gumbus & Meglich, 2013).

Given wider access for all ages, even younger people are subject to human aggression online. "The Internet poses many risks to children and teens but perhaps the greatest challenge is the ability to be anonymous online. Studies have found that between 8% of teenagers and 18% of middle school children have been victimized by cyberbullies" (Gumbus & Meglich, 2013; Wagner, 2008; Winchester, 2009). Jones (2013) also noted that cyberbullying and aggression bring a new elusive element that was not present with traditional bullying. "Physical bullies got suspended; bathroom walls were cleaned, and offensive material removed. Harassing phone calls could be reported to the police; perpetrator phone numbers could be blocked... [with] cyberbullying the game has changed into one that is not so easily controlled" (Jones, 2013, p. 1).

In contrast, these decentralized voices of the public online can be used for social change (Earl, 2006). Several researchers have noted that the Internet gives voice to the people to bring change, whether it is dealing with social unrest in Asia (Wong, 2001), or advocating for Mexican rain forests (Garrido & Halavais, 2003; Kreimer, 2001; Martinez-Torres, 2001), the decentralized voice of the people can be harnessed through website and cyberspace to create petitions and spark boycotts (Earl, 2006). Open access is a double-edged sword, allowing both for advocacy and aggression.

Currently, church structures have a much-diminished influence. The same applies to remaining monarchy structures and family storytellers. The Internet is now the fractured structure, the storyteller, the powerful tool for the public to use and abuse. The Internet is the conveyor and transmitter. The Internet is the storyteller with critical elements distilled to sound bites or tweets of 140 characters or less. It is a vehicle granting more access. Yet, such brevity on the Internet still allows for an unadulterated expression. These trends of self-expression, aggression, and harassment are evolving so quickly that laws and legislation cannot keep up with the latest transgressions in flaming, harassment, trolling or revenge pornography (Hollis, 2016). In short, aggression, bullying, and harassment have been with civilization all along; however, society is still learning how to manage uncontrolled freedom of expression. Beyond stating this obvious point, we argue that it is the postmodern expurgation of structure, whether it was good, bad or indifferent, that allows more citizens in various civilizations to regularly voice malcontent.

In the postmodern age of self, the aggression that has been simmering below the surface and structure has minimal constraints. Postmodern society has very little empathy, the capacity to get in touch with the anxieties and frustrations of others (West, 1993, p. 5).

The disconnectedness of the Internet and other cyber modalities separates humans from other humans. Bullying, harassment, and aggression blossom when individuals, although members of a society, are often disconnected from humanity.

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