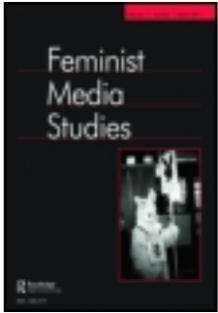


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“YOUR A UGLY, WHORISH, SLUT”

Understanding E-bile

Emma A. Jane

In recent years, the mainstream media has identified on-line vitriol as a worsening problem which is silencing women in public discourse, and is having a deleterious effect on the civility of the public cybersphere. This article examines the disconnect between representations of “e-bile” in media texts, and representations of e-bile in academic literature. An exhaustive review of thirty years of academic work on “flaming” shows that many theorists have routinely trivialized the experiences of flame targets, while downplaying, defending, and/or celebrating the discourse circulated by flame producers. Much contemporary scholarship, meanwhile, ignores e-bile completely. My argument is that this constitutes a form of chauvinism (in that it disregards women’s experiences in on-line environments) and represents a failure of both theoretical acuity and nerve (given that it evades such a pervasive aspect of contemporary culture). The aim of this paper is not only to help establish the importance of on-line vitriol as a topic for interdisciplinary scholarly research, but to assist in establishing a theoretical problematic where what is seen is barely regarded as a problem. Overall, my argument is that—far from being a technology-related moral panic—e-bile constitutes a field of inquiry with a pressing need for recalibrated scholarly intervention.

KEYWORDS computer-mediated communication; flaming; trolling; cyberbullying; misogyny

Your a ugly, whorish, Slut. I hope someone slaps the fuck out of you and spits in the face ... Your nothing more than an easy little cum dumpster. (Post on the question and answer social media page *Formspring* [2011])

Shut the fuck up you fucking ugly OLD wowser cunt. You need a good stiff cock shoved down your throat if you ask me. (E-mail sent to the Australian children’s advocate Julie Gale, cited in Jackman [2011])

I hope you get raped in your *sshole and eyeballs until you bleed to death. (Post on the conservative website *MoFo Politics* [f u commenting on *Mofo Politics* (2011)])

Introduction

Hateplay? Rapeglish? Signviolence? This paper endeavours to establish a field of inquiry for an object of analysis that is difficult to name—although such discourse has been variously referred to in scholarly and popular literature as, among other things, “flaming,”

“trolling,” and “cyberbullying.” Here, I will be using the term “e-bile” to describe the extravagant invective, the sexualized threats of violence, and the *recreational nastiness* that have come to constitute a dominant tenor of Internet discourse. My case is that a new descriptor is required in order to gather under one heading a variety of denunciatory forms that share characteristic, signal features and so demand a broad field of inquiry—one that is able to gather ostensibly variegated speech acts into a specific yet widely conceived theoretical reflection. While it is the burden of this essay to bear this claim out, for counsel as to how the reader might approach the analysis, consider: the flamboyant demands for the neutering or killing of the parents of the perpetrators—and indeed the victims—of violent crime; the garishly punctuated threats to torture, rape, and execute media commentators of both genders; the suggestion that a high profile sexual assault victim is a “conceited bitch” for considering herself even remotely “rapeable” (Jackman 2011); the posting of pornographic images and sexually explicit and/or abusive comments on the memorial web pages for murdered children. Toxic and often markedly misogynist e-bile no longer oozes only in the darkest digestive folds of the cybersphere but circulates freely through the entire body of the Internet. This is a condition whose ambit is vast and whose scope and reach seems inversely proportional to its consideration in the scholarly literature.

The type of on-line hostility under discussion here is usually designated in academic research as “flaming,”¹ which, over the past thirty years, has been addressed by a large number of scholars from a near-equally large range of disciplines. This literature can be periodized in terms of three paradigmatic waves.² The first involves disagreements about technological determinism, the second concerns debates over definitions, and the third argues for the extinguishing of the term “flaming” or ignores the phenomenon altogether. It is telling that, in three decades of research, the fiercest academic heat has been generated around the issue of how to *define* flaming, while the ethics and ramifications of such speech acts have been largely ignored. (An exception is when e-bile is called “cyberbullying,” although this term is generally deployed quite narrowly—often referring to very specific bullying incidents in educational settings or among young populations only—and therefore fails to capture the larger discursive mode under discussion in this article.)

A substantial sub-sector of academic literature on flaming reads as a defensive response to what is often framed as media sensationalism. Scholars frequently dismiss media concerns about Internet-related issues as “moral panics”³ (a term which, despite describing a tightly delineated pattern of reaction sequence and media amplification, is often used interchangeably with the notion of a media “beat up”). My own research, however, suggests that, far from inventing or exaggerating the problem of on-line vitriol (as per the accepted *modus operandi* of a moral panic), mainstream and new media outlets have done a better job than academics at identifying and assessing the convergence, mainstreaming, and ramifications of on-line invective. As such, my intention is not to examine media representations of on-line vitriol for their own sake, but as pre-theoretical attempts to grapple with the features and ethical and cultural significance of a discursive mode which has the potential to pose serious ethical and material threats. Ultimately, my case is that this discourse cannot be properly addressed in a material sense until it is adequately conceptualized, and that—contrary to the contentions of previous scholarship—the most theoretically commodious way to conceptualize e-bile is as an emergent field of inquiry. To put it another way: in order to *theorize* e-bile, we have to be able to *conceptualize* it; and both these moves are necessary before we are able to canvas material interventions such as policy and educational initiatives.

Recreational Nastiness

While much academic work on flaming has involved impossibly narrow definitions, my concept of e-bile is sufficiently broad in order to bring into the ambit of my analysis a variety of related phenomena that are sometimes—mistakenly, in my view—differentiated with high neo-scholastic attention to minutiae. Here I am using the term to refer to any text or speech act which relies on technology for communication and/or publication, and is perceived by a sender, receiver, or outside observer as involving hostility. I will explain and justify the broadness of this working definition—as well as locating it theoretically—later in this paper. Presently, I will describe some characteristics of and examples of e-bile based on my textual analysis of a large archive of material collected from a range of Anglophone sources between 1999 and 2012. My citing of uncensored e-bile in the examples that follow represents a deliberate strategy to speak of the ostensibly unspeakable so as not to perpetrate—and thus perpetuate—the tyranny of silence about the sexually explicit nature of this material. On a related, albeit less political note, I have decided against the use of “sic” after grammatical and spelling errors in quoted e-mails and on-line material in recognition of the informalities of expression commonly found in these contexts.

E-bile occurs in a wide range of contexts ranging from individual exchanges via private e-mail accounts, to wide publication via websites and social media networks. It involves an extensive variety of interlocutors who may post anonymously, quasi-anonymously⁴ or in a manner which renders authors identifiable. Despite their spread across ostensibly disunited communicational contexts, these vitriolic communications have a multitude of commonalities that cumulatively constitute an analysable whole. We can see, for instance that the rhetorical constructs of individual e-bile texts are strikingly similar in terms of their reliance on profanity, *ad hominem* invective, and hyperbolic imagery of graphic—often sexualized—violence. Such aggression sometimes manifests as a direct threat, but most commonly appears in the form of hostile wishful thinking, such as “I hope you get raped with a chainsaw” (cited in Doyle 2011). Gender stereotypes abound. E-bile targeting women commonly includes charges of unintelligence, hysteria, and ugliness; these are then combined with threats and/or fantasies of violent sex acts which are often framed as “correctives.” Constructions along the lines of “what you need is a good [insert graphic sexual act] to put you right” appear with such astounding regularity, they constitute an e-bile meme.⁵ Female targets are dismissed as both unacceptably unattractive man haters *and* hypersexual sluts who are inviting sexual attention or sexual attacks. E-bile aimed at men, meanwhile, commonly impugns their masculinity via derogatory homophobia or the suggestion that they suffer some kind of micropenile disorder; they have, in other words, vanishingly small penises. If aesthetic criticisms are involved, they usually take the form of attacks on the physical appearance of male targets’ female partners or family members.

While e-bile has a number of distinctly gendered dimensions, both the authors and targets of e-bile cross all manner of political divides: this is not a campaign engineered by the Right against the Left or vice versa. (In fact, claims of having been the target of Internet-related death threats have been deployed—in an arguably strategic manner—by activists on both sides of the climate change debate [*Media Watch* 2012].) E-bile episodes may be triggered by disagreements over divisive subjects such as politics, religion, or sexual preference, but participants rarely engage substantively with each other’s positions. Instead, the first and final move is almost always an *ad hominem*. E-bile episodes in public

on-line spaces often manifest in a series of mimetic exchanges between participants whose interactions escalate; sometimes because they are in bitter dissent, sometimes because they are in savage agreement.⁶ Once again, the point is rarely about winning an argument via the deployment of coherent reasoning, so much as a means by which discursive volume can be increased—e-bile is utilized, in other words, to out-shout everyone else.

In trolling communities e-bile producers often boast of their exploits and openly say they are enjoying themselves. A supposedly “legendary” troll called Weev, for instance, boasts to the media about his ability to make “people afraid for their lives” (cited in Schwartz 2008). Even when e-bilers do not explicitly admit to gaining pleasure from their activities, the enthusiastic derision and counter-derision evident in their back-and-forthing suggests many participants relish these stichomythic exchanges. In such cases, e-bile appears to be a pleasurable—albeit competitive—game, in which players joust to produce the most creative venom, break the largest number of taboos, and elicit the largest emotional response in targets. Thus, what looks like hate speech might better be classed as “boredom speech” or “gaming speech.” This does not, however, render such recreational nastiness (a) ethically unproblematic, (b) innocuous to targets, or (c) unthreatening to the broader ideals of civility and democratic inclusivity.

E-bile in the Mainstream Media

On-line hostility has been addressed by the international mass media in reports on issues such as: cyberbullying; on-line racism, homophobia, religious prejudice, and cultural intolerance; and trolling. One version of the latter is a practice known colloquially as “RIP trolling” (in which Facebook memorial sites are vandalized with pornographic images and/or explicit or offensive comments). Most recently, mainstream media commentators have begun linking what has previously been framed as disconnected manifestations of hateful speech on the Internet, warning of a more general on-line “age of rage” (Adams 2011). A typical observation is that the Internet has become a place where “even the meekest of people” have become “ground-shaking titans” who “crusade and burn and unleash hell on . . . imaginary enemies” in “all-caps rants” (Tin 2012). While some of this mass media rhetoric is obviously hyperbolic, my research confirms the gist of these assessments: on-line hostility is getting more prevalent, it is getting uglier, and it has a number of distinctly gendered characteristics.

Space prohibits an exhaustive survey of examples of all the media texts mentioned in the previous paragraph, but I will offer a brief summary of a particularly relevant cluster of 2011 articles from Anglophone on- and off-line media sources, in order to venture an argument about on-line vitriol: its ambit, tenor, and paradigmatic targets. In February 2011, for instance, an internationally syndicated *New York Times* column by Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Maureen Dowd discussed the new media invective directed at CBS television reporter Lara Logan after Logan was beaten and sexually assaulted by a mob in Cairo’s Tahrir Square (2011). Dowd notes a comment from the conservative blog *MoFo Politics* which reads, “OMG if I were [Logan’s] captors and there were no sanctions for doing so, I would totally rape her” (cited in Dowd 2011). Dowd also points to New York journalist and NYU academic Nir Rosen’s tweeted suggestions: that Logan may have wanted to be sexually assaulted to increase ratings; that sympathy for Logan was misdirected because she was “a major war monger”; and that the assault was “funny” (cited in Dowd 2011).

In Australia, meanwhile, a nationally published magazine article refers to the case of Nina Funnell—an Australian academic who had previously spoken publically about having been sexually assaulted at knifepoint (Jackman 2011). In this article, Funnell reveals that her public discussion of the attack had prompted derogatory on-line jokes about her “rapeability” (cited in Jackman 2011). These included comments such as “what a conceited bitch for thinking she is even worthy of being raped. The guy just probably wanted to give her a good bashing in which case job well done” (cited in Jackman 2011). Another interviewee in this article, the founder of an Australian children’s advocacy group, reports receiving similar e-mails after appearing on a national television programme. One of these reads:

Shut the fuck up you fucking ugly OLD wowser cunt. You need a good stiff cock shoved down your throat if you ask me. What’s the matter? Were you the ugly fat flat chested girl at school? Why don’t you shut you fucking cunt mouth? . . . I’m going to a brothel tonight, and I’ll be selecting the whore who most looks your age (cited in Jackman 2011).

In the *Independent* in the UK, journalist and blogger Laurie Penny says she has become fearful about leaving her house after receiving multiple electronic communications which contain, among other things, threats to rape, bash, murder and/or urinate on her (2011). “For criticising neo-liberal economic policymaking,” Penny writes, “it was suggested I should be made to fellate a row of bankers” (2011). A follow-up feature in the British newspaper the *Observer* agrees that “[c]rude insults, aggressive threats and unrelenting ridicule” has become “business as usual in the world of website news commentary,” and that the frequency of violent on-line invective levelled at female commentators is “causing some of the best known names in journalism to hesitate before publishing their opinions” (Thorpe & Rogers 2011). In other UK media outlets, female writers say they routinely receive e-mails calling them “ugly” and “disgusting,” and threatening sexual attacks such as gang and anal rape (cited in Lewis-Hasteley 2011). One of the supposedly milder e-mails received by a feminist activist and comedian calls her a “TRASH TALKING K*NT” who should have “HER F*CKING, TONGUE RIPPED OUT OF HER SUCK-HOLE” (cited in Lewis-Hasteley 2011). A number of female commentators say they have received threatening correspondence indicating a knowledge of personal details such as the addresses of their home and workplace (cited in Lewis-Hasteley 2011).

These—and numerous other first-hand accounts in both mainstream and new media fora—offer good evidence to support the contention that a great many women in the public domain (including those whose public profile does not extend beyond a low-key blog or occasional tweet) are being subjected to high levels of on-line hostility. Such discourse has become normalized to the extent that threatening rape has become the *modus operandi* for those wishing to critique female commentators. It is important, however, to note here that e-bile, including sexualized e-bile, is also directed at men. An example is the third quote listed at the start of this article. “I hope you get raped in your *sshole and eyeballs until you bleed to death,” is addressed to a male commentator on *MoFo Politics* by an author identifying herself as a woman (f u commenting on *MoFo Politics* [2011]). This woman says she enjoys “trolling rape apologists” on the site. There is also the case of Richard Glover, a prominent Australian newspaper columnist, radio broadcaster, and author, who found himself at the receiving end of a flood of venomous, sometimes sexualized, cyber-vitriol after writing a piece on climate change (2011a). Over the course of just a few days, he received more than 2,400 mostly antagonistic e-mails. Of these, he says:

"[Q]uite a few threaten me with sexual violence. They say, in various forms, that they want to rape me" (2011b).

With respect to gender, we can see, therefore, that e-bile does have some "equal opportunity" aspects. That said, both mainstream media reports and scholarly research show that women are more likely to be the targets and less likely to be the authors of this type of discourse.⁷ While there have been a number of high-profile cases of boys and men who have killed themselves after cyberbullying episodes, there are vast differences in the ways females and males report experiencing on-line threats of rape and violence. Glover, for instance, says the threats of violence "didn't really worry" him (Glover personal communication, 2012) while another male columnist insists that on-line death threats should only change "a few minutes of your morning—the minutes spent hitting delete on your email" (Blair 2012). Internationally syndicated British columnist Brendan O'Neill, meanwhile, argues that crudeness and personal attacks are simply part of the Internet experience (2011).

Women who have been targeted by e-bile, on the other hand, generally report that the experience has been upsetting in various ways. They describe emotional responses ranging from feelings of irritation, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, vulnerability, and unsafeness; to feelings of distress, pain, shock, fear, terror, devastation, and violation (see Doyle [2011], Elliott [2011], Jackman [2011], Lewis-Hasteley [2011], Penny [2011], and smith [2011], and multiple comments in response to smith [2011]). Some women say they have begun censoring themselves, or have switched to anonymous commenting only (see multiple comments in response to smith [2011], and O'Hagan cited in Lewis-Hasteley 2011). In the most extreme cases, female e-bile targets have withdrawn not only from on-line engagement but from the off-line public sphere as well. In 2007, tech blogger Kathy Sierra made a last-minute decision to cancel a public appearance at a conference because of sexually graphic e-threats including images of her as a sexually mutilated corpse, and posts such as "fuck off you boring slut . . . i hope someone slits your throat and cums down your gob" (cited in Walsh 2007). Sierra's on-line apology to the conference organizers read:

I'm at home, with the doors locked, terrified . . . I have cancelled all speaking engagements. I am afraid to leave my yard, I will never feel the same. I will never be the same (cited in Harris 2007).

The tyranny of silence associated with e-bile has parallels with that associated with off-line sexual abuse. Many female commentators report feeling reluctant to speak openly about receiving sexually explicit on-line vitriol, and hesitant to admit to finding such discourse unsettling. Speaking out, they say, risks accusations that they lack humour, are weak or thin-skinned, or are opposed to the principles of free speech (cf. Evans 2011; Penny 2011). (This, in fact, is precisely the criticism levelled at "peculiarly sensitive female bloggers" by O'Neill, who embarks on some name-calling of his own by denouncing those feminist and female bloggers concerned about rape threats as "fragile," "hilarious," and Orwellian [2011].) Other female targets of e-bile report feeling: reluctant to give the authors of these texts the "satisfaction" of knowing they have been emotionally affected by the abuse; concerned that articulation of the problem will discourage other women from participating in public life; and/or afraid of incurring more vitriol, having their websites hacked, or of placing themselves in material danger if they speak out (cf. Evans 2011; Gale cited in Jackman 2011; Tankard Reist cited in Jackman 2011; Lewis-Hasteley 2011; Smith 2011).

In conclusion, we can see that the large number of mainstream and new media accounts of on-line hostility make a convincing case for e-bile's increasing prevalence, as well as its social noxiousness. Given (a) the mainstream acceptance of gender equity ideals, (b) the general repugnance for (and in many cases the legal prohibition of) hate speech, and (c) the Internet's dominant role in contemporary sociocultural contexts, we could reasonably expect a substantial scholarly consideration of the topic. Such a body of literature certainly exists, but many of its contributing authors have preoccupations—perhaps even agendas—which have resulted in a set of e-bile-related texts very different to those extant in the mainstream and new media.

E-bile in Theory

The type of discourse I am designating as “e-bile” has been addressed in a great deal of academic work over the past thirty years. As with mass media reports, it has come under the ambit of what has been referred to as (among other things) “cyberviolence,” “cyberbullying,” “trolling,” and—most commonly—“flaming” (see, among a multitude of others, Kiesler, Zubrow, and Moses [1985], Lea, O'Shea, Fung, and Spears [1992], Lee [2005], O'Sullivan and Flanagin [2003], Spears and Lea [1992], and Turnage [2007]). The latter I will now examine in detail by grouping flaming-related literature into three “waves” to reflect thematic similarities as well as, to a lesser extent, temporal overlaps. Many theorists routinely trivialize the experiences of the targets of “flaming” while downplaying, defending, and/or celebrating vitriol producers. As we will see, repeated demands for univocal definitions and one-size-fits-all test mechanisms help explain why research in this area has now all but evaporated. Certainly there is no scholarly work tracking the evolution of e-bile from the occasional, impolite flame in isolated pockets of the cybersphere, to the contemporary proliferation of hyperbolic and sexualized invective saturating the Internet.

Much of the first wave of scholarly writing on flaming—which appeared during the 1980s and 1990s—involves debate about so-called “computer effects” in which researchers argue about whether e-animus is caused by computers or by social contexts (and, by extension, whether on-line hostilities are the same or different to face-to-face varieties) (see Kiesler, Zubrow, & Moses 1985; Lea et al. 1992; Spears & Lea 1992). One of the key, first wave texts rejecting the technological determinist view of flaming is a chapter in *Contexts of Computer-Mediated Communication* (Lea 1992) which contends that “far from being uninhibited and deregulated behaviour that is universally observed” flaming is, in fact “both radically context-dependent and relatively uncommon in CMC” (Lea et al. 1992, 89). Two decades after publication, this text remains influential and widely cited⁸ even though it refers to a very small sample of flaming episodes that, for the most part, occurred in the 1980s—a time when the digital landscape was profoundly different to the contemporary cyber-domain.

The second wave of flaming-related research, published mostly in the early twenty-first century, involves punctilious attempts to formulate a definition of flaming which can account for all possible variations in producer intention, audience reception, outside observer perception, and every participant's individual social context (see Kaufer 2000; O'Sullivan & Flanagin 2003; Turnage 2007). Here, previous research is critiqued for failing to designate flames according to strictly uniform criteria, and complex definitional and standardization rubrics are offered as antidotes. The most well-known and influential of

these rubrics is that proffered by O'Sullivan and Flanagin in a journal article in *New Media & Society* (2003). Their proposal is for an "interactional norm cube" which defines "true" flames only as those on-line (as well as off-line) communications in which the sender's intent is to violate norms *and* both the receiver and a third party observer perceive the message *as* a violation (2003, 80–82). This defies many key tenets of reception theory, and is analogous to insisting that the only "true" meaning of a particular novel is one which is endorsed by the author, all possible readers, and all possible outside observers. Rather than achieving its stated goal of "enabling more accurate assessments of the prevalence, causes, and consequences of" problematic interactions (2003, 84), therefore, the taxonomic demands made by this norm cube are likely to prevent the making of any sort of assessment at all.

The enormity—or, more accurately, the impossibility—of this second wave preoccupation with devising a fail-safe identification device for all on-line hostilities past, present, and future helps explain two of the most prominent characteristics of contemporary scholarly literature on e-bile (and I will use the term "third wave," even though this expression overstates the novelty of the theoretical resources under consideration). One recent approach rejects "that a category of on-line phenomena called 'flames' exists" (Lange 2006), while another ignores on-line invective altogether. Wiley-Blackwell's *The Handbook of Internet Studies* (Consalvo & Ess 2011) makes only passing mentions of flaming and trolling (rather than addressing on-line invective as a legitimate topic in its own right), while Springer's *The International Handbook of Internet Research* (Hunsinger, Klastrop, & Allen 2010) does not mention flaming or trolling at all. Lange, meanwhile, is more explicit in her dismissal of the subject. In the peer-reviewed on-line journal *First Monday*, she rejects the term "flaming" as a "viable metric of online interaction," claiming the expression may have never had any theoretical value, and should be extinguished altogether (2006).

Lange's call, however, for academics to avoid "engaging in a moral categorization that takes sides" risks a moral relativism and scholarly detachment which ignores consideration of *any* of the ethical ramifications of e-bile. It also imagines the Internet as a level playing field in which all interlocutors are equal and voluntary participants in all conversations. Yet what of those female commentators or bloggers living alone who have received rape threats from anonymous posters who make it clear they know their targets' address and children's or pets' names? It seems unlikely that such women would agree with Lange's conclusion that the most pertinent research question to ask about flaming involves "examining how participants invoke supposed local norms to make flame claims and how these claims play a role in ordering participants' micro-social worlds" (2006).

Having looked at the differences between these three waves of flaming-related research, I will now look at their similarities. Scholarly literature on e-bile across the waves often involves a tightly delineated focus and/or very narrow samples, as well as the claim—in relation to possible remedies for flaming—that any degree of Internet censorship poses an unacceptable threat to the principles of free speech. A significant sector of flaming-related literature is geared towards improving on-line learning in educational settings or increasing efficiencies in business, reflecting a focus on the functional and pragmatic aspects of e-bile rather than its ethical ramifications. It is rare for scholarly texts in any area to cite specific examples of explicit e-bile. Instead, most texts refer obliquely to messages that are in "bad taste," and so on (Lea et al. 1992, 90). This failure to provide specific examples of flaming is far more problematic than the lack of a universal definition when it comes to comparing work across research projects. After all, given the subjectivity of a term such as

“bad taste,” it is impossible to know whether researchers are even addressing the same sorts of communication. Certainly there is a vast difference between “you are a jerk” (one of the “impolite statements” Kiesler, Zubrow, and Moses code as uninhibited social behaviour in CMC [1985, 89]) and “Dr. Laura is a stupid cunt and I hope she gets assraped by a gang of n-words ... adios Dr Laura you dripping sack of intestinal pus” (a comment thread on the website for California’s Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival [*Coachella* 2010]).

It is common for scholars to trivialize and downplay e-bile by framing flame producers as misunderstood tricksters or as being engaged in laudable and savvy resistance to mainstream media norms (see Lange 2006; Phillips 2011). As such, many e-bile producers are offered exculpatory opportunities by theorists who argue that flames represent harmless humour, and that recipients should lighten and/or harden up. Certainly those flammers who discuss their vitriolic communications almost invariably claim these are simply jokes that have been misunderstood or taken too seriously. (And we are reminded here of the “harmless prank” defence which is so frequently raised in relation to alleged hate crime or hate speech in off-line contexts.) But the fact that e-bile may amuse its initiators (and even some scholars) does not automatically render it innocuous. Indeed, cruelty couched as humour has the potential to cause additional injury because it delegitimizes the suffering experienced by the target in the first instance, while providing an additional insult in the accusation that the complainant lacks a sense of humour and/or is hypersensitive.

In general, the tone of most academic work on flaming ranges from quiet optimism to out-and-out cheerleading. In *Feminist Media Studies*, for example, Walker argues that “flame wars” in on-line lesbian fan communities are an example of “deliberative democracy in action” and that censoring them “speaks to a lack of democracy in the groups in the enforcement of dominant community mores” (2008, 204). Lee’s view is that flaming may retain elements of harmless ritual, and can be read “in terms of its playfulness and as a sign of affection and trust rather than of hate or hostility” (2005, 401), while Wang enthuses that flaming “educates the ignorant,” “tames the uncouth,” enforces “netiquette,” “promotes good writing and effective communication,” and “scares away commercial advertizing” (1996, 2). A more subtle manifestation of this pro-flaming/pro-flamer bias in academia is evident in the way so many researchers so often “resolve” flaming-related ambiguities in a manner which privileges e-bile authors at the expense of e-bile recipients and audiences. Flaming is difficult to define, so the problem is avoided via the prescription of impossible denominational rubrics or by ignoring it altogether. Flaming’s prevalence is difficult to determine empirically, so scholars offer the optimistic assumption that it is probably less common than previously thought and will probably become even less common in future.

One of the results of all this is an ethically problematic “blame the victim” mentality in scholarship. A survey of the extant literature reveals that e-bile producers are rarely reprimanded for engaging in insensitivity or cruelty, while recipients and outside observers are frequently chastised as hypersensitive or humourless for failing to make the supposedly easy move of reframing a flame as funny, innocuous, or transgressive. In these circumstances it seems the new media user-producer can do no wrong. Given the gendered nature of so much e-bile, this scholarly bias constitutes a reckless indifference to the increasingly hostile and misogynist nature of the cybersphere. It also represents a failure of theoretical acuity and nerve in that it evades such a pervasive aspect of contemporary culture, and fails to address the fact that the agency enjoyed by citizens in their new roles as media user-producers can be used—not only transgressively—but oppressively and injuriously.

While the bulk of research downplays, trivializes, or explicitly celebrates e-bile, there are several researchers who do address on-line hostility as a legitimate problem with serious ramifications. Notable in this regard is the research of Susan C. Herring, who has consistently argued that—as in off-line domains—men are disproportionately the perpetrators and women disproportionately the victims of on-line hostility (see especially Herring 2002; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab 2002). There is also computer scientist Jaron Lanier who contends that the “culture of sadism on-line . . . has gone mainstream” and that trolling⁹ “is not a string of isolated incidents, but the status quo in the online world” (2010, 60). Relevant to note here is the fact that when scholars designate on-line hostility as something other than flaming (when they call it, for instance, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, cyberviolence, cyber rape, trolling, on-line hate speech, on-line sexual harassment, and so on), they are more likely to frame such speech acts as constituting significant problems with serious ethical and material implications. For the most part, however, these terms are used to refer to tightly delineated phenomena and represent only a small sector—rather than the larger whole—of the speech modes under discussion in this article. Overall, my case is that *all* these putative variations in on-line hostilities belong in the field of e-bile and that *all* deserve ethics-related consideration.

E-Bile as a Field

Further research is required to fully investigate the etiological dimensions of e-bile, the ramifications of the increasing prevalence of this type of discourse, and what—if any—interventions may be possible. It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to solve the social and cultural problems posed by e-bile. I do, however, propose a modest first step for addressing the problems associated with e-bile-related research. As we have seen, attempts to settle on a water-tight definition of flaming have failed—not only in their stated goal, but more broadly in terms of advancing productive research into this emergent and increasingly dominant discourse. Earlier in this paper I offered my own, very loose framing of e-bile in order to give readers some idea about the object under analysis. My case, however, is that there is actually no requirement—either methodologically or practically—that a univocal definition of e-bile be furnished. In fact, insisting on such criteria would render almost all objects of sociological and cultural analysis unanalysable. (Imagine, for instance, if all work in the field of “cultural studies” was suspended until scholars could agree on an incontrovertible definition for “culture” and then “studies.”)

Here we are reminded of the “problem of the criterion” addressed in various works by philosopher Roderick M. Chisholm (1966, 1973, 1988). Chisholm discusses this fundamental question of epistemology in *Theory of Knowledge*, where he contrasts two sets of questions: “What do we know?” and “What is the extent of our knowledge”; and “How are we to decide . . . whether we know” or “What are the criteria of knowing?” (1966, 56, emphasis in original). He concludes that if we do not have the answer to the first question, then it would seem we have no way of answering the second—and vice versa (Chisholm 1966). While Chisholm acknowledges that the problem of the criterion is insoluble (1988, 234), he advocates a “particularist” approach in which an epistemological enterprise begins with particular cases (1988, 232). This, he maintains, is superior to the only other options available: methodism (in which one starts with general principles) or scepticism (in which “one doesn’t do anything” at all) (1988). Chisholm’s work shows us the futility of commencing a research project by devising—in advance—a rigid set of necessary and

sufficient conditions which cultural objects must fulfil in order to qualify for analysis. While it may be possible to identify a chemical element such as carbon via this approach, most human categories would be rendered unanalysable. Better progress can be made by beginning with exemplars of what we believe a phenomenon such as e-bile to be, and then building up our knowledge of this phenomenon by extrapolating from these particulars.

Proceeding in this way also shows us—in an insight parallel to the one just ventured—that e-bile is best considered as belonging to a polythetic rather than a monothetic class. The former draws on Wittgenstein's ideas about "family resemblances," which refer to groups whose members have a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" rather than those whose members all have a single something in common ([1953] 1976, 32e). Polythetic arrangements place together group members that have the greatest number of shared features, and no single feature is either essential to group membership or is sufficient to make an organism a member of the group (Bailey 1973, 294).

Further examination reveals that the polythetic class of e-bile has properties which are morphogenetic. As such, the best way to conceptualize this discourse is not so much as a set, but as an *emergent field* whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Cogent, here, is the work of William Hasker who proposes an analogy between the fields of physical science and those in philosophy (1999). Hasker notes that once generated, the magnetic field "exerts a causality of its own, on the magnet itself as well as on other objects in the vicinity" (1999, 190). Fields are produced by generating physical objects, yet are distinct from those objects "as is shown by the fact that the object is sharply localized whereas the field spreads out for an indefinite distance in all directions" (1983, 73).

Thus while individual instances of e-bile communications are themselves something definite, the boundaries of the field of e-bile are not. The former are both cause and effect of the e-bile field, while the latter exerts "its own characteristic influence on whatever lies within its ambit."¹⁰ This is evident in the way e-bile tends to make more of itself. Aside from the fact that the entire *raison d'être* of trolling is to incite a heated response in others (Schwartz 2008), those who are at the receiving end of on-line hostility tend to respond in a similar fashion regardless of whether they are genuinely offended, and/or are simply enjoying the e-bile game, etcetera. Structural aspects of the technological medium are also self-replicating. Google's autocomplete function, for instance, offers a drop-down list of suggested search phrases based on other users' on-line activity—often suggestions which are racist, sexist, or in other ways objectionable (Jane 2011). Computer users can obviously make their own search term decisions, but the whole point of predictive web-ware is to use pre-existing routes to generate more traffic along these same streams.

My proposal is that this broad, blurrily bordered, self-replicating field of e-bile be conceptualized to include practices such as trolling, RIP trolling, cyberbullying, cyberviolence, cyberstalking, cyberhate, "happy slapping,"¹¹ and certain types of hacking, as well as on-line speech acts evincing misogyny, homophobia, racism, religious prejudice, and cultural intolerance. E-bile may circulate as written texts, images, and/or sounds, and may have been intended for one person to read, or many. A unifying feature of these individual texts, however, is that they involve some element of hostility in such forms as harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion, and so on. This hostility may be located in authorial intent, rhetorical construct, audience reception, and/or contextual impact.

Conceptualizing e-bile in such a broad fashion may result in some texts being classified as e-bile when they are not. (Commonly cited arenas of ambiguity include the

genial use of expletives between friends, and the appropriation of offensive colloquialisms such as “queer” or “nigger” within subcultures.) These occasional misclassifications will undoubtedly horrify many authors of flaming-related literature given the extraordinary efforts they have expended to ensure the reverse does not occur. As we have seen, however, many of the definitional rubrics offered by scholars make it not just difficult but impossible for *any* on-line communications to be classified as flames. In contrast, my case is that the risks involved in a small degree of e-bile *overcoding* are far outweighed by the dangers involved in very large amounts of e-bile *undercoding* (the latter, of course, being the situation which is closest to the status quo given that, for the most part, e-bile is not being coded at all).

Conclusion

This paper shows that hyperbolic vitriol—often involving rape and death threats—has become a *lingua franca* in many sectors of cyberspace. It is a commonsensical, even expected, way to, among other things: register disagreement and disapproval; test and mark the boundaries of on-line communities; compete and create; ward off boredom; prod for reaction; seek attention; and/or simply gain enjoyment. Obviously none of these activities and motivations is ethically problematic *a priori*, but when the performance of such acts and the seeking of such discursive pleasures requires that suffering be inflicted on others, the result is a form of textual sadism. On-line hostility can cause targets—particularly female targets—pain and suffering and may result in their withdrawal from the public cybersphere.

In addition to damaging individuals, the unchecked circulation of e-bile has the potential to cause larger harm. By normalizing a hostile and hateful mode of discourse marked by scathing *ad hominem* invective, extravagant misogyny, and hyperbolic threats of (often sexualized) violence, e-bile has the potential to reduce the inclusivity and civility of both on- and off-line cultures. As we know, the Internet and technology-based interactions no longer constitute occasional adjuncts to off-line existence, but have become dominant—and integrated—parts of contemporary existence itself. E-bile can therefore be seen as threatening the realization of broad ideals such as civil discourse, social inclusivity, and democratic engagement. Thus the case for more—and radically different—scholarly research is underpinned by a pressing ethical imperative. This recalibrated academic effort should not proceed via yet another impossible search for a set of objective message characteristics. Instead, e-bile must be conceptualized broadly as an emergent field. This is the only way to adequately assay the etiological and ethical dimensions of e-bile—and from there to canvas the possibility of material interventions and remedies.

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NOTES

1. While definitions vary, “flaming” is usually described as an on-line communication involving hostility, aggression, insults, offensiveness, and so on (Turnage 2007, 2).
2. The term “paradigmatic” here invokes the epistemological idea of Kuhn’s account of scientific change in terms of paradigm shifts (1970).

3. "Moral panic" is the theory that agents and institutions of control, including the media, exaggerate and amplify forms of deviance in order to justify the control of those portrayed as "deviant" (Cohen 2002).
4. I use the term "quasi-anonymously" in recognition of the fact that an on-line identity need not correlate with a computer user's off-line identity in order to be recognizable. It is common, for instance, for created personas to become well-known in certain cyber communities.
5. Coleman defines Internet memes as "viral images, videos, and catchphrases under constant modification by users, and with a propensity to travel as fast as the Internet can move them" (2012, 109).
6. For an example of an e-bile exchange in which hostility increases because of *differing* views, see the comments posted in response to "CBS reporter Lara Logan detained in Egypt" (Mofo Politics 2011). For an example of an e-bile escalation in which participants *agree* with each other, see the comments posted in response to "Cheerleader Falls on her Face in Front of the School" (*Nothing Toxic* 2008).
7. Susan C. Herring—a scholar who has written extensively on gender and on-line hostility—concludes that, as with the off-line world, men are disproportionately the perpetrators and women are disproportionately the victims of on-line hostility (1996, 2002).
8. A search on "Google Scholar" on July 4, 2012 showed that the Lea et al. (1992) chapter had been cited on 386 occasions (see <http://scholar.google.com.au/scholarhttp://scholar.google.com.au/scholar?q=%22flaming%22+in+computer-mediated+communication&btnG=&hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5>).
9. While definitions of "trolls" vary, Lanier uses the term to describe "an anonymous person who is abusive in an online environment" (2010, 60).
10. This quote is from the work of Fleming and O'Carroll on Romanticism (2005).
11. "Happy slapping" refers to the practice of digitally recording assaults on a target and uploading these to the Internet (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston 2012, 67).

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