Bad Guys and Bag Ladies: On the Politics of Polemics and the Promise of Ambivalence

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Abstract
The call for papers suggests a certain “loss of innocence” with regard to how media scholars view the nature of digital technologies and their potential role in societies today. As the editors write, “Just a few years ago, many scholars celebrated digital technology for its potential to flatten hierarchies and strengthen civic life. Today, many of the same observers are writing about the darker sides of digital culture.” While this may be true, given the ways in which digital technologies are pervasively used for surveillance, misinformation and so forth, there is also something to be said about the politics of polemics, of pitching a celebratory account of technology against a supposedly more “critical” one. What I want to do is to take the opportunity offered by this inaugural issue of 2K to reflect on polemics and neatly dressed straw men as rhetorical strategies used in scholarly argumentation. My goal is to argue for the virtue of ambivalence in thinking and writing about the nature of digital technology. Far from being agreeable or a cop-out, the ambivalent position means having to negotiate an ongoing tension without necessarily finding resolution. The kind of ambivalence I have in mind is not about occupying an indifferent position. It’s not an “anything goes” attitude, nor does it involve compromise. Ambivalence isn’t a lack of belief, but rather the ability to “stay with the trouble” of questioning basic assumptions and to be transparent about them.

Keywords
ambivalence, feminist technoscience, polemics

I have always wondered why the farthest-out position always feels so right to me; why extremes, although difficult and sometimes painful to maintain, are always more comfortable than one plan running straight down a line in the unruffled middle. (Audre Lorde, 1982, p. 15)

The call for papers suggests a certain “loss of innocence” with regard to how media scholars view the nature of digital technologies and their potential role in societies today. As the editors write, “Just a few years ago, many scholars celebrated digital technology for its potential to flatten hierarchies and strengthen civic life. Today, many of the same observers are writing about the darker sides of digital culture.” While this may be true, given the ways in which digital technologies are pervasively used for surveillance, misinformation and so forth, there is also something to be said about the politics of polemics, of pitching a celebratory account of technology against a supposedly more “critical” one. I admit to being guilty of pitching one against the other myself, with my own work tending to be categorized as “critical” (which to be honest, I am happier with than if the opposite were the case).

Yet, I no longer believe, if I ever did, that the world can be neatly divided into clear camps like this.

The aim of this essay, however, is not to suggest that the editors are wrong in describing how our feelings toward digital technologies have changed. They most probably have and continue to do so. What I want to do is to take the opportunity offered by this inaugural issue of 2K to reflect on polemics and neatly dressed straw men as rhetorical strategies used in scholarly argumentation. My goal is to argue for the virtue of ambivalence in thinking and writing about the nature of digital technology. In an algorithmically mediated world, it’s not the extremes that are difficult to maintain, but ambivalence. In keeping with the above opening quote, the question is what
it would entail to productively occupy the “unruffled middle” as a renewed mode of critique. By critique, I do not have the unveiling of deeper realities in mind, but the kind of “compositionism” that Latour (2010) talks about, the idea that the world is not given but must be assembled and stitched together by components and composites (that are sometimes at odds with one another).

There are several reasons for thinking about the potenti-

alities of the ambivalent position: First, discourse on digi-
tal technology often tends to construct opposites in a way that makes it seem very Black and White (e.g., celebratory versus critical, technology versus nature, materiality versus users). Second, and related to the first point, as scholars we are often asked to take sides, to come up with a clear answer to the “whodunit” question (e.g., “was it an algorithm or a human?”) despite the fact that many of us trade in dialectics. Third, and related to the previous point, certain positions are more common-

place and accepted than others. There is much discourse on digital technology insinuating that there are sides to be taken, even claiming that these specific sides are unproblem-

atic. Who, after all, could be against a reading of Facebook as exploitative and capitalistic in character? Besides representing the usual story, such a reading of Facebook is also the one that, as critical scholars, we are expected to tell, sup-
posed to believe in, and frankly, the easiest to defend and get acceptance for. But for all those with good intentions and progressive thoughts, occupying a more or less accepted and clear position may not always be the most fruitful path to take. Instead I want to consider the extent to which ambiva-

cence is something to embrace.

**Stitching Together Some Components**

Like many other early career researchers, I believed that taking a position meant having to inhabit one end of a spectrum. I believed that taking a position meant taking an unambigu-

ous position, often in opposition to someone else, a position that could be easily identified, put into a box, thrown around in bite-sized pitches and purposefully used against the attack of others. I thought that believing in the need for more mate-

rial media studies, for example, meant pitching it against au-
dience studies. Indeed, critics of my work have done the same, claiming that by emphasizing software as an object of study I was relinquishing the importance of users. As if one precludes the other. These days, however, I am mostly criti-

cized for not taking software seriously enough, because, as some suggest, taking software seriously means analyzing code, not users.2 Never clear enough, never quite right.3

Conformity, dogmatism, polemics, whatever you choose to call the belief in zero sum games, it’s neither very produc-
tive nor interesting. Indeed, as Foucault (1998) puts it when asked why he wouldn’t engage in polemics, “[t]hat’s not my way of doing things; I don’t belong to the world of people who do things that way.” What does this mean? Polemics is a rhetorical strategy of dispute, one that is more preoccupied with getting one’s own position across than trying to engage with the other. For Foucault, polemics has “sterilizing effects” in that it doesn’t advance new ideas but continually falls back on what it must defend. The problem? It’s a cheap form of defense, and one that too easily gets conflated with scholarly argumentation.

As academics, we are used to justifying our work, which often happens by identifying “the gap” in existing research. Sometimes the gaps are filled too quickly and too easily, whether by grasping some off-the-shelf resources or glancing over entire arguments and simplifying books. In those cases, polemics often gets mistaken for justification. How many papers haven’t I read about social media during the past decade, referring to the same scholars as representative of particular academic camps? Never mind the actual attempts by the authors to nuance, qualify their claims, or provide important caveats.4 I call them the usual suspects of citation brackets. As one of my students tellingly remarked, “Henry Jenkins, that’s the celebratory bracket guy, right?” The point is that the sticky labels persist. The citation bracket guys (yes, the usual suspects are mostly male) are actual people, who have probably spent years developing and writing a book that often says more than the title or subtitles suggests, and whose arguments can only seldom be used as totalizing depictions across time and space. The point is not that the bracket guys won’t cope with such simplifications (I am sure they will), but to be mindful of our citation practices. Not just how we cite but who we cite.5

My interest and belief in the virtue of ambivalence stems in part from my personal experiences of being addressed as a public expert on the power of algorithms, a techno-scientific topic that is fraught with juxtapositions and moral impera-
tives, and in part from what I take to be a symptomatic mis-

conception about the power of “extreme” answers. According to a recent Harvard study in Economics, the authors argue that women’s disposition to provide less “extreme” answers in which they strongly agree or disagree to survey questions should be understood as a lack of confidence and belief in their abilities (Sarsons & Xu, 2015). As the authors write, “From a young age, women appear less confident than men” (Sarsons & Xu, 2015, p. 2). This, I believe, is not just a com-

mon misconception, but one that may help to explain why ambivalence is often falsely framed as an undesirable state.

Feminist and postcolonial writings in technoscience and beyond (Ahmed, 2017; Haraway, 2016; Le Guin, 1989; Suchman, 2007) help us unsettle such unhelpful binary oppositions. Extreme positions are no more naturally “male” than the less extreme is “female.” The fact that certain disposi-

tions are gendered (or racialized for that matter) tells us more about what is already in place than about the people occupying those positions. Whether red or blue, celebratory or critical, human or algorithm, what we need is not the mobilization of oppositional terms but the interrogation of such mobilizations to begin with. Let us not pitch one against the other in the ways that the media, political, and scholarly
discourse often seems to demand of us, but instead think about what it entails to encounter the “other” in all its complexity, without taking on the role of moral arbiters. What if judging the world in gradations of good and bad, rather than as good or bad, were the legitimate default position? What if the world cohered around ambivalence rather than decisiveness? I am deliberately not using the word certainty here, as it is not a question of being certain or uncertain. It is still possible to be certain and confident about conflicting and contradictory things.

**Ambivalence Takes Work**

While things may happen that make us change our beliefs, I want to make a case for the legitimacy of believing in different (even contradictory) things at the same time, in an attempt to reorient our scholarly sensibilities toward the productive potentials of the ambivalent position. Advocating an ambivalent position, however, is not without its problems. Within the fields of psychology (Sincoff, 1990) and sociology (Merton, 1976), the “overwhelming perspective on ambivalence has been negative” (Widger, 2018, p. 406). Despite the fact that life is full of tension, overlap, divergence, difference, and hesitation, ambivalence has been framed as a pathological condition that needs to be resolved. There is also the risk of being accused of “both-siderism,” or claiming a “view from nowhere.” Yet, simply holding multiple beliefs doesn’t imply that they are equivalent, nor is it an invitation to shirk responsibility. As Barad (2007) suggests, “we are responsible for the world in which we live not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing, but because it is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping” (p. 203). The kind of ambivalence I have in mind, then, is not about occupying an indifferent position. It’s not an “anything goes” attitude, nor does it involve compromise. Ambivalence isn’t a lack of belief, but rather the ability to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016) of questioning basic assumptions and to be transparent about them.

Far from being agreeable or a cop-out, the ambivalent position means having to negotiate an ongoing tension without necessarily finding resolution. As Meyerson and Scully (1995) have argued, ambivalence, which stems from the Latin ambo (both) and valere (to be strong) “can be tapped as a source of strength and vitality, not just confusion and reluctance” (p. 588). Instead of trying to eradicate ambivalence, Meyerson and Scully point to ways in which ambivalence resembles the experiences of marginality and biculturalism, understood as living on the boundary—or edge—of distinct cultures. It takes work to be ambivalent. Not simply being able to answer yes or no, good or bad, either/or often require more work, not less. It might arguably be easier to agree with the fact that Facebook is a powerhouse of surveillance capitalism than to think seriously about what the pleasures of the platform would entail. As Kierans and Bell (2017) suggest with regard to anthropological research on the tobacco industry as a “bad guy,” “a moral commitment to viewing things in a particular way from the outset becomes the foundation for further inquiry” effectively limits our grasp of such phenomena (p. 33). Drawing on Kierans and Bell’s call for methodological ambivalence as a way to avoid getting trapped into polarized positions, ambivalence becomes a way of breaking with the legitimate cultural scripts of “good” and “bad” guys.

**No More Bad Guys, Only Bag Ladies**

Every story has a hero, and often a villain too, but never just the very ordinary person who is not ostensibly one or the other. Good cop, bad cop, but “maybe cop,” not so much. Instead of “bad guys,” let’s do “bag ladies.” In her essay *The carrier bag theory of fiction*, Le Guin (1989) argues against the masculinist heroic narrative, positing instead the carrier bag as a metaphor for a new kind of storytelling. As she writes, “Heroes are powerful. Before you know it, the men and women in the wild-oat patch and their kids [...] have all been pressed into service in the tale of the Hero. But it isn’t their story. It’s his” (Le Guin, 1989, p. 150). Carrier bag stories are stories that have been collected, gathered, stored, and carried around in bags, boxes, and bundles. They might not be as sensational and grand as the heroic “killer story” (Le Guin, 1989, p. 152) nor might they offer clear and resolute endings. Carrier bag stories imply leaving the polemic battlefield and the heroes behind and putting people and things back into an unending story.

What’s in my carrier bag? Among other things, there’s my PhD thesis and beliefs about legitimate scholarly argumentation, disciplinary and interstitial positions, citation practices and usual suspects, good and bad guys, my book on the multiplicity of algorithms that doesn’t contain code, conformism, feminist killjoys, unruffled middles and extreme positions, confidence scores, easy answers, and frustrating complexities. While the absence of heroes and villains makes the story harder to tell, the stitching together of collected things, experiences, and events may ultimately offer new modes of seeing, even if it’s a story that doesn’t know how to finish.

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**Notes**

1. In doing so I am building on a range of scholarship from anthropology, management studies, and Internet studies that
have similarly argued for the productive potentials of ambivalence (Kierans & Bell, 2017; Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Phillips & Milner, 2017).

2. As one audience member asked during a recent Q&A, “isn’t it mandatory to look at code in a book on the power of algorithms?” The question is a nonstarter, because the premise of there being an a priori right or more legitimate way of studying the power of algorithms is a faulty one. Just consider the analogous case of a television scholar being told that descriptions of electromagnetic wave spectrums, or cable infrastructure for that matter, were “mandatory.” As Nick Seaver (2017) suggests, let us be wary of “correct” definitions (and their spokespersons) that only seek to further isolate algorithms from the concerns of social scientists and humanists. There is no one right way to do things, no single way to be curious, and no a priori distinction between something designated as technical and something said to be social (see also my discussion of this in Chapter 3 of Bucher, 2018).

3. This sense of being never quite right, sometimes “too much,” at other times “too little,” is nicely described in Sarah Ahmed’s (2017) notion of the feminist killjoy who threatens to upset a supposedly “happy occasion” by speaking out. There is “so much you are supposed not to say, to do, to be, to preserve that we” (p. 37).

4. Take the much cited books on convergence and participatory culture by Henry Jenkins (2006a, 2006b); around the time they were published, these book quickly came to stand in for a supposedly new sentiment around the optimistic potentials for a more participatory and democratic web, coinciding with the emergence of what we today call social media platforms. While I am not saying we should stop citing Jenkins (for his books are formidable works), we should be more wary about how we cite them and the work that we take these citations to do. It has become too easy to just replicate certain positions without actually engaging with the works and arguments in question. See also the special journal issue of Cultural Studies dedicated to “Rethinking Convergence/Culture” (Hay & Couldry, 2011) and Jenkins’ (2014) response to it.

5. What I am getting at is to be more mindful of what Solórzano and Yosso (2002) call the “majoritarian story,” the one that “privileges Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference” (p. 28).

6. While telling the story from both sides and claiming a view from nowhere under the guise of “objectivity” has been a journalistic ideal for a long time, Trump blaming “both sides” in the Charlottesville violence made many wary of the rhetorical dangers of “both-siderism.”

7. The hero being male.

8. As Le Guin (1989) says of why she loves novels: “Instead of heroes they have people in them” (p. 153).

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