Anne Graefer (ed.) Media and the Politics of Offence

**Political offensiveness in the mediated public sphere: The performative play of alignments**

**Introduction**

This chapter explores developing concerns about the rise of offensiveness in the political public sphere and more especially in social media. We argue that current iterations of purposeful political offence should be considered in the context of a number of factors.  One is the ascendency of short-form social media such as Twitter and Instagram, which disperse and fragment the discourse of political elites, enabling multi-articulated tactics of address that are subject to processes of remediation.  A second factor is the rise of “post-truth” politics (Montgomery, 2017), in which impressions of personal authenticity take the place of facts, and truth becomes less important than ‘speaking your mind’. Finally, however, we suggest that several significant cases of political offence take form and shape along an axis between ’authentic’ expression (or ‘speaking your mind’) and submission to political correctness.

Offence and offensiveness, of course, just like notions of ‘fake news’ or ‘impoliteness’, are difficult categories to define (see, for example, Wardle, 2017; Culpeper 2011). In the case of offence, most commentators stress its situated character. Here, for instance, is Culpeper (2011:23) on impoliteness and the language of offence:

Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires and /or beliefs about social organisation, including, in particular, how one person's or group's identities are mediated by others in interaction. Situated behaviours are viewed negatively when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be. Such behaviours always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence.

In order to recognise the situated character of impoliteness and offence, Culpeper’s definition is obliged to work at a high level of abstraction. We choose a different route – to build up an account of offence in specific contexts at a specific historical juncture by considering a series of incidents or cases. In so doing, we suggest that the production of offensive discourse in the political domain is routinely enacted within what Goffman (1981) refers to as “participation frameworks”. We wish to argue, indeed, that there is a structure to offence in the public sphere – but that this is modulated in the subtle contrasts between publicly-oriented offensiveness, particularly using media, and private or face-to-face offensiveness between connected individuals, stemming from important differences between their associated participation frameworks.

**Offence, insult and participation frameworks**

As a starting point for considering the anatomy of verbal offence it is useful to return to Labov’s seminal account of ‘Rules for Ritual Insults’ (1972). In brief, Labov showed how members of a teenage group could say gratuitously offensive things to one other, but if what was said conformed to the rules of the game – thereby observing its ritual qualities – group members avoided outright conflict and its consequential violence. One element of the ritual required that the insult – the offence – ought to be untrue, even fanciful: indeed, the nearer it got to mundane reality the more likely it was to be judged lame. This creative elaboration would be further mitigated by the use of standard formats for the insult itself, as well as by recurring types of contextual reference. Thus the insulter would commonly comment (in an ostensibly misogynistic fashion) on the insulted’s mother and her sexual history, sometimes even claiming to have engaged in sexual relations with her. Insults would be exchanged in rounds with as many as 30 in a 35 minute session, hence alternative titles such as “sounding”, “signifying” and “playing the dozens”. Within this arrangement, a skilful perpetrator of the art would gain a strong position within the group.

Success would be a matter of assessment, of course, and judgment was externalised and vocalised in the context through the role of the audience, comprising other members of the group. The assessment therefore takes place within what Goffman (1981: 3) calls a “participation framework” in which we can identify at least three participants: (i) the insulter; (ii) the insulted; (iii) the immediately present audience – or evaluators. As members of the same “participation framework”, those occupying these participant roles assent to the rules of the “interactional environment” (Goffman, 1981: 153) of the exchange: viz. that the insults are to be ornate and incredible, and that no sincere face threat is intended to the “insulted” party.

The kind of offensiveness in which we are interested differs, of course, from those in Labov’s account in various significant ways. For one thing we are primarily interested in offensiveness in the mediated public sphere involving large (though potentially fragmented) audiences with the more complex participation framework that this inevitably entails. Following from this, most of our examples are written rather than spoken. And in the context of social media, at least, this may allow a degree of anonymity in the production and delivery of offense. Unlike Labov we are interested ultimately in utterances which really give offence rather than utterances which are designed to simulate characteristics of offensiveness but where the apparent offensiveness is mitigated by the rules of the game (hence, ‘rules for ritual insults’). In this way we are mostly interested in what might be designated deliberate rather than inadvertent offence. A further complication here lies in the possibility, through writing and digital recording, of the re-tweeting (for example) and the re-contextualisation and indeed what Iedema (2003) refers to as the re-semiotization of messages. What might have begun as an example of inadvertent offence can be deliberately re-contextualised or re-semiotised to foreground its potential for offence.

In order, therefore, to clarify the structure of offence in the public sphere, it is possible – building on Goffman (1981) and Labov (1972) - to situate it within a participatory framework in the following terms. At the heart of an act verbal offence (rather than a ritual insult) we may find the following components:

a. An *Offence Giver* (one who issues offence);

b. An *Offence Taker* (which may be an individual or a group);

We should note, immediately, that “*Giving Offence*” and “*Taking Offence*” are potentially fuzzy categories that are in any case sensitive to situation and subject to re-semiotization, in ways that we explore later. Nor are the categories of giving and taking offence strictly symmetrical: for instance, offence can be taken where none was intended. The Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, Ben Broadbent, for example, was quoted in an interview in May 2018 in the Daily Telegraph, describing the rather lack-lustre state of the British economy as “menopausal” – “past its productive peak”: “The word ‘climacteric’ is, according to Mr Broadbent,” as reported in the *Daily Telegraph*, “a term that economists have borrowed from biology and means ‘you’ve passed your productive peak’. It has the same Latin roots as ‘climax’ and means ‘menopausal’ but it applies to both genders”, he said. The Deputy Governor was very soon forced to issue a public apology for his poor choice of words saying “how sorry I am for the offence my interview this morning has caused to Bank colleagues", not to mention the general public. Clearly he had not anticipated the effect of his original choice of words, and so – we may reasonably surmise – had not intended to give offence. The offence, as it were, was discovered in the act rather than intended.

By the same token, just as offence can be taken when none was intended, so also in theory can offence be intended, only for none to be taken, though documentary cases of the latter are more difficult to retrieve.

c. A *Target of Offence*

The *Target* may be implicit or explicit; it may comprise an individual object of the offence – one who may or may not take offence; but most importantly it may include within its focus an abstract set of attitudes or values representative of a way of thinking belonging to, or identified with, a social group, (as we shall see later in the in relation to “political correctness”).

d. An *Audience,* or *Public*

The *Audience (Audiences* or *Publics)* in practice will be likely to include differing alignments to the offence, divided principally between those that align alongside the *Target* against the offence and those who align with the *Offence Giver* against the *Target*. This division is most likely where the context or situation is already agonistic – for instance in the context of political campaigning. Segments of the *Audience* may, alternatively, be simply indifferent. *Audiences*, therefore, may occupy any of at least three positions: A1 (align with the *Target* against the *Offence*); A2 (align with the *Offence-Giver* against the *Target*); A3 (non-aligned ambient affiliation).

This provides us with the rudimentary outline of the components of a structural or participation framework for understanding the dynamics of offence. We must note immediately, however, that the structural composition of the framework for offence needs to allow for the negotiation or contestation of positions within it. For instance, Mark Meechan – a person with an emerging reputation as a stand-up comic - was prosecuted under Scots law for the crime of hate speech, having posted on YouTube a video (viewed more than 3 million times) of his girlfriend’s pet dog, Buddha, responding to the command, “Hey Buddha, gas the Jews” by giving a Nazi salute with its paw. In Meechan’s defence he claimed no intention to give offence, and that it was a joke merely to annoy his girlfriend. In sentencing, the Sheriff declared otherwise: “The fact that you claim in the video, and elsewhere, that the video was intended only to annoy your girlfriend and as a joke and that you did not intend to be racist is of little assistance to you. A joke can be grossly offensive. A racist joke or a grossly offensive video does not lose its racist or grossly offensive quality merely because the maker asserts he only wanted to get a laugh." Thus, Meechan was claiming one kind of position for his act, which the Sheriff emphatically rejected.

It is, in passing, worthy of note that an alternative line of defence, offered on Meechan’s behalf by other comedians such as Ricky Gervais, claimed rights of free speech for the video: “If you don't believe in a person's right to say things that you might find ‘grossly offensive,’ then you don't believe in Freedom of Speech.” Or as Rowan Atkinson had put it earlier in the context of jokes about religion (specifically Islam): “the right to offend is far more important than any right not to be offended” – a claim he was to revive subsequently in defence of former UK Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson. “All jokes about religion cause offence, so it's pointless apologising for them.”

**Offence and political correctness**

We can see, therefore, the basic components through which offensiveness is performed and offence may be taken. In this section, we begin to look at this broader cultural context of political offence in media, and in particular how judgements over offence are claimed and contested, by looking at the development and use of political correctness. One significant feature of Trump’s presidential campaign and his subsequent presidency has been his predeliction for offence (Montgomery, 2017), and this quite deliberately set off in counterpoint to norms of political correctness.

“I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct”, said Trump in 2015.

Or as Ivanka Trump observed when introducing her father at the event when he announced his run for the presidency:

"My father is the opposite of politically correct. He says what he means and he means what he says,"

Ivanka Trump 2015

Political correctness (or “PC”, to give it is popular acronym) has, however, a convoluted history. Perry traces the first printed citation of the term to a 1970 article by Toni Cade on sexism in black politics, in which it is asserted that “a man cannot be politically correct and chauvinist too” (cited in Perry 1992: 73). While this presents political correctness as a positive attribute, Perry (1992: 77) writes that “no sooner was [PC] invoked as a genuine standard for socio-political practice […] than it was mocked as purist, ideologically rigid, and authoritarian”. And it was on the basis of this reactionary reinterpretation that PC came to embody the struggle between representation and political and cultural power. Suhr and Johnson comment that:

‘Political correctness’ was blamed for all the ills perceived in British society: for some it was the hegemony of politically correct thinking, which had rung in a new era of ‘mock’ politeness and led to a generation paralysed by a fear of denting the all too fragile egos of anyone who might belong to a so-called minority group. For others, ‘PC’ was to blame for stifling the ‘real’ debates and conflicts which must be allowed to surface if we are to have any hope of progressing towards a more truly egalitarian society (Suhr and Johnson, 2003: 5).

Fairclough (2003: 21) claims that this labelling is in itself “a form of cultural politics, an intervention to change representations, values and identities” in the way they pursue or confound social development. Although PC has had implications for a variety of political positions, from the perspective of the reactionary right in particular it “has been held responsible for every imaginable form of restriction, well beyond concerns about racism and sexism” (Talbot, 2007: 756). Cameron (1995: 127) describes a “discursive drift”, in which PC moves beyond its specialist meaning to become a catch-all phrase for the restriction of expression by the mainly bureaucratic forces of aggressive social liberalism. As a consequence, Talbot (2007: 759) argues, PC became a “snarl word” cloaked in negativity or irony and associated with the politics of restriction and exaggeration.

The history of how hostility to political correctness developed in Britain in particular is complex – a subtle interweaving of cultural politics with struggles over the form and shape of governance. In the early 1980s, at the height of Margaret Thatcher’s push to dismantle and de-centralise larger urban authorities, the Greater London Council (GLC, the largest and wealthiest local government in the UK at the time) was run by mayor ‘Red’ Ken Livingstone. Livingstone’s GLC was characterised by a strong socialist agenda which embraced issues of gender and race equality. Many policies directly challenged the agenda of Thatcher’s Conservative government, and in a Tory-friendly media, were branded as irrational or detrimental to national values. The GLC was eventually disbanded by the Thatcher government of 1986, but the legacy of their popular press characterisation as the ‘loony left’ continues to this day in terms of the tropes it throws up. Amongst the “urban legends”, for instance, propagated by the right-wing print media in the 1980s include those such as the over-enthusiastic, anti-racist primary school teachers who were reported to have banned the nursey rhyme Baa, Baa, Black Sheep (Cameron, 1994: 117). As Stuart Hall comments, such vexatious reports were difficult to counter because ‘there was just enough truth in the stories in a few instances to sustain media amplification’ (1994: 173), a feature still recurrent in anti-PC stories today.

Beyond the UK too, in its 1980s manifestation, political correctness became a part of a political struggle against political dominance of the reactionary right wing, and hostility towards and ridicule of political correctness became part of the right-wing armoury:

With America in the grip of a sustained period of right wing government, preaching aggressive free market economics and reduced government welfare, issues of race and gender (issues always associated with the left) had been more or less knocked off the political agenda. PC, both on and off campus, has helped to put them back on (Dunant, 1994).

In 2018, we can see this right wing political thinking once again coming to the fore, in a context in which Dunant links political correctness with an excessive concentration of the effect of language on the sensitivities of minority groups, rather than on the ‘real’ important issues at hand. In a manner that we will examine in more detail below, these correlations with the regulation of language links political correctness with the elevation of “face work” and value good manners over spontaneity and sincerity of expression. In this regard, political correctness has parallels with the forms of civility and courtliness identified by Higgins and Smith (2017) as emblematic of an overly-tactical approach to public discourse, and that provide a foil for a less polished and more relatable mode of public talk. It also, however, has come to stand in constrast not just with authenticity and sincerity but also with free speech. Against the stultifying mores of political correctness, the right to speak one’s mind and say what one means becomes a badge of honour. What begins and takes shape as a move to champion the rights of minorities, of the marginalised, or of those excluded from power, ends up being regarded as a repressive tool of the elites. One way in which to challenge the rubrics of PC is precisely through acts of offence in which the offence-giver speaks his or her mind and reclaims the ancestral rights to free speech.

**Offence as a collective activity**

In this way, acts of offence, especially those that flout political correctness, readily articulate with countervailing discourses of collectivity and mutual belonging. Indeed, the association between truculent spontaneity and authentic speech ranges from the “righteous indignation” of populist performance (Higgins, 2013) to Trump’s misogynist language of the ‘locker room’. These forms of authenticity carry claims to certain kinds of group solidarity, so that in the very act of alienating the progressive left, as well as those minorities that political correctness was intended to protect, an appeal to like-minded associates is simultaneously projected. Thus, offence as a collective activity produces a double alignment.

**Situational sensitivities and the public versus the private**

In terms of the major distinctions in context of situation relating to the performance of offence, perhaps the most critical but unstable distinction in late modernity lies between the public and the private. Feminism may have justifiably declared that the personal is political but examples of mediated, politically-charged, offensiveness typically depend upon the eruption in the public domain of discourses that might have circulated in semi-private contexts relatively unchallenged – or even endorsed by micro-collectivities. This is especially so in the age of digital media which has enhanced what Thompson (2005) identifies as transformations in the character of media visibility, and its implications for the uneven boundary between public and private. Thompson (2005: 121) argues that the late modern period saw an association between public life and a state-centred subjectivity. In a manner that contrasts with the more recent developments described above, this lent itself to what Peters (1995) describes as a set of performative expectations around public conduct, dedicated to the display of responsible citizenship and respectability. Entailed is what Weintraub (1997) describes as a complementary notion of privacy, where localised, personal activities are insulated from state surveillance and the domain of the domestic and the family remains detached from the public realm. This has been replaced, Thompson suggests, by a new form of “mediated publicness”, which extends access to public and political events in a manner that admits the images of public life into the personal sphere. The implications for political figures are clear:

Today the careful presentation of self before the distant others whose allegiance must be constantly nourished, and whose support is vitally required from time to time, is not so much an option as an imperative for actual or aspiring political leaders and their parties. In the social and political conditions of the late twentieth century, politicians in liberal-democratic societies have little choice but to submit to the laws of compulsory visibility (Thompson, 1995: 137).

As we approach the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the responsibilities and expectations of this “compulsory visibility” in the construction of self have multiplied. Politicians’ use of media to introduce the “real”, unpolished self of the private domestic sphere can be traced to Franklin D Roosevelt’s “fireside chat” radio broadcasts in the 1930s and 40s (Enli, 2015: 109) and have merged with broader discourses of the popular through such staged events as Bill Clinton’s use of prime-time chat shows (Drake and Higgins, 2006). In looking at how public figures manage these expectations, Enli (2015: 111) alights on the notion of “performed authenticity” as a way of understanding the relationship between these forms of media engagement and the expectation that they will reveal something of the private individual behind the public face. In keeping with recent analysis of the presentation of the personal lives of politicians and their families (Higgins and Smith, 2013; Smith, 2016), Enli (2015) also notes that the introduction of social and participatory media into political campaigning has elevated this responsibility to project an authentic self from a weapon in the armoury cultural politics to an essential strand of the political campaign (Montgomery, 2017).

However, as Thompson (2005: 39) argues, this extension of visibility moves further along a continuum that produces risk as well as opportunity for those in public life. In looking to what he describes as the “new visibility” that characterises an increasingly complex, interactional and democratised media environment, Thompson (2005: 49) argues that events are not just driven by the images and backroom glimpses of visibility, but are often constituted by them. And, as the management of image and notions of authenticity become more prominent components of politics (Lyon, 2002; Kreiss and Howard, 2010), activities such as “scandal mining” (Trottier, 2017b) come into play, so that potentially consequential images and statements by political figures are sought out and released into public discourse in order to generate political outrage. This is particularly so in the first of our illustrative cases to which we now turn.

**The “private correspondence made public” offence**

In this section we consider an example from the UK where offensive remarks that circulated in the first instance semi-privately are subsequently recontextualised in the public realm in such a way that foregrounds and highlights their offensiveness. This case of “resemiotisation” (Iedema, 2003) or “remediation” Trottier (2017b) – taking an item of discourse out of one interpretative context and placing it in one where the meanings derived are likely to be different – bears some comparison in its structural characteristics with the leaked audio tape of then presidential candidate Donald Trump boasting that his fame enabled him to grab women “by the pussy”. And in both cases we can see aspects of those “talk scandals” described by Ekstrom and Johansson (2008), where material is mined and cast into the public eye generating a “digital vigilantism” designed to breach “on-/offline” or front/back stage distinctions for political gain (Trottier, 2017a).

The scope for the emergence of such material is far greater now than before since the democratisation of communication platforms widens access to a variety of actors in the political realm. These include those lobbyists and public relations agencies that Habermas (1989) would have considered predatory colonisers of public discourse, who, by means of social media in particular, now share the same platforms as senior politicians and policy-makers. Other actors who enjoy an enhanced place in political discourse range from single-issue advocates to ordinarily disinterested members of the voting public. Extending the dangers to public figures highlighted by Thompson (2005) and Brighenti (2007), all of these are subject to parallel risks around political visibility, where breaches of acceptable conduct can offend the norms of political propriety. To take the example of non-conventional political actors, interventions into the political field by non-elected Twitter users can be characterised as “trolling” if they are seen as antagonistic, overly contentious or designed to cause offence.

The example we consider is that of Jo Marney who at the time was the partner of then-leader of the right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Henry Bolton. In January 2018, a number of Marney’s texts and Facebook posts were made available to the news media. Those to excite most public attention were a series of text messages concerning the then-fiancé of Prince Harry, Meghan Markle, from which this sequence of text messages is taken:

She’s a ‘gender equality t\*\*\*

She’s obsessed with race

And her seed with [sic] taint our royal family.

Just a dumb little commoner. Tiny little brain.

She’s black.

A dumb little ‘actress’ that no one has heard of.

This is Britain, not Africa

(quoted in Owen, Mail Online, 13 January 2018).

These comments, on their publication in the *Mail* *Online*, were widely deemed to be offensive in their use of highly-charged negative descriptors (“tart”, “dumb little commoner”, “tiny little brain”, “dumb little actress” – note the repeated use of “little”) and in their negative references to Markle’s ethnic background, with particular attention to her racial characteristics (“she’s black”), which might come to “taint the royal family”. In subsequent posts, racial prejudice is expressed in terms of a denial of personal animosity and is further combined with a classic trope (in the politics of race and immigration) about ‘invasion’:

Not wanting other faces and cultures to invade your own culture doesn’t mean I hate their race. Just means I don’t want their cultures invading mine.

Just don’t like her.

One feature worth noting in the context of these ostensibly racist and sexist remarks is the use of ‘just’ as a minimizer: “just a little commoner”; “just means I don’t want their cultures invading mine”; and finally “just don’t like her”. The combined effect of these choices – the uses of ‘just’, for instance, and ‘little’ – is to present the opinions expressed as unremarkable, ordinary matters of personal opinion, consonant with the private realm and not articulated as weighty and rationally-founded public commentary.

However, the point at which the messages from Marney move from the relatively private or semi-private domain of texting to operate in the public realm is when the core components of the structural framework for offence come into play: it remains consistent that Marney is the *Offence Giver* and Markle is the *Target*, but the recipient(s) of the messages as the *Audience* is now much broader and diverse in their interpretative position than originally conceived by Marney as *Offence Giver.*

Indeed, the *Audience,* becomes vastly extended and differentiated or fragmented, for it is not just the *Mail Online* that remediates the material: it is in turn further remediated on social media and broadcast news. There are clearly divisions in the kind of response which Marney’s comments evoke. In the event, and reflecting the much-expanded *Audience*, most public commentary aligned emphatically with the *Target* and against the *Offence Giver.*

Of course, objectionable as these views may be in themselves, the basis for their publication for a wider audience in mainstream newspapers was Marney’s association with the leader of a political party, with specific implications for Henry Bolton’s own views and personal judgement in maintaining their relationship. Similarly, comments on Marney’s Facebook page relating immigration to a fire in a block of flats in London (Bennett, Huffington Post, 2018) were intended for and originally available only to those admitted as Facebook friends. However, in relation to the remediation of this correspondence as it makes its way into the broader and more visible public realm, Marney tries to reframe her views as part of a legitimate public discussion, saying:

The language I used was not good, not good at all. I didn’t mean to cause offence but I think in a wider, broader context of the things that I said these are things that we need to be discussing (quoted in Bennett, *Huffington Post*, 2018).

Her response to criticism, therefore, has two dimensions. Firstly, she regrets her poor choice of language (rather like Deputy Governor of the Bank of England). But, secondly, she claims to be highlighting issues of legitimate public concern (“things that we need to be discussing”). Whether successful or not in ameliorating the offence caused by a series of statements intended to be kept private, Marney’s response rests upon the instinctive hostility to immigration characteristic of that right-wing populism to typify the post-truth political environment. But, crucially perhaps, the justification made necessary by the reconfigured participation framework produces a variant of the *Offence Giver* merely ‘speaking her mind’ with echoes of the defence invoking freedom of speech

**Offence and resemiotisation**

This next section looks at a more clear-cut example of where what we have referred to as “scandal mining” (Trottier, 2017b) is used in order to expose instances of offensiveness by a figure already in the public eye. Here, it is useful again to draw upon Iedema (2003) and the Scollons’s (2003) notion of resemiotization. According to Iedema and Scollon, discourse can be transferred from one setting or mode to another, sometimes to preserve the meaning, but on other occasions in a way that significantly alters its impact or force.

The example we will look at is that of Toby Young. Young has worked as journalist and reviewer since the early 1990s. He started as co-founder of the *Modern Review*, and has most recently been associate editor of conservative current and social affairs magazine *The Spectator*. Young also enjoyed public prominence as the author of the autobiographical memoir *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People* in 2001. More recently, he became associated with the campaign for “free schools” to be established and run by parents with minimal state interference. It was on the basis of this experience and his apparent credentials in the philosophy and practice of secondary education that Young was announced as a non-executive member of an Office for Students, set up by the UK Government as a mechanism to oversee the conduct and performance of English and Welsh universities.

Young’s appointment to this position occasioned immediate controversy. This was initially motivated by Young’s commitment to the free market in the delivery of education at school level, and were therefore directed at the ideological commitments associated with Young’s chosen political persona, what we have described as a state-centred subjectivity (Thompson, 1995). However, critical commentary soon turned to Young’s twitter account, and a number of tweets were identified that were deemed to be offensive. Amongst the tweets that most caught the public eye are those reproduced below, including ones which feature a performance of misogyny as a particular form of laddish “banter”:

Example 1

[](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/jan/03/toby-young-quotes-on-breasts-eugenics-and-working-class-people#img-3)

Example 2

“What happened to [Claudia] Winkleman’s breasts? Put on some weight, girlie.”

Example 3

“Serious cleavage behind Ed Miliband’s head. Anyone know who it belongs to?”

This series of tweets perform a classic sexist manoeuvre of reducing women to their body parts: Padma’s bottom or arse; Winkelman’s breasts; an unnamed MP’s cleavage (presumably a woman rather than a man). In Toby Young’s first Tweet, the offensiveness is accentuated by building on Isaacson’s prior suggestion that a publicity picture seems to show Young’s “hand on Padma’s bottom” (who, it is claimed, looks “surprised but pleased”). Young, then, ‘doubles down’ on this suggestion by correcting it: “Actually, mate, I had my dick up her arse” – rather in the manner of Labov’s ritual insults among teenage boys.

Broadly, the structural framework of offence for these Tweets consists of Young as the laddish (‘humourous’) *Offence Giver* and women, identified in terms of their body parts, as *Targets for Offence*. The *Audience* for this is layered and complex. In some cases there is a defined addressee - for instance, Barry Isaacson, or even Winkelman herself (“put on some weight, girlie”). And in the case of Isaacson, and other members of the associated in-group, it is noticeable that there is a familiar and conversational mode of address: “mate”, “anyone know who it [the cleavage] belongs to?”. More generally, the conventional implication of this is that there will be a self-selected group of followers for these tweets who can be expected to align with the tweets as laddish humour as much as acts of offence. But there will also be an *Audience*, not necessarily aligned, who relate to the material in a state of what Zappavignana (2012) describes as ‘ambient affiliation’. And in common with the mediated messages in the example above, this is subject to shift. At the time when the Tweets were first made the ambient audience on Twitter may have been much smaller than it subsequently became as Twitter moved from 30 million active participants per week to 370 million per week seven years later.

In the context of Young’s proposed elevation to the Office of Students, however, Young’s conduct on Twitter – driven again by ‘scandal mining’ – occupied a different interpretative field in which their crude sexism appeared at odds with the decorousness and decency necessary for public office. Thus, their offensiveness became foregrounded in the process of resemiotisation by diffusion through traditional media outlets – press and broadcasting – and the extension of the participation framework to the public at large.

Of course, public discourse around the tweets took place in the context of a decades-long shift against political correctness. Critical discussion of Young’s tweets and journalism therefore focused on the validity of his role as contrarian, adopting positions designed to inflame liberal sensibilities and taking great pleasure in offending as many people as possible “while guffawing about political correctness” (Foster, The Guardian, 2018).Other criticism focused on the seeming inconsistency deleting those Tweets that had previously been celebrated as examples of free speech and authenticity (Cowburn, The Independent, 2018).

From a defensive position, Young’s regression into old-school masculinity forms part of a more general move against the perceived progressiveness of previous governments, as found in this 2012 article for *The Spectator*:

Inclusive. It’s one of those ghastly, politically correct words that have survived the demise of New Labour. Schools have got to be ‘inclusive’ these days. That means wheelchair ramps, the complete works of Alice Walker in the school library (though no Mark Twain) and a Special Educational Needs Department that can cope with everything from dyslexia to Münchausen syndrome by proxy. If [then education secretary, Michael] Gove is serious about wanting to bring back O-levels, the government will have to repeal the Equalities Act because any exam that isn’t ‘accessible’ to a functionally illiterate troglodyte with a mental age of six will be judged to be ‘elitist’ and therefore forbidden by Harman’s Law (Spectator, 2012)

The strategy of using single quotation marks for isolated words or phrases in a way quite distinct from the representation of reported speech is one that is available on the printed page and allows the writer to open up an ironic distance between these expressions and their own words. In her research into the language of newspapers, Tuchman (1972) refers to these as a signalling device to distance the authorial voice from the sentiment expressed and thus to question its legitimacy. Systematically, Young’s article uses this to highlight lexis (inclusive, accessible) that link to the main features of the move towards equality that the particular education policy in question is engaging with. In this way, we are invited to see the validity of such terms in a questionable light. Instead, Young conflates educational reform in terms of examinations with wider issues of equality and attacks those of lower academic achievement in hyperbolic terms that range from the extremely rare psychological disorder of Munchausen Syndrome, to the dehumanising reference to ‘troglodytes’ rather than teenagers. His reference to ‘wheelchair ramps and the complete works of Alice Walker’ also draw upon shared prejudices to produce an indirect attack on issues of equality, although to many liberal readers the idea of greater physical accessibility and a wider range of literary works available to children would seem to be common sense.

As the participatory framework widens to encompass the general media audience, the rights to engage offensively are therefore distributed on the basis of role and power (Higgins and Smith, 2017). Toby Young claims warrant to engage offensively on the basis of his self-styled role as ‘journalistic provocateur’, thus positioning himself within a tradition in which journalists have permission to engage with whatever is most likely to excite controversy.

However, perhaps the most complex aspect of this *Framework for Offence* in the public sphere is the notion of *Target*. In the case of Toby Young, as can be seen, his recontexualised tweets, and other writings, target groups such as women, the disabled and working class students. While these remain the ostensible targets of offence, it is not necessarily the case for various reasons that members of those groups actually take offence or respond to it. Those who did respond held other kinds of position within the public sphere - as journalists, for instance, or politicians – exhibiting a kind of taking offence by proxy on behalf of the ostensible *Targets* (rather like the Scottish Sheriff in the case of Meechan’s pet dog).

In this respect, we can see more clearly how the giving of offence is played out to more than one kind of audience. A tweet such as Toby Young’s “Actually, mate, I had my dick up her arse” is designed to elicit one kind of response on its production as part of man-to-man, male banter but meets a radically different kind of response on its subsequent recontextualisation when its offensiveness is discovered and made manifest to a different kind of audience on a spectrum ranging from those who might align with it enthusiastically , to those that see the tweets as empty discursive acts in line with Labov’s (1972) ritual insults, to those who take the most grave of offence. In terms of our structural framework for Offence it moves from *A2* (align with the *Offence-Giver* against the *Target*) to *A1* (align with the *Target* against the *Offence*).

On the face of it, Toby Young’s offensiveness is apparently targeted at groups with a fairly strictly defined membership, such as women (and their body parts – Claudia Winkelman’s breasts or Padma Lakshmi’s arse, or someone’s anonymous cleavage), low-income parents with below average IQs, teachers, functionally illiterate troglodytes with a mental age of six, or working class students at Oxford. Taken as a whole they can be seen collectively as a group whose common membership is normally protected by the protocols of Political Correctness: in other words, membership of these groups has one overarching requirement – that they should be addressed or referred to by preferred, or at least respectful terms. Young’s offensive comments are thus not just an attack on women, or the poor, or teachers, but an attack on the protocols of political correctness. His own later reflections on the problematic nature of his tweets - or his journalism, more generally - make this clear. He described his tweets posted between 2009 and 2012 as “sophomoric and politically incorrect”. In an attack on the term ‘inclusive’, he dismissed it as “one of those ghastly, politically correct words that have survived the demise of New Labour”. Thus, behind the manifest and individuated *Targets* of his offensiveness lies the larger and more abstract *Target* of Political Correctness – or progressive identity politics more generally.

It is worth emphasising that roles within any participation framework tend to be founded upon various identity claims, ranging from interpersonal (the position of a friend and confidant, for example), and draw upon performative claims from the professional to the unpolished and authentic. While Young’s style of engagement might be sustained as a journalist, it was a discursive form found to be inconsistent with a proposed role in government. The Chairman of the Board of the Office of Students welcomed Young’s withdrawal from consideration in the following terms:

“Many of his previous tweets and articles were offensive, and not in line with the values of the Office for Students. Mr Young was right to offer an unreserved apology for these comments and he was correct to say that his continuation in the role would have distracted from our important work.”

In terms described by Iedema (2003) and Scollon and Scollon (2003), the resemiotization of the tweets saw the intended contrarian frame evaporate, to be replaced by a frame informed by the norms of government and regulatory discourse.

**Conclusion**

To sum up: we have argued that the production of offensive discourse in the political domain is enacted within what Goffman (1981) refers to as “participation frameworks”. We have suggested, indeed, that there is a structure to the performance of offence in the public sphere, whereby it is constituted by key components such as *Offence Giver,* *Offence Taker, Target of Offence* and *Audience*. These are modulated in late modern societies, especially where digitalisation and social media platforms allow many possibilities for re-semiotisation, to allow subtle differences to develop in the way the structural framework is activated between initial utterances and their subsequent reiterations especially in the transition between private or face-to-face offensiveness between connected individuals and publicly-oriented offensiveness. Most importantly, however, we suggest that at the present time there is clearly a political stake to offensiveness; and we reviewed in some detail cases where despite the particularity of *Targets* such as Meghan Markle, Padma Lakshmi, Claudia Winkelman – or, more generally, working class students, or the disabled – the ultimate underlying *Target* seems to be Political Correctness and its priorities. This seems effectively a move overtly to politicise the cultural terrain itself. And, by and large, wherever this move is resisted – where offensiveness is noted and called out – the defensive riposte takes the form of a claim to the rights of freedom of speech, sometimes quite simply in terms of the supposed authenticity of ‘speaking one’s mind’. Inasmuch as the more individuated and concrete *Targets* of this manoeuvre (rather than PC in general) tend to lack economic, political or cultural power, it could be argued that political offensiveness is more often than not structured in dominance. The attack by members of a dominant majority against members of a minority works to dismantle at a symbolic level some of the kinds of symbolic protections that PC was designed to offer. Boris Johnson’s remarks in the *Daily Telegraph* (August 2018) about the burka (sic) looking like a letter box would provide yet another case in point.

On reflection, however, the situation may be more complex. As we noted, the roots of political correctness can be traced to the emergence in the latter decades of the twentieth century of identity politics, particularly around questions of feminism and ethnicity - so neatly captured in the feminist dictum of ‘The personal is the political’. For those on the Left, language, and more particularly the question of how things should be named, became a stake in the political struggle. (Dunant, 1994; Hall, 1994: 167). Although the basic principles and protocols of political correctness may have remained more or less unchanged, the role of political correctness within culture and society over time has undergone significant transformations. In some ways PC was at its most vigorous (some might say strident) around the time of the high point of the Reagan-Thatcher consensus, now summed up as neo-liberalism. At the present moment when the political centre cannot hold but when the basic tenets of neo-liberalism no longer sit easily with the phantasmagorical visions of the right and when on the other hand social movements do seem increasingly capable of mobilising popular support, the working out of political struggle seems increasingly to operate in the sphere of the symbolic imaginary, especially on the Right. “Brexit”, for instance, for the Right consists of a politics that lacks any referent but itself (‘Brexit means Brexit’). In this climate, it is hardly surprising that voices on the Right should seek to reclaim language for itself through claims to be the authentic voice of the people (hence Trump’s claim to his own supporters “I will be your voice”). One kind of claim for authenticity is precisely through pushing back – offensively - against the niceties of political correctness and its restrictions on ordinary speech.

As Stuart Hall commented

Paradoxically, though PC is its sworn adversary, the New Right shares with PC an understanding that the political game is often won or lost on the terrain of … moral and political issues, apparently far removed from the Westminster … conception of ‘politics’ (1994: 169)

However, two decades after Hall’s comments it seems that the New Right may be less confident than its occasional electoral success might indicate. Indeed, despite the partial electoral successes of Trump and Brexit, the Right still lacks a coherent political project but is fed rather on xenophobic fantasies of Empire 2.0, ‘making America great again’, ‘taking back control’, white ascendancy and the oxymoron of frictionless trade across stringent border controls. But just as the political contours of neo-liberalism – with its growing fissures and unevenness – has become unsustainable, floating free of points in anchorage in the real world, the resistance of the Right to the Left has come to be fought out with renewed intensity in the symbolic imaginary, with PC providing a kind of totemic *Target* or shibboleth for those on the right, used mainly to mark out the distance and the dividing line between them and the Left.

Indeed, for Britain the post war consensus, which rested primarily on the question of how best to manage capitalism through forms of social welfarism, seems finally and irretrievably to have broken down. For Britain – and elsewhere - this has inevitably led to a fracturing of the body-politic and the rise of social antagonisms of all kinds, intensified by the further mediatisation of the public sphere through developments in the internet and digital social media (Smith 2018) (Higgins and Smith 2017). Into this highly charged semiotic space, the offensiveness of Marney, Young, as well of course as that of Trump or Boris Johnson, can be seen not only as a stake in the political (and cultural) struggle but as a defensive and ultimately bankrupt reaction to the incoherence and inconsistencies of their position.

In the discursive confusions of symbolic charge and counter-charge (from which Labour in its internal clashes over anti-semitism is by no means immune), Toby Young and Jo Marney may well prove to be bit players, minor actors in a far larger drama. They are, however, symptomatic figures, epiphenomena of larger currents and patterns. Young himself while attempting to downplay his offense by passing it off as “sophomoric and politically incorrect”, could also try and dignify it as the actions of a “journalistic provocateur”.

To some it might seem simply, in Matthew Arnold’s phrase, as if ‘we are.. on a darkling plane…where ignorant armies clash by night’[[1]](#footnote-1). Indeed, it is perhaps too easy to invoke the language of crisis to try and understand these complex processes of cultural and political change. Nonetheless it seems clear in retrospect that the financial collapse of 2008 marked a turning point in the durability of neo-liberalism as a project. The inevitable economic crisis that followed, with national state and supra-national interventions designed to try and halt the unravelling of the financial system, where the burdens of ‘austerity’ fell most unequally on the poor rather than the rich, has not surprisingly provoked the widespread political crisis in the midst of which we find ourselves. Offensiveness, however, is no substitute for a politics of change. Perhaps Gramsci’s words, rather than Matthew Arnold’s, can better sum up the present condition:

“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” (1971, 276)

Toby Young, Jo Marney and, more generally, the publicly mediated language of offense, are best understood as morbid symptoms of the interregnum.

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*New media & society* 13 (5), 788-806

1. Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*, originally published 1857. The final three lines read:

   “And we are here as on a darkling plain

   Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

   Where ignorant armies clash by night.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)