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# Alternative spelling and censorship: the treatment of profanities in virtual communities

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## Introduction

Discourse on the internet is characterized by the paradoxical ability of users to write and communicate in alternative ways, with minimal supervision or external regularization—in most, not all communities—while new norms arise and are replaced according to users of virtual communities.

On most websites, there is no regulating organ, except the Terms of Service that every registered user has to abide by. The standard version (used on websites like Facebook) includes a clause stipulating that the user should not: “*use the Services [...] to : upload, post, transmit, share, [...] any User content [deemed] harmful, threatening, unlawful, defamatory, infringing, abusive, inflammatory, harassing, vulgar, obscene, [...] hateful, or racially, ethnically or otherwise objectionable*”. A way to avoid these abuses of the service is to use automated censorship scripts, which neutralizes offensive words and expressions with a simple substitution command. The problem with such pieces of software lies in the fact that users of forums and network websites can decide to circumvent these through different strategies aiming at respelling incriminating words. As the corpus at hand is taken from a particular setting (the most important African American related website, *Black Planet*), other layers of identification, anti-identification and name-calling will come into play.

The study of the mechanisms to counteract censorship without stopping to use profanities, as well as impolite behaviors and insults, are the main topics of this paper. It tackles the delimitation of the cat-and-mouse play between users and censorship scripts through alternative spellings (which are not to be confused with involuntary spelling mistakes), as well as the double status of certain expressions. Gender distribution of insults and name-calling will also be addressed.

The parameters of censorship online are the first topic of the study. The typology of uses (and abuses) on the Internet, with a determination of the overlapping scope of alternative spellings and spelling mistakes, is the core of the second part of this study, as well as words bearing ambiguous meanings codified through sets of alternative spellings. Face-work, that is the study of social strategies used in order to give or claim value in interpersonal relations, can also be used in order to examine the difference between ritual name-calling and actual impolite, offensive discourse. The use of community-centered profanities and insults—with or without the actual will to insult—is the subject of the final part of this study. Do pseudonyms illustrate the divorce between society's etiquette and a niche website's new conventions, or the semantic shift of African American expressions? Community-centered insults are used, and are only understandable by members of certain subgroups (gangs, for instance).

## 1. CENSORSHIP ON THE INTERNET

### 1.1. Hypotheses around the use of alternative spellings

The hypotheses relating to the use of alternative spellings are mainly the need for cohesion (Rourke et al., 2001). Users of internet forums are aggregated around common, shared values, and sharing an alternative spelling (the only form of communication on these forums is writing) allows them to share tools (the alternative tokens) to their fellow forum members. The replicated tokens, if successful, spread exponentially through the whole forum (sometimes out

too, if it is especially good), through a memetic process<sup>1</sup>. Frequent users of internet platforms need a sense of belonging, and this can be expressed through alternative spellings, or words belonging to their community only (whether in real life or online).

The second aspect of the use of alternative spellings is the playfulness involved in creating and coining new expressions. These spellings can be combinations of different codes (use of non-alphabetical characters, punctuation, numbers, layout of the text etc.). Each user can thus create a unique, stylized version of discourse (within the limits of intelligibility). This playfulness is twofold. It is also a sign of free, unchecked discourse. As the users' utterances are not monitored actively, they can say virtually anything they want, in any possible way.

Some parameters play against the use of alternative forms: first, the problem of intelligibility can hinder some users from understanding the contents of a message, especially when the user uses either a complex code or a high frequency of coded words in her discourse. Certain codes (such as replacing letters by punctuation) can also be harder to decipher if the reader has not been exposed to it (Stavfeldt, 2011). Age and exposure to Netspeak<sup>2</sup> have to be taken into account. The older a user is, the less likely she is to use alternative forms and extreme forms of Netspeak (such as Leet<sup>3</sup>).

Serious discussions or arguments also trigger the use of proper, traditional spellings. Playfulness and rebellion against norms may be expressed through alternative spellings, but when the subject matter becomes more serious, or that the need to be credible or convincing arises, the proportion of alternative spellings in the discourse falls.

## 1.2 Censorship online

Messages can be censored if they do not comply with the Terms of Service in vigor in most online platforms. Websites tend to have two layers of censorship. Their efficiency depends on their level: human intervention, which occurs after the incriminating message has been posted; and mechanical, computer-based deletion or substitutions, prior to the message's appearance on the platform.

First, the most common actor in online censorship is the team of moderators and administrator(s), whose role is to ensure smooth exchanges within the limits fixed by the community. Moderators are also helped by users, who can flag offensive messages. On *Facebook*, any comment can be censored, and marked either as spam, or as an abuse<sup>4</sup>. This decentralization of power allows a greater coverage of the contents of an online platform, and contributes to the cohesive aspect necessary to any online community.

Cruder censorship is exerted through censoring scripts. They contain a list of offensive swearing and profanity, and systematically replace incriminating words. Like website, like censorship script, and if some tend to replace words with somewhat creative alternatives, like *Something Awful*, which uses 'gently caress' for *fuck*, others like *Cracked* turn to a Hamito-Semitic substitution of vowels for asterisks. *Black Planet* replaces offensive lexemes by "%#&@\$!". This method of censoring is a source of inconsistencies: if the censorship script only recognizes a series of characters, it can correct perfectly viable words: *jap* is deemed offensive, but *Japan*, or *Japanese* bear no derogatory meaning. Yet, they are all treated the same by *Cracked*'s censorship module, because it does not distinguish the insulting apocope from the standard words.

*Cracked* also allows users to show or hide profanities in the comments<sup>5</sup>. This feature creates discrepancies between certain headlines containing profanities, such as "*The 5 most statistically full of shit national stereotypes*"—and, as a result, of the URL to access them<sup>6</sup>—and the answers and reactions from *Cracked*'s readership.

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<sup>1</sup> i.e. small cultural units reproduced and imitated the same way genes are propagated (Dawkins, 1989, Blackmore, 1998)

<sup>2</sup> The concept of Netspeak represents "the words, idioms, spelling and grammatical features proper to communication on the internet" (Crystal, 2001; McFedries, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> Leet was originally a "secret" form of writing, used by hackers, and very similar to a written form of slang. It consists in replacing all letters by graphically similar numbers or symbols.

<sup>4</sup> An online form allows users to determine the kind and the degree of abuse (hate speech, insults towards a member, or even identity theft).

<sup>5</sup> The default setting is "hide profanity".

The problem illustrated by *Black Planet*'s entire word deletion is twofold. First, there may be cases where the deleted token is not readily retrievable ("I'm not a %#&@\$! " can have several potential meanings, not understandable without the context. This script also recognizes strings of characters, and introduces a space after the filtered word. To the untrained eye, the sequence "%#&@\$! s" could appear as puzzling, with the presence of the <s>. However, this is only the plural form of any censored word.

Censorship scripts, especially older ones, only censor a certain list of words, and there is no official list of the most insulting words, only subjective lists around the most (in)famous profanities—the F-and the N-word, to name but a few. On *Black Planet*, the censored words<sup>7</sup> are: *ass*, *bitch*, *cunt*, *faggot*, *fuck*, *nigger*, *pussy* and *shit*. They are either body parts and bodily functions, or derogatory words for certain groups of people (except for *fuck*)<sup>8</sup>. However, other (potentially) offensive words, like *damn*, *dick*, *dyke*, *jap*, *piss* or *suck* do not belong to the script's list of stop words.

Censorship scripts vary in efficiency, and in the degree of alternation of words they apply (whether partial or complete replacing). Users who want to be understood and maintain free, unchecked dialogues while still using words of their own choice resort to using alternative spellings to circumvent censorship of their messages.

## 2. TYPOLOGY OF AB-USES

### 2.1 Alternative spellings and spelling mistakes

Alternative spellings and spelling mistakes share common mechanisms—and graphic representations—and distinguishing between them is not an easy task. Most of the time, especially in this corpus where all the users are native English speakers, the errors occur in only two stages where potential spelling mistakes can arise: spelling and typing<sup>9</sup>. Spelling mistakes occur when the users are unsure of the graphic sequence corresponding to their sound representation of the given word. For instance, <familyer> [familiar], or <edmit> [admit] are spelling mistakes, because they show the incorrect selection of graphic sequences (<yer> and <e> respectively) for the sounds in unaccented syllables /jə/ and /ə/.

Typing mistakes include the number of characters of a word, and the layout of the keyboard. Possible typing mistakes can be insertion and deletion of letters, (<grannt> [grant], <tht> [that]), substitutions of a letter for another if they are close on the keyboard, (<gaon> [gain]), or metatheses (<voilence> [violence]).

In this paper, the term “spelling mistake” is used to refer to both spelling and typing mistakes, because they are both assumed to be involuntary. Typing mistakes occur when the user displays little attention to proofreading, and chooses not to edit the message after its publication (when the possibility is offered).

The list of criteria necessary to distinguish spelling mistakes and alternatively spelt items is short, and knowledge of the context and the users is necessary. Alternative spellings can be used to convey a humorous meaning (code-switching towards a more vernacular dialect), and the consistency of alternately spelt items, as well as the usage of uncommon graphophonemic conversions can lead to the emergence of voluntary alternates.

### 2.2 Alternative spellings

For *Black Planet*'s censored words, the most frequent alternates are: ‘azz’ [ass] (13 840 occurrences<sup>10</sup>), ‘bytch’ [bitch] (1 605 occurrences), ‘fucc’ [fuck] (819 occurrences), ‘nigga’ [nigger] (3 759 occurrences), and ‘shyt’ [shit] (14 593 occurrences). The most common strategy to alter a word, while retaining intelligibility is to replace one letter or one phoneme only, while trying to retain the word's length. The substitution goes to the closest phoneme if needed

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<sup>6</sup> <[http://www.cracked.com/article\\_18409\\_the-5-most-statistically-full-of-shit-national-stereotypes.html](http://www.cracked.com/article_18409_the-5-most-statistically-full-of-shit-national-stereotypes.html)>

<sup>7</sup> This list was inspired by various short lists of insults and profanities, and comprises lexemes which are generally recognized as such. A definitive list does not exist, because words deemed insulting or profane depend on the users, and the recipient of degrading words.

<sup>8</sup> For a more precise account of these categories, cf Allan and Burridge (2006).

<sup>9</sup> For non-native speakers, the construction of words can be problematic, and lead to the selection of incorrect affixes.

<sup>10</sup> In forum messages on *Black Planet*, as of the 20<sup>th</sup> of May, 2011.

(as for *ass/azz*, where only the phonological trait [+voiced] changes the word). Vowels are exchanged only when there is an equivalent sound value (/i/ can be represented by both <i> and <y>). However, the monosyllabic nature of most of these insults, along with the fact that minimal pairs may parasite comprehensibility, explains why other vowels are not altered. The phenomenon of lexical competition explains why *bitch* could not evolve as ‘batch’, ‘botch’, or ‘butch’, because all these lexemes already exist. That accounts for the equal proportion of vowels and consonants affected by the substitution.

These spellings are used across *Black Planet*, by different participants, and are accepted as “alternative standards”. They undergo derivations, such as *ni99a*, *nikka* or *nigg*, all based on ‘nigga’. All of these variants are hapax legomena. *Ni99a* and its substitution of <g> with <9> is based on a paradigmatic alteration based on the iconic resemblance between the letter and the number. *Nikka* follows the pattern of a single phonological trait substitution ([±voiced]) and replaces /g/ with /k/. The form *nigg*, an apocope, neutralizes the ending altogether and cancels the polysemy. These further transformations show that *nigga* is acknowledged to be a recognizable form.

Other “alternative standards” are less attested and used, so they undergo greater transformations: ‘shyt’ is replaced by *shyte* or *sh!t*. The former spelling is a mere addition of <e> at the end of the word, suggesting a pronunciation closer to the British /ʃaɪt/, but probably only a typographic device to avoid censorship. The latter is a further proof that keeping the word’s length is important and that paradigmatic replacement is a valid method of substitution. The exclamation mark can be seen as a reversed <i>, thus a good visual replacement for it.

## 2.3 Polysemic confusions

*Nigger* is the only word in the corpus for which the paradigm “the [N-] word” is used. Its dual meaning, highlighted by the use of two different endings, <-er> and <-a>, according to its meaning, makes it extremely versatile. The substitution of the <-er> for <-a> in *nigga* is twofold: it is the written sign of R-dropping, while expressing the semantic shift from the extremely derogatory *nigger* to *nigga*, an example of empowerment through reappropriation of offensive lexemes (Godrej, 2003). This form is attested in many African American medias (especially hip hop culture), and is mainly accepted as a different word by African Americans.

The use of *nigger*, at least in the corpus, is always negative. It clearly belongs to the category of positive face-threatening acts even if the lexeme is not used by members to insult each other. Example 1 illustrates the immediate judgment (enhanced by the racial tension between a Caucasian speaker insulting an African American hearer) passed onto this lexeme:

- 1) [White people] did refer to us by the “N” word (unacceptable) (From the forum’s thread “Are black people more racist than whites?”)

The status of *nigga* is a little less clear-cut. The word in itself may bear a more positive connotation, in comparison with *nigger*, but its generic uses on *Black Planet* may suggest otherwise. In example set 2, it is used generically, and is a sign of positive politeness in a), because it is flattering and gives a sense of solidarity and friendship, and can be paraphrased as “you are my (close) friend”. Examples 2b and 2c illustrate the general understanding that a “real nigga” (29 000 occurrences of the expression across the site) is a positive, face flattering expression. The phrase *real nigga* emphasizes the importance of being a ‘real man’, and enforces the idea of positive virility and power (Muehleisen & Migge, 2005):

- 2)
  - a. *you`re my nigga!* (in a personal profile)
  - b. *A real nigga should be treated like one...* (in a personal profile)
  - c. *All real nigga’s drive Chevy’s* (name of a group<sup>11</sup>)

The axiological shift from a positive to a negative connotation is achieved when *nigga* is followed by the adjective *lame*, as illustrated by the example set 3<sup>12</sup>. A *lame (ass) nigga* is an insulting reversal of values from a ‘(real) nigga’, as in example 2a. The user describes himself as the opposite of a ‘lame ass nigga’—that is, as a ‘trill ass nigga’, a successful and attractive man—in a binary opposition between the two phrases. Example 2b confirms this shift: since the user has a job, he is the contrary of a ‘broke ass lame nigga’. In this phrase, *ass* is used as a modifier, and reinforces the negative adjective ‘broke’.

<sup>11</sup> Members can decide to join groups based on common interests.

<sup>12</sup> There are 10 000 occurrences of ‘lame nigga’ on *Black Planet*.

Example 2c is the frontal, insulting use of the phrase ‘lame nigga’. This positive face-threatening act is even strengthened by the deletion of the copula (a feature of African American Vernacular English).

3)

- a. *ALL THESE GIRLS IN AUSTIN WHO WANT A TRILL ASS NIGGA NOT A LAME ASS NIGGA GET AT ME* (in a personal profile)
- b. *I got me a job so naw im not a broke azz lame nigga* (in a personal profile)
- c. *you one lame nigga* (From the forum’s thread “\*Google\*....i mean....\*Giggle\*”)

Pragmatic studies and context are the most important criteria to understand the axiological shift between the two aspects of *nigg-er/-a*, along with the finer indication offered by modifiers. The most common misconception could be around the graphic shift from the “one of the most racially offensive words in the language”<sup>13</sup> and its apparently less aggressive counterpart *nigga*.

The word *bitch* (and its alternative spelling *bytch*) is another example of polysemy. Its alternative spelling cannot compare with *nigga*—it is almost 400 times less frequently used than its orthographic counterpart online<sup>14</sup>, whereas *nigga* registers about three times more results than *nigger*.

The analysis of *bitch* is based on the study of comments to an article entitled “*Why Do Women Like To Be Called A “Bad B\*\*\*\*”?*” published on *Hello Beautiful*<sup>15</sup>. Its readership is made of *Black Planet* users, who use their accounts to write comments. In her article, Sharde Gilliam opposes a derogatory and negative value [trashy and poor attitude and just an overall bad personality]—without any reference to the original meaning of the word—to a more positive value: a feminine equivalent to “boss”, “a woman of power”. Out of the 67 comments, 60% (40 comments) expressed contempt, comparing *bitch* to the use of *nigga*, i.e. a degrading and sexist slur. Attractiveness and positive face are also threatened by the use of such a word for many users: they either shun women who self-describe as ‘bitches’, or predict they will not be able to get married.

Only 4%<sup>16</sup> of the users (3 messages) do not react negatively to the lexeme, although women who use it for themselves perceive it as insulting when said by a man. The positive aspect of the word is reinforced by the use of the adjective *bad(d)*. A *bad(d) bytch* is a positive, face flattering name, whether used for oneself, as in example 4a, or in 4b, where the (male) user describes an attractive woman: ‘bad bytch’ is here the synonym of ‘cool as hell’. However, example 4c proves that *bad bytch* and *bytch* are interchangeable, even if this user (a woman) keeps both meanings intertwined when expressing her negative face while potentially threatening the reader’s positive face. She claims she is not to be bothered by anybody, and boasts when she emphasizes her sentence by capitalizing the word *bytch*, and uses exclamation marks:

4)

- a. *Bad Bytch’s Of All Year Around* (name of a group)
- b. *Basically im lookin 4 a bad bytch* (in a personal profile)
- c. *I am the ruthless BYTCH I am today, cause I’m the true definition of a bad BYTCH!!!* (in a personal profile)

Although all the users do not share the same point of view, certain groups exploit the double meaning of words. Context has more weight than spelling when it comes to the axiological shift, whether said context is extended, or limited to a few words. However, frequent users of online platforms have incorporated the alternative spellings, and use them (although the spelling *bytch* is only popular because of censorship).

### 3. USING INSULTS V. INSULTING

The ritual use of insults and the reappropriation of certain words explain the shift between using insults, along with the act of insulting. What is usually deemed offensive in standard (American) English is integrated in certain users’

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<sup>13</sup> According to the OED (1989).

<sup>14</sup> In a *Google* search, using the same parameters.

<sup>15</sup> a satellite news site connected to *Black Planet*

<sup>16</sup> The remaining 36 percent are composed of jokes, answers not commenting on the main subject, spam or irrelevant messages.

productions and community-centered<sup>17</sup> discourse as a whole illustrates this shift. Pseudonyms are a full-fledged part of online presence, while community-based insults thrive on an almost unchecked ground.

### 3.1 The treatment of pseudonyms

Pseudonyms represent the first image users show others. They are the first message they send out, and embody face, and how the bearer sees himself or others around him. Unsurprisingly, the two most frequent profanities used as pseudonyms are *nigga* and *bytch*. They are used as pseudonyms once for every 4.33 and 4.13 occurrences in the forums, respectively, hence highlighting the importance of their use to describe oneself (as a comparison, *azz* is used once for every 14.23 occurrences on the forum, and *shyt*, once for every 25.11 presence in messages).

Out of the 20 million users of *Black Planet*, only 873 use *nigga* in their pseudonyms, and 388 pseudonyms contain the word *bytch*. This seems to illustrate the axiological shift for certain users. Users turning to *nigga* are mainly males (97%), and they are fairly young, between the age of 18 and 22. Pseudonyms enter two big categories: either *nigga* is followed by a number (area code, zip code, date, enforcing the idea of closeness...), or by a short phrase or sentence ('nigga4life', 'niggaUneed'...) in a smaller proportion—46% of all cases. They enforce the positive view on the lexeme, as only 2% were of a racist or derogatory nature ('nigga-hater', for instance). It is accepted by the great majority as a positive nickname, and is integrated to a process of self-identification.

However, the usernames containing *bytch* are less innocuous. Although the great majority (87%) is used by female users, the proportion is lesser than *nigga*'s. This is peculiar, because two-third of all the users of *Black Planet* are women<sup>18</sup>. Almost 70% of users use *bytch* along with a phrase, but the most striking particularity is the fact that it is often used as a vocative addressed to all other users: when it is used by men, it is often insulting. They either describe themselves ('bytch-hater'), or address a putative female user ('BYTCH\_DONT\_BITE'). This type of face-threatening act can go as far as 'BYTCH\_i\_WILL\_SMAC\_U'<sup>19</sup>, that is a plain physical threat along with the use of an insulting vocative. *Bytch* is less commonly associated with positive, face flattering pseudonyms than *nigga*, and this shift results in direct threats. It is possible to link this phenomenon with various African American ritualized exchanges based on insults, such as "sounding" or "signifying" (Campbell, 1997), that is a form of verbal joust where the speaker has to assert his or her power by belittling the opponent.

### 3.2 Community-based insults: gang rhetoric

The presence of gang members online (whether actual ones, or people pretending they belong to a gang) is the ideal setting in order to analyze signifying, and its codified spellings. The two most important African American gangs are the Bloods and the Crips, and sub-organizations exist throughout the United States. These dangerous crime organizations demand their members to prove their allegiance while insulting the opposite gang, by displaying shows of virility and power (Muehleisen & Migge, 2005). Spoken gang slang is highly codified, and laced with African American Vernacular expressions. Example sets 5 and 6 illustrate Crip and Blood discourses, along with an analytical transcription:

#### 5) Example set : Crip discourse (in personal profiles)

- a. *WATZ CRACCIN BKPK AND A MY TRUE LOCZ OUT DER YALL FAKE ASS WANNA C CRIPKZ NEED TO STOPK CEFO U GET GOT YA FEEL ME CUZ. [...] TO ALL DA MUTHAPUCKIN SLOBKZ DONT SEND ME NO SHIT BKEEF CUZ THAT SHIT AINT GANGSTA BKANGIN ON THA NET STOPK IT.* (What's going on BP? I am a true Crips out there. All of you fake wannabe Crips need to stop posing before you get killed, do you understand me, cousin [= term of endearment between Crips]? To all the motherf\*\*\*king Bloods, don't send me beef [= threats/taunts], because this is not being a gangster online, so stop it.)
- b. *Yea THIS BKE YOUR BKOY RAY AKA SCOOBKIE NI66A HOOD IM AM FOR MAFIAS TO DA DA I DIE YEA I RUN THAT BKLOCC CITY FOLK GANG AKA BKFG AN LADY MAFIAS THAT IT TO ALL THEM HATER OUT THERE IF IT BKEEF GET THAT 6 POPPIN x5 DROPPIN ALL DAY* (Yeah, this is your boy Ray aka Scoobie Nigga Hood. I am for mafias until the day I die. Yeah I run that Block City Folk Gang aka BFG and Lady Mafia. That is for all the haters out there; if there is beef [= trouble/taunts], Crips will shoot, and Bloods will die all day.)

#### 6) Example set : Blood discourse (in personal profiles)

- a. *Ayo,wuz PoPPin in di5 BitcKh ??? Di5 dat 1 and only nigga Nightmare reppin dat 55 Piru Homicide Blood Family ya heard ??? cKraBz need 2 exit,faget a55 niggaz need 2 follow right Behind that,Be5ide5 dat if u cKool people5*

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<sup>17</sup> Whether the community is *Black Planet*, or a larger, sociocultural community.

<sup>18</sup> 65.6% according to official figures published in October 2010

<sup>19</sup> The use of lowercase <i> is merely stylistic. Certain prefer to write in uppercase except for this letter as they want to use a negative mirror of standard English ('I' being the only capitalized letter when it is a pronoun, they use it in lowercase)

*and u lookin fo a friend,im dat nigga ya heard ???* (Yo, what's going on here? This is the one and only Nightmare representing the 55 Piru Homicide Blood Family, do you understand? Crips need to get out of here, gay people should follow right after them, besides that if you are cool and looking for a friend, I'm the man, ok?)

- b. *THIS IS YO BLOODY NIGGA TEVIN KILLIN ALL THEM CKRAB5 AND DOUNUT5 FUCK A BIX POINTED STAR FIVE POINT TIL I DIE BITCH HOP-TOWN I DON'T PLAY NO MOTH A FU5KING GAMES AROUND HERE IT IS NUTTIN BUT BLOOD5 ANY DOUNUT OR CKRAB WILL GET THEY A55 SHOT LIKE SOME BIT5HE5 I EAT DOUNUT5 FO BREAKFAST I EAT CKRAB LEG5 FO 4 OF JULY.* (This is your nigga Tevin killing all Crips and Disciples<sup>20</sup>, f\*\*\* the six-pointed star [=the Crip symbol]. I will be a five-pointed star [= Blood] until I die in Hopkins, SC. I am not joking, I'm a serious Blood, and any Disciple or Crip will get his a\*\* shot like a dog. I eat Disciples for breakfast and Crips for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July).

Right after a short introduction, all 4 members assert their belonging to a gang, and dismiss the rival gang(s) and their members. The important feature of each group's discourse is the fact that high symbolic value is given to certain letters: Crips favor the letter C and Bloods B (along with P, the initial letter of Piru<sup>21</sup>). As a result, both groups turn to alternative spellings to neutralize the rival's grapheme, and emphasize theirs. Crips always use <k> after <b>, while Bloods use <k> after <c>, because <k> stands for the word 'killer', thus saying that the authors are Blood or Crip killers. These insults are gratuitous, and only based on the graphemes they use. Example 6a is the only one where the presentation is written in lowercase, and <k> is systematically capitalized when it follows a <c>. The letters <b> and <p> are also always capitalized (to enforce the gang's importance). In both examples 6a and 6b, <s> is always replaced by the number <5>, first because of its graphic resemblance with the letter; along with the fact it represents the Bloods. A six-pointed star is the symbol of the Crips, so the user in example 5b turns to the number <6> to replace <g> in the word 'NI66A'. Another strategy used to nullify the opponent's letter is to replace it with one's own. The main risk is to jeopardize intelligibility in case of lexical competition instead of using an iconic substitution (play on characters' resemblance). Clarity can be at stake, lest the reader knows about such substitutions, and can trace the original word. In monosyllabic words, this can prove to be difficult, as in example 5a 'wanna c' [wannabe], or example 6 b 'bix pointed star' [six pointed star]. This method is less favored than adding extra letters, because it is not as offensive to the rival gang.

Commonly used insults such as 'slobs' for Bloods and 'crabs' for Crips are well-documented, and belong to gang slang. They are derogatory on at least two levels: first, the standard meanings of 'crab' and 'slob' are negative, and would be insulting as such, for non-gang members. These words have not been selected because of their original meaning, but because they are phonetically close to 'Crip' and 'Blood', and offer a disparaging, twisted image of the name of these gangs. They are insulting the very face of the rival, creating a parody to belittle its importance (and the importance of its members as a whole).

Face is important not only for the user, but also for the gang he is representing. Hence, facelattering expressions and codes are used to praise the gang, and these reflect on the user as well. However, the rival gang—and its members—has to be threatened in these standardized exchanges to assert the power, manliness and potential danger the user represents. This type of ritualized insults finds a unique setting online, since the users can profess as many profanities as they want against their enemy without possible, immediate retaliation.

## Conclusion

Content and context are very important, and they are to be kept in mind when studying censorship online. The conveyed meaning is always more important than the words users select, so computer-based censorship cannot keep up with simple substitutions of letters, let alone community-based insults which do not belong to any standardized list of profanities.

Using insults can be positive, as for the word *nigga*, although it is not recognized as such universally. This form of the word already existed (in songs, and in certain sociocultural settings), and virtual communities users circumvent censorship, while creating full-fledged alternative spellings. These are recognized as such, and *nigga* is more frequent online than its standard counterpart, showing its successful entrance as an almost independent lexeme. However, there is no real lexical creation, only the adaptation of preexisting words. Polysemic confusions are easily avoided by using alternative spellings, and positive profanity is important to some who use expletives to describe themselves.

Certain codified insults and forms of slang, although extremely offensive, are not neutralized correctly by the censorship scripts: gang insults are a complex network on forbidden and allowed combinations of letters and numbers,

<sup>20</sup> 'Donut' is a disparaging term used for another African American gang, the (Gangster) Disciples, based in Chicago.

<sup>21</sup> Piru is a street in Compton, a suburb of Los Angeles, where gangs merged into the Bloods.



along with slang and ritual sentences, and only a human intervention could circumvent such divergences from the Term of Services. Ritualized impoliteness and face threatening acts struggle against normative censorship, but users always find a way to convey their intended meaning. The automated tool proves to be irrelevant to the kind of interactions held on community websites, and only prevents the most obvious profane words to be written, without preventing insults.

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