

# The Toxoplasma Of Rage

*Posted on December 17, 2014 by Scott Alexander*



I

Some old news I only just heard about: PETA is [offering to pay the water bills](#) for needy Detroit families if (and only if) those families agree to stop eating meat.

Predictably, the move caused a backlash. The International Business Times, in what I can only assume is an attempted pun, describes them as [“drowning in backlash”](#). Groundswell thinks it’s a [“big blunder”](#). Daily Banter says it’s [“exactly why everyone hates PETA”](#). Jezebel calls them [“assholes”](#).

Of course, this is par for the course for PETA, who have previously engaged in campaigns like throwing red paint on fashion models who wear fur, juxtaposing pictures of animals with Holocaust victims, juxtaposing pictures of animals with African-American slaves, and ads featuring naked people that cross the line into pornography.

People call these things “blunders”, but consider the alternative. [Vegan Outreach](#) is an extremely responsible charity doing excellent

and unimpeachable work in the same area PETA is. Nobody has heard of them. *Everybody* has heard of PETA, precisely because of the interminable stupid debates about “did this publicity stunt cross the line?”

While not everyone is a vegan, most people who learn enough about factory farming are upset by it. There is pretty much zero room for PETA to convert people from pro-factory-farming to anti-factory-farming, because there aren't any radical grassroots pro-factory-farming activists to be found. Their problem isn't lack of agreement. It's lack of attention.

PETA creates attention, but at a cost. Everybody's talking about PETA, which is sort of like everybody talking about ethical treatment of animals, which is sort of a victory. But most of the talk is “I hate them and they make me really angry.” Some of the talk is even “I am going to eat a lot more animals just to make PETA mad.”

I HAVE BEEN VEGAN  
SINCE 1999.

It's important to me. I would love it  
if more people adopted a vegan or  
vegetarian lifestyle.

BUT IF PETA USES GOING  
VEGAN AS A CONDITION FOR  
GIVING PEOPLE IN DETROIT  
ACCESS TO WATER I WILL  
EAT MEAT FOR EVERYDAY IT  
CONTINUES

PETA: JUST PAY THE WATER  
BILLS BECAUSE IT'S THE  
RIGHT THING TO DO

★ STOP MAKING VEGANS LOOK LIKE ASSHOLES

So there's a tradeoff here, with Vegan Outreach on one side and PETA on the other.

Vegan Outreach can get everyone to agree in principle that factory-farming is bad, but no one will pay any attention to it.

And PETA can get everyone to pay attention to factory farming, but a lot of people who would otherwise oppose it will switch to supporting it just because they're so mad at the way it's being publicized.

But at least they're paying attention!

PETA doesn't shoot themselves in the foot because they're stupid. They shoot themselves in the foot because they're traveling up an incentive gradient that rewards them for doing so, even if it destroys their credibility.



The University of Virginia rape case profiled in *Rolling Stone* has fallen apart. In doing so, it joins a long and distinguished line of highly-publicized rape cases that have fallen apart. Studies sometimes claim that only 2 to 8 percent of rape allegations are false. Yet the rate for allegations that go ultra-viral in the media must be an order of magnitude higher than this. As the old saying goes, once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, three times is enemy action.

The enigma is complicated by the observation that it's usually feminist activists who are most instrumental in taking these stories viral. It's not some conspiracy of pro-rape journalists choosing the most dubious accusations in order to discredit public trust. It's people specifically selecting these incidents as flagship cases for their campaign that rape victims need to be believed and trusted. So why are the most publicized cases so much more likely to be false than the almost-always-true average case?

Several people have remarked that false accusers have more leeway to make their stories as outrageous and spectacular as possible. But I want to focus on two less frequently mentioned concerns.

The Consequentialism FAQ explains signaling in moral decisions like so:

When signaling, the more expensive and useless the item is, the more effective it is as a signal. Although eyeglasses are expensive, they're a poor way to signal wealth because they're very useful; a person might get them not because they're very rich but because they really need glasses. On the other hand, a large diamond is an excellent signal; no one needs a large diamond, so anybody who gets one anyway must have money to burn.

Certain answers to moral dilemmas can also send signals. For example, a Catholic man who opposes the use of condoms demonstrates to others (and to himself!) how faithful

and pious a Catholic he is, thus gaining social credibility. Like the diamond example, this signaling is more effective if it centers upon something otherwise useless. If the Catholic had merely chosen not to murder, then even though this is in accord with Catholic doctrine, it would make a poor signal because he might be doing it for other good reasons besides being Catholic – just as he might buy eyeglasses for reasons beside being rich. It is precisely because opposing condoms is such a horrendous decision that it makes such a good signal.

But in the more general case, people can use moral decisions to signal how moral they are. In this case, they choose a disastrous decision based on some moral principle. The more suffering and destruction they support, and the more obscure a principle it is, the more obviously it shows their commitment to following their moral principles absolutely. For example, Immanuel Kant claims that if an axe murderer asks you where your best friend is, obviously intending to murder her when he finds her, you should tell the axe murderer the full truth, because lying is wrong. This is effective at showing how moral a person you are – no one would ever doubt your commitment to honesty after that – but it's sure not a very good result for your friend.

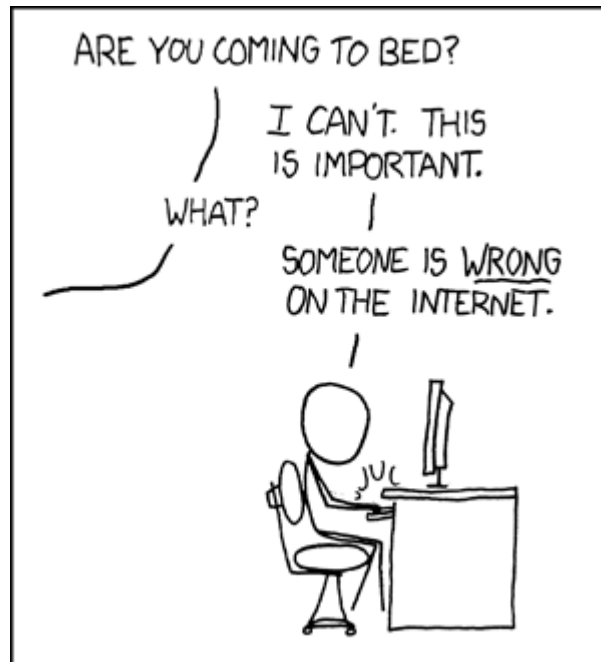
In the same way, publicizing how strongly you believe an accusation that is obviously true signals nothing. Even hard-core anti-feminists would believe a rape accusation that was caught on video. A moral action that can be taken just as well by an outgroup member

as an ingroup member is crappy signaling and crappy identity politics. If you want to signal how strongly you believe in taking victims seriously, you talk about it in the context of the least credible case you can find.

But aside from that, there's the PETA Principle: the more controversial something is, the more it gets talked about.

A rape that obviously happened? Shove it in people's face and they'll admit it's an outrage, just as they'll admit factory farming is an outrage. But they're not going to talk about it much. There are a zillion outrages every day, you're going to need more than that to draw people out of their shells.

On the other hand, the controversy over dubious rape allegations is exactly that – a controversy. People start screaming at each other about how they're misogynist or misandrist or whatever, and Facebook feeds get filled up with hundreds of comments in all capital letters about how my ingroup is being persecuted by your ingroup. At each step, more and more people get triggered and upset. Some of those triggered people do emergency ego defense by reblogging articles about how the group that triggered them are terrible, triggering further people in a snowball effect that spreads the issue further with every iteration.



[source](#)

Only controversial things get spread. A rape allegation will only be spread if it's dubious enough to split people in half along lines corresponding to identity politics. An obviously true rape allegation will only be spread if the response is controversial enough to split people in half along lines corresponding to identity politics – which is why so much coverage focuses on the proposal that all accused rapists should be treated as guilty until proven innocent.

Everybody hates rape just like everybody hates factory farming. “Rape culture” doesn’t mean most people like rape, it means most people ignore it. That means feminists face the same double-bind that PETA does.



First, they can respond to rape in a restrained and responsible way, in which case everyone will be against it and nobody will talk about it.

Second, they can respond to rape in an outrageous and highly controversial way, in which case everybody will talk about it but it will autocatalyze an opposition of people who hate feminists and obsessively try to prove that as many rape allegations as possible are false.

I have yet to see anyone holding a cardboard sign talking about how they are going to rape people just to make feminists mad, but it's only a matter of time. Like PETA, their incentive gradient dooms them to shoot themselves in the foot again and again.



Slate recently published an article about white people's contrasting reactions to the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson versus the Eric Garner choking in NYC. And man, it is *some* contrast. [A Pew poll found that](#) of white people who expressed an opinion about the Ferguson case, 73% sided with the officer. Of white people who expressed an opinion about the Eric Garner case, 63% sided with the black victim.

Media opinion follows much the same pattern. Arch-conservative Bill O'Reilly [said](#) he was "absolutely furious" about the way "the liberal media" and "race hustlers" had "twisted the story" about Fer-

guson in the service of “lynch mob justice” and “insulting the American police community, men and women risking their lives to protect us”. But when it came to Garner, O’Reilly [said](#) he was “extremely troubled” and that “there was a police overreaction that should have been adjudicated in a court of law.” His guest on FOX News, conservative commentator and fellow Ferguson-detractor Charles Krauthammer added that “From looking at the video, the grand jury’s decision [not to indict] is totally incomprehensible.” Saturday Night Live did [a skit](#) about Al Sharpton talking about the Garner case and getting increasingly upset because “For the first time in my life, everyone agrees with me.”

This follows about three months of most of America being at one another’s throats pretty much full-time about Ferguson. We got treated to a daily diet of articles like [Ferguson Protester On White People: “Y’all The Devil”](#) or [Black People Had The Power To Fix The Problems In Ferguson Before The Brown Shooting – They Failed](#) or [Most White People In America Are Completely Oblivious](#) and a whole bunch of people sending angry racist editorials and counter-editorials to each other for months. The damage done to race relations is difficult to overestimate – CBS reports that they dropped ten percentage points to the lowest point in twenty years, with over half of blacks now describing race relations as “bad”.

And people say it was all worth it, because it raised awareness of police brutality against black people, and if that rustles some people’s jimmies, well, all the worse for them.

But the Eric Garner case also would have raised awareness of police brutality against black people, and everybody would have agreed about it. It has become increasingly clear that, given sufficiently indisputable evidence of police being brutal to a black person, pretty much everyone in the world condemns it equally strongly.

And it's not just that the Eric Garner case came around too late so we had to make do with the Mike Brown case. Garner was choked a month before Brown was shot, but the story was ignored, then dug back up later as a tie-in to the ballooning Ferguson narrative.

More important, unarmed black people are killed by police or other security officers [about twice a week](#) according to official statistics, and probably much more often than that. You're saying none of these shootings, hundreds each year, made as good a flagship case as Michael Brown? In all this gigantic pile of bodies, you couldn't find *one* of them who hadn't just robbed a convenience store? Not a single one who didn't have ten eyewitnesses and the forensic evidence all saying he started it?

I propose that the Michael Brown case went viral – rather than the Eric Garner case or any of the hundreds of others – because of the PETA Principle. It was controversial. A bunch of people said it was an outrage. A bunch of other people said Brown totally started it, and the officer involved was a victim of a liberal media that was hungry to paint his desperate self-defense as racist, and so the people calling it an outrage were themselves an outrage. Everyone got a great opportunity to signal allegiance to their own political

tribe and discuss how the opposing political tribe were vile racists / evil race-hustlers. There was a steady stream of potentially triggering articles to share on Facebook to provoke your friends and enemies to counter-share articles that would trigger *you*.

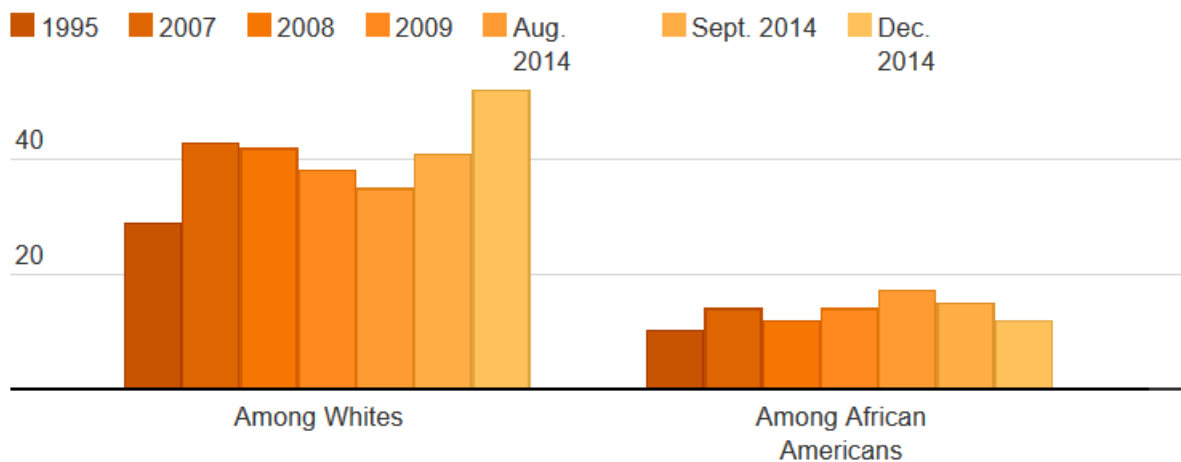
The Ferguson protesters say they have a concrete policy proposal – they want cameras on police officers. There’s only spotty polling on public views of police body cameras before the Ferguson story took off, but what there is seems pretty unanimous. A UK poll showed that [90% of the population of that country](#) wanted police to have body cameras in February. US polls are more of the form “crappy poll widget on a news site” ( [1](#), [2](#), [3](#)) but they all hovered around 80% approval for the past few years. I also found a poll by Police Magazine in which a plurality of the *police officers* they surveyed wanted to wear body cameras, probably because of evidence that they cut down on false accusations. Even before Ferguson happened, you would have a really hard time finding anybody in or out of uniform who thought police cameras were a bad idea.

And now, after all is said and done, ninety percent of people are still in favor – given methodology issues, the extra ten percent may or may not represent a real increase. The difference between whites and blacks is a rounding error. The difference between Democrats and Republicans is barely worth talking about- 79% of Republicans are still in support. The people who think Officer Darren Wilson is completely innocent and the grand jury was right to release him, the people muttering under their breath about race hustlers and looters – *eighty percent of those people still want cameras on their cops*. If the Ferguson protests didn’t do much to the pub-

lic's views on police body cameras, they sure changed its views on some other things. I wrote before about how preliminary polls say that hearing about Ferguson *increased* white people's confidence in the way the police treat race. Now the less preliminary polls are out, and they show the effect was larger than even I expected.

## Whites' confidence in local police highest on record

How much confidence do you have in police officers in your community to treat blacks and whites equally: A great deal, a fair amount, just some, or very little confidence? Results show % saying they have a "great deal" of confidence



Source: [NBC, NBC/WSJ, Pew Research and USA Today/Gallup national polls](#)

The Washington Post

[source](#)

White people's confidence in the police being racially unbiased increased from 35% before the story took off to 52% today. Could even a deliberate PR campaign by the nation's police forces have done better? I doubt it.

It's possible that this is an artifact of the question's wording – after all, it asks people about their local department, and maybe after seeing what happened in Ferguson, people's local police forces look pretty good by comparison. But then why do black people show the opposite trend?

I think this is exactly what it looks like. Just as PETA's outrageous controversial campaign to spread veganism make people want to eat more animals in order to spite them, so the controversial nature of this particular campaign against police brutality and racism made white people like their local police department even more to spite the people talking about how all whites were racist.

Once again, the tradeoff.

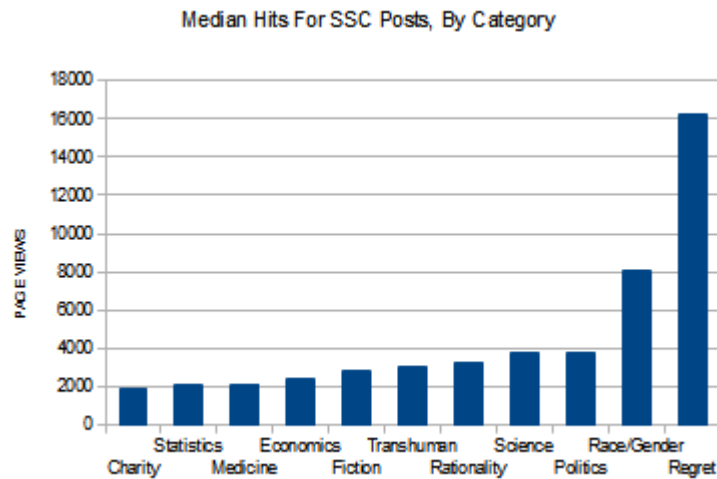
If campaigners against police brutality and racism were extremely responsible, and stuck to perfectly settled cases like Eric Garner, everybody would agree with them but nobody would talk about it.

If instead they bring up a very controversial case like Michael Brown, everybody will talk about it, but they will catalyze their own opposition and make people start supporting the police more just to spite them. More foot-shooting.

## **IV**

Here is a graph of some of the tags I commonly use for my posts, with the average number of hits per post in each tag. It's old, but I

don't want to go through the trouble of making a new one, and the trends have stayed the same since then.



I blog about charity only rarely, but it must be the most important thing I can write about here. Convincing even a few more people to donate to charity, or to redirect their existing donations to a more effective program, can literally save dozens or even hundreds of lives even with the limited reach that a private blog has. It probably does more good for the world than all of the other categories on here combined. But it's completely uncontroversial – everyone agrees it's a good thing – and it is the least viewed type of post.

Compare this to the three most viewed category of post. Politics is self-explanatory. Race and gender are a type of politics even more controversial and outrage-inducing than regular politics. And that “regret” all the way on the right is my “things i will regret writing” tag, for posts that I know are going to start huge fights and probably get me in lots of trouble. They're usually race and gender as

well, but digging deep into the really really controversial race and gender related issues.

The less useful, and more controversial, a post here is, the more likely it is to get me lots of page views.

For people who agree with me, my angry rants on identity politics are a form of ego defense, saying “You’re okay, your in-group was in the right the whole time.” Linking to it both raises their status as an in-group members, and acts as a potential assault on out-group members who are now faced with strong arguments telling them they’re wrong. And the people who disagree with me will sometimes write angry rebuttals on their own blogs, and those rebuttals will link to my own post and spread it further. Or they’ll talk about it with their disagreeing friends, and their friends will get mad and want to tell me I’m wrong, and come over here to read the post to get more ammunition for their counterarguments. I have a feature that tells me who links to all of my posts, so I can see this all happening in real-time.

I don’t make enough money off the ads on this blog to matter much. But if I lived off them, which do you think I’d write more of? Posts about charity which only get me 2,000 paying customers? Or posts that turn all of you against one another like a pack of rabid dogs, and get me 16,000?

I don’t have a fancy bar graph for them, but I bet this same hierarchy of interestingness applies to the great information currents and media outlets that shape society as a whole. It’s in activists’



interests to destroy their own causes by focusing on the most controversial cases and principles, the ones that muddy the waters and make people oppose them out of spite. And it's in the media's interest to help them and egg them on.

## V

And now, for something completely different.

Before “meme” meant doge and all your base, it was a semi-serious attempt to ground cultural evolution in parasitology. The idea was to replace a model of humans choosing whichever ideas they liked with a model of ideas as parasites that evolved in ways that favored their own transmission. This never really caught on, because most people's response was “That's neat. So what?”

But let's talk about toxoplasma.

Toxoplasma is a neat little parasite that is implicated in a couple of human diseases including schizophrenia. Its life cycle goes like this: it starts in a cat. The cat poops it out. The poop and the toxoplasma get in the water supply, where they are consumed by some other animal, often a rat. The toxoplasma morphs into a rat-compatible form and starts reproducing. Once it has strength in numbers, it hijacks the rat's brain, convincing the rat to hang out conspicuously in areas where cats can eat it. After a cat eats the rat, the toxoplasma morphs back into its cat compatible form and re-

produces some more. Finally, it gets pooped back out by the cat, completing the cycle.



*It's the ciiiiircle of life!*

What would it mean for a meme to have a life cycle as complicated as toxoplasma?

Consider the war on terror. They say that every time the United States bombs Pakistan or Afghanistan or somewhere, all we're doing is radicalizing the young people there and making more terrorists. Those terrorists then go on to kill Americans, which makes Americans get very angry and call for more bombing of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Taken as a meme, it's a single parasite with two hosts and two forms. In an Afghan host, it appears in a form called 'jihad', and hijacks its host into killing himself in order to spread it to its sec-

ond, American host. In the American host it morphs in a form called 'the war on terror', and it hijacks the Americans into giving *their* own lives (and tax dollars) to spread it back to its Afghan host in the form of bombs.

From the human point of view, jihad and the War on Terror are opposing forces. From the memetic point of view, they're as complementary as caterpillars and butterflies. Instead of judging, we just note that somehow we accidentally created a replicator, and replicators are going to replicate until something makes them stop.

Replicators are also going to *evolve*. Some Afghan who thinks up a particularly effective terrorist strategy helps the meme spread to more Americans as the resulting outrage fuels the War on Terror. When the American bombing heats up, all of the Afghan villagers radicalized in by the attack will remember the really effective new tactic that Khalid thought up and do *that one* instead of the boring old tactic that barely killed any Americans at all. Some American TV commentator who comes up with a particularly stirring call to retaliation will find her words adopted into party platforms and repeated by pro-war newspapers. While pacifists on both sides work to defuse the tension, the meme is engaging in a counter-effort to become as virulent as possible, until [people start suggesting putting pork fat in American bombs](#) just to make Muslims even *madder*.

And let's talk about Tumblr.

Tumblr's interface doesn't allow you to comment on other people's posts, per se. Instead, it lets you reblog them with your own commentary added. So if you want to tell someone they're an idiot, your only option is to reblog their entire post to all your friends with the message "you are an idiot" below it.

Whoever invented this system either didn't understand memetics, or understood memetics *much too well*.

What happens is – someone makes a statement which is controversial by Tumblr standards, like "Protect Doctor Who fans from kitten pic sharers at all costs." A kitten pic sharer sees the statement, sees red, and reblogs it to her followers with a series of invectives against Doctor Who fans. Since kitten pic sharers cluster together in the social network, soon every kitten pic sharer has seen the insult against kitten pic sharer – as they all feel the need to add their defensive commentary to it, soon all of them are seeing it from ten different directions. The angry invectives get back to the Doctor Who fans, and now *they* feel deeply offended, so they reblog it among themselves with even more condemnations of the kitten pic sharers, who now not only did whatever inspired the enmity in the first place, but have inspired extra hostility because their hateful invectives are right there on the post for everyone to see. So about half the stuff on your dashboard is something you actually want to see, and the other half is towers of alternate insults that look like this:

Protect Doctor Who fans from kitten pic sharers at all costs!

Yeah, seriously, I'm a Doctor Who fan and I can't believe how nasty those kitten pic assholes can be.

REALLY? YOU REALLY WANT TO GO THERE? All I have ever wanted to do is share kitten pictures in peace, and you guys keep spamming my feed with your dumb pictures of Daleks and stuff. And now you're trying to cast yourselves as the oppressed party? Seriously, you make me sick!

At least pictures of Daleks are more interesting than just cats forever 24-7. Also, I would like you to know I am a person of color, and when you say that Doctor Who fans make you sick, you're literally comparing people of color to disease. I guess you probably want to exterminate us, but what else should I expect from cis white male kitten pic sharing scum?

It's you Dalek freaks who are always talking about exterminating.

Oh, God. The ignorance. I can't even...

Reblogging to show everyone just how ignorant kitten pic sharers really are.

I will always reblog posts that call out kitten pic sharers.

Reblogging to show how Doctor Who fans love to gang up against people of color and call them ignorant.

107,336,298,402,969 notes

Actually, [pretty much this](#) happened to the PETA story I started off with

And then you sigh and scroll down to the next one. Unless of course you are a Doctor Who fan, in which case you sigh and then immediately reblog with the comment "It's obvious you guys started ganging up against us first, don't try to accuse \*\*US\*\* now" because you can't just *let that accusation stand*.

I make fun of Tumblr social justice sometimes, but the problem isn't with Tumblr social justice, it's structural. Every community on Tumblr somehow gets enmeshed with the people most devoted to making that community miserable. The tiny Tumblr rationalist community somehow attracts, concentrates, and constantly reblogs stuff from the even tinier Tumblr community of people who hate rationalists and want them to be miserable (no, well-intentioned and intelligent critics, I am not talking about you). It's like one of those rainforest ecosystems where every variety of rare endangered nocturnal spider hosts a parasite who has evolved for millions of years

solely to parasitize that one spider species, and the parasites host parasites who have evolved for millions of years solely to parasitize *them*. If Tumblr social justice is worse than anything else, it's mostly because everyone has a race and a gender so it's easier to fire broad cannonades and just hit everybody.

Tumblr's reblog policy makes it a hothouse for toxoplasma-style memes that spread via outrage. Following the ancient imperative of evolution, if memes spread by outrage they adapt to become as outrage-inducing as possible.

Or rather, that is just one of their many adaptations. I realize this toxoplasma metaphor sort of strains credibility, so I want to anchor this idea of outrage-memes in pretty much the only piece of memetics everyone can agree upon.

The textbook example of a meme – indeed, almost the only example ever discussed – is the chain letter. “Send this letter to ten people and you will prosper. Fail to pass it on, and you will die tomorrow.” And so the letter replicates.

It might be useful evidence that we were on the right track here, with our toxoplasma memes and everything, if we could find evidence that they reproduced in the same way.

If you're not on Tumblr, you might have missed the “everyone who does not reblog the issue du jour is trash” wars. For a few weeks around the height of the Ferguson discussion, people constantly called out one another for not reblogging enough Ferguson-related

material, or (Heavens forbid) saying they were sick of the amount of Ferguson material they were seeing. It got so bad that various art blogs that just posted pretty paintings, or kitten picture blogs that just reblogged pictures of kittens were feeling the heat (you thought I was joking about the hate for kitten picture bloggers. I never joke.) Now the issue du jour seems to be Pakistan. Just to give a few examples:

“friends if you are reblogging things that are not about ferguson right now please queue them instead. please pay attention to things that are more important. it’s not the time to talk about fandoms or jokes it’s time to talk about injustices.” [ [source](#) ]

“can yall maybe take some time away from reblogging fandom or humor crap and read up and reblog pakistan because the privilege you have of a safe bubble is not one shared by others” [ [source](#) ]

“If you’re uneducated, do not use that as an excuse. Do not say, “I’m not picking sides because I don’t know the full story,” because not picking a side is supporting Wilson. And by supporting him, you are on a racist side... Ignoring this situation will put you in deep shit, and it makes you racist. If you’re not racist, do not just say “but I’m not racist!!” just get educated and reblog anything you can.” [ [source](#) ]

“why are you so disappointing? I used to really like you. you’ve kept totally silent about peshawar, not acknowledging anything but fucking zutara or bellarke or whatever. there are other posts you’ve reblogged too that I wouldn’t expect you to- but those are another topic. I get that you’re 19 but maybe consider becoming a better fucking person?” [ [source](#) ]

“if you’re white, before you reblog one of those posts that’s like “just because i’m not blogging about ferguson doesn’t mean i don’t care!!!” take a few seconds to: consider the privilege you have that allows you not to pay attention if you don’t want to. consider those who do not have the privilege to focus on other things. ask yourself why you think it’s more important that people know you “care” than it is to spread information and show support. then consider that you are a fucking shitbaby.” [ [source](#) ]

“For everyone reblogging Ferguson, Ayotzinapa, North Korea etc and not reblogging Peshawar, you should seriously be ashamed of yourselves.” [ [source](#) ]

“This is going to be an unpopular opinion but I see stuff about ppl not wanting to reblog ferguson things and awareness around the world because they do not want negativity in their life plus it will cause them to have anxiety. They come to tumblr to escape n feel happy which think is a load of bull. There r literally ppl dying who live with the fear of go-



ing outside their homes to be shot and u cant post a fucking picture because it makes u a little upset?? I could give two fucks about internet shitlings.” [ [source](#) ]

You may also want to check the Tumblr tag [“the trash is taking itself out”](#), in which hundreds of people make the same joke (“I think some people have stopped reading my blog because I’m talking too much about [the issue *du jour*]. I guess the trash is taking itself out now.”)

This is pretty impressive. It’s the first time outside of a chain letter that I have seen our memetic overlords throw off all pretense and just go around shouting “SPREAD ME OR YOU ARE GARBAGE AND EVERYONE WILL HATE YOU.”

But it only works because it’s tapped into the most delicious food source an ecology of epistemic parasites could possibly want – controversy.

I would like to be able to write about charity more often. Feminists would probably like to start supercharging the *true* rape accusations for a change. Protesters against police brutality would probably like to be able to focus on clear-cut cases that won’t make white people support the police *even harder*. Even PETA would probably prefer being the good guys for once. But the odds aren’t good. Not because the people involved are bad people who want to fail. Not even because the media-viewing public are stupid. Just because information ecologies are not your friend.

This blog tries to remember the [Litany of Jai](#): “Almost no one is evil; almost everything is broken”. We pretty much never wrestle with flesh and blood; it’s powers and principalities all the way down.

## VI

A while ago I wrote a post called [Meditations on Moloch](#) where I pointed out that in any complex multi-person system, the system acts according to its own chaotic incentives that don’t necessarily correspond to what *any* individual within the system wants. The classic example is the Prisoner’s Dilemma, which usually ends at defect-defect even though *both* of the two prisoners involved prefer cooperate-cooperate. I compare this malignant discoordination to Ginsberg’s portrayal of Moloch, the demon-spirit of capitalism gone wrong.

I would support instating a National Conversation Topic Czar if that allowed us to get rid of celebrities.

— [Steven Kaas \(@stevenkaas\)](#), August 26, 2010

Steven in his wisdom reminds us that there is no National Conversation Topic Czar. The rise of some topics to national prominence and the relegation of others to tiny print on the eighth page of the newspapers occurs by an emergent uncoordinated process. When we say “the media decided to cover Ferguson instead of Eric Gar-

ner”, we reify and anthropomorphize an entity incapable of making goal-directed decisions.

A while back there was a minor scandal over [JournoList](#), a private group where left-leaning journalists met and exchanged ideas. I think the conservative spin was “the secret conspiracy running the liberal media – revealed!” I wish they had been right. If there were a secret conspiracy running the liberal media, they could all decide they wanted to raise awareness of racist police brutality, pick the most clear-cut and sympathetic case, and make it non-stop news headlines for the next two months. Then everyone would agree it was indeed very brutal and racist, and something would get done.

But as it is, even if many journalists are interested in raising awareness of police brutality, given their total lack of coordination there’s not much they can do. An editor can publish a story on Eric Garner, but in the absence of a divisive hook, the only reason people will care about it is that caring about it is the right thing and helps people. But that’s “charity”, and we already know from my blog tags that charity doesn’t sell. A few people mumble something something deeply distressed, but neither black people nor white people get interested, in the “keep tuning to their local news channel to get the latest developments on the case” sense.

The idea of liberal strategists sitting down and choosing “a flagship case for the campaign against police brutality” is poppycock. Moloch – the abstracted spirit of discoordination and flailing response to incentives – will publicize whatever he feels like publiciz-

ing. And if they want viewers and ad money, the media will go along with him.

Which means that it's not a coincidence that the worst possible flagship case for fighting police brutality and racism is the flagship case that we in fact got. It's not a coincidence that the worst possible flagship cases for believing rape victims are the ones that end up going viral. It's not a coincidence that the only time we ever hear about factory farming is when somebody's doing something that makes us almost sympathetic to it. It's not coincidence, it's not even happenstance, it's enemy action. Under Moloch, activists are irresistibly incentivized to dig their own graves. And the media is irresistibly incentivized to help them.

Lost is the ability to agree on simple things like fighting factory farming or rape. Lost is the ability to even talk about the things we all want. Ending corporate welfare. Ungerrymandering political districts. Defrocking pedophile priests. Stopping prison rape. Punishing government corruption and waste. Feeding starving children. Simplifying the tax code.

But also lost is our ability to treat each other with solidarity and respect.

Under Moloch, everyone is irresistibly incentivized to ignore the things that unite us in favor of [forever picking at](#) the things that [divide us](#) in exactly the way that is most likely to make them more divisive. Race relations are at historic lows not because white people and black people disagree on very much, but because the me-

dia absolutely worked its *tuchus* off to find the single issue that white people and black people disagreed over the most and ensure that it was the only issue anybody would talk about. Men's rights activists and feminists hate each other not because there's a huge divide in how people of different genders think, but because only the most extreme examples of either side will ever gain traction, and those only when they are framed as attacks on the other side.

People talk about the shift from old print-based journalism to the new world of social media and the sites adapted to serve it. These are fast, responsive, and only just beginning to discover the power of controversy. They are memetic evolution shot into hyperdrive, and the omega point is a well-tuned machine optimized to search the world for the most controversial and counterproductive issues, then make sure no one can talk about anything else. An engine that creates money by burning the few remaining shreds of cooperation, bipartisanship and social trust.

Imagine Moloch looking out over the expanse of the world, eagle-eyed for anything that can turn brother against brother and husband against wife. Finally he decides "YOU KNOW WHAT NOBODY HATES EACH OTHER ABOUT YET? BIRD-WATCHING. LET ME FIND SOME STORY THAT WILL MAKE PEOPLE HATE EACH OTHER OVER BIRD-WATCHING". And the next day half the world's newspaper headlines are "Has The Political Correctness Police Taken Over Bird-Watching?" and the other half are "Is Bird-Watching Racist?". And then bird-watchers and non-bird-watchers and different subgroups of bird-watchers hold vitriolic attacks on each other that feed back on each other in a vicious cycle for the next six months,

and the whole thing ends in mutual death threats and another previously innocent activity turning into World War I style trench warfare.

(You think I'm exaggerating? Listen: "YOU KNOW WHAT NOBODY HATES EACH OTHER ABOUT YET? VIDEO GAMES.")