

THE WORLD MADE MEME: DISCOURSE AND IDENTITY IN PARTICIPATORY MEDIA

BY

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ABSTRACT

This project explores internet memes as public discourse. ‘Meme’ is a term coined by biologist Richard Dawkins to describe the flow, flux, mutation, and evolution of culture, a cultural counter to the gene. But the term has evolved within many online collectives, and is shifting in public discourse. In this emerging sense, ‘memes’ are amateur media artifacts, extensively remixed and recirculated by different participants on social media networks. But there is reason to doubt how broad and inclusive this amateur participation is. If the networks producing memes are truly participatory, they will definitionally facilitate diverse discourses and represent diverse identities. Therefore, we need detailed empirical work on specific participatory sites in order to clarify questions of mediated cultural participation. My goal was a better understanding of discourse and identity in participatory media through an investigation of memes and the collectives producing them.

To answer this question of mediated cultural participation, I used a critical discourse analytic method and focused on three criteria indicative of cultural participation: processes, identities, and politics. The results were mixed. First, while the formal processes necessary for making memes were open, they required literacy to engage. Second, while meme collectives were readily and broadly accessible by diverse identities and perspectives, they were gatekept by subcultural insiders who privileged some and marginalized others. Third, while diverse political commentary did occur, it happened in a relatively narrow frame of perspectives. However, these inequalities did not mean polyvocal public participation was absent in meme collectives. Memes were a means to transform established cultural texts into new ones, to negotiate the worth of diverse identities, and to engage in unconventional arguments about public policy and current events. Memes were a mix of old inequalities and new participation.

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Like the artifacts contained herein, this work is collaborative. It's the process of years of insight and sacrifice from the people closest to me. I first wandered into Nancy Baym's graduate seminar on digital media six years ago, a dazed M.A. student who wasn't quite sure why he was there. In the six years sense, she has read as many drafts of my work as I have, written more letters of recommendation than I deserve, and offered immeasurable guidance on what it means to be a scholar. Any current or future successes I've enjoyed are hers and mine in equal measure. The same could be said for the rest of the committee guiding this project. I've crowded the offices and struggled through the seminars of Jay Childers, Dave Tell, Yan Bing Zhang, and Ben Chappell, groping with half-formed ideas. They've walked them to fruition. I've also sat in those seminars with some of the finest friends and colleagues I could hope for. My fellow graduate students Mike Anderson, Evan Center, Chelsea Graham, and Vince Meserko have listened intently as I've droned on about the public worth of internet cat comics. All of these influences are a part of what's below.

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CHAPTER ONE

Artifacts: Memes as Participatory Media

Mediated Cultural Participation

The era of you. In 2006, *TIME Magazine* declared ‘You’ its person of the year (Grossman, 2006, Dec. 25). The declaration bucked 80 years of primarily honoring warriors, world leaders, and business tycoons (a notable exception was 1982, when ‘the computer’ was recognized; Rosenblatt, 1983, Jan. 3). You were recognized because now you could engage the world in bold new ways:

It's a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It's about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people's network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes. (Grossman, 2006, Dec. 25)

According to *TIME* what's different is ‘Web 2.0’. We have a new set of communication technologies, which allow broader engagement with our world: a louder voice, a longer reach. And, maybe, a more democratic public sphere. Web 2.0, the magazine says, is “not the Web that Tim Berners-Lee hacked together” for intellectuals and officials. Instead, it’s “a tool for bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter”. What’s different, in a word, is participation.

For *TIME* and others (Jenkins, 2006; Lévy, 2001; Terranova, 2004), the rigid gatekeepers and old hierarchies which pervaded the mass-mediated age are shifting. We now live, ostensibly, in a more ‘participatory’ culture. Where the mass media of the past were the domain of paid

experts and the investors that backed them, *TIME* tells us that now “car companies are running open design contests. Reuters is carrying blog postings alongside its regular news feed. Microsoft is working overtime to fend off user-created Linux” (Grossman, 2006, Dec. 25). Whenever you – the ‘you’ of *TIME* fame – update your Facebook status, edit a Wikipedia entry, upload a video on YouTube, or download a videogame mod, you’re engaging in a participatory practice. These practices – aggregating across thousands of platforms and millions of users – promise to *TIME* a shift in public voice. In a participatory culture, the magazine says, “we’re looking at an explosion of productivity and innovation, and it’s just getting started, as millions of minds that would otherwise have drowned in obscurity get backhauled into the global intellectual economy”.

‘Participatory culture’ has been of increasing interest to media scholars and practitioners over the last decade. In the same year *TIME* pointed to you, Jenkins (2006) proposed that new trends were developing in the media industry. While gatekeepers and hierarchies still exist, there’s now less room to differentiate between those producing media and those consuming them. In Lessig’s (2008) terms, a heretofore ‘read only’ media culture is being opened up for more ‘read/write’ participation among media audiences. Fan-made commercials are making their way into the Super Bowl; mash up artists like GirlTalk are remixing micro samples of countless songs into entirely new ones; activists are organizing on iPhones and Twitter. Burgess and Green (2009) say that for sites like the video sharing service YouTube “participatory culture is not a gimmick or a sideshow; it is absolutely core business” (p. 6).

This newfound mediated engagement even has implications for what Fishkin (2009) calls the ‘trilemma’ of democracy: equality, participation, and deliberation. Jenkins (2006) sees all three in seemingly banal practices like *Harry Potter* fan fiction and *Star Wars* mashups. Atton

(2004) argues the media created by you “have been powerfully characterised by their potential for participation...Rather than media production being the province of elite, centralised organizations and institutions, alternative media offer possibilities for individuals and groups to create their own media” (p. 9). Likewise, Lievrouw (2011) says that alternative media can “challenge or alter dominant, expected, or accepted ways of doing society, culture, and politics” (p. 19). This makes for a more ‘participatory democracy’, which Lievrouw defines as “the widespread, direct involvement of citizens in both political processes and governance” (p. 149). De Kosnik (2008), arguing for the inherent value of participation to democracy, says “new technologies have opened up the possibility for fulfillment of a greater range of the potentialities inherent in the idea of democracy itself. A more participatory democracy, facilitated by digital tools, is a democracy more fully realized” (9.6). Asen and Brouwer (2001) argue we need to acknowledge and embrace the ‘multiplicity of the public’ in order to facilitate more inclusive deliberation. Amateur media may be tools for just that.

Van Zoonen (2005) consents that ‘populist’ forms of public discourse can be manipulated by powerful institutions to stir up antagonism, distract the public, or cheapen political discourse (as with the propaganda of the Third Reich). Dalton and Klingmann (2007) acknowledge that more open political participation can mean a tyranny of the masses, as majority rule trumps minority rights, and unequal access favors those with the time and resources to participate. Mouffe (2005) points to the antagonism inherent in public engagement, as individuals coalesce into groups with oppositional interests. However, despite these potential limitations, they all see open participation as a better answer than the alternative: a restricted public with unequal access to public discourse. Like van Zoonen (2005), Dalton and Klingmann (2007), and Mouffe (2005), I value a vibrant agora over hegemonic gatekeeping, apathetic disengagement, or consensus built

by exclusion.

In the most optimistic conception of Web 2.0, a flood of ‘user-generated content’ facilitates such an agora as it crushes systemic and societal barriers to participation. Shirky (2008) says we live in a world where “most of the barriers to group action have collapsed, and without those barriers, we are free to explore new ways of gathering together and getting things done” (p. 22). Your social practices have a larger voice and a longer reach, and you can dramatically add to the media you consume. “And for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game, *TIME*'s Person of the Year for 2006 is you” (Grossman, 2006, Dec. 25).

Problematic participation. But utopian notions of ‘participatory culture’ are facing increased scrutiny. It’s been five years since *TIME* made you person of the year, and the Web 2.0 golden era has seen mixed results. It’s sometimes credited for helping liberate Egypt, but hasn’t been as successful in Bahrain or Syria. Social network sites are means for us to share our perspectives and potentially broaden the public sphere, but they’re also provided for us by new industrial giants who make billions on the premise of participation. Google has shut down profiles that don’t meet its ‘real names’ policy, and Facebook consistently blurs what’s private and what’s public user information without user consent. As Burgess and Green point out, “there is no necessary transfer of media power” in a Web 2.0 era (p. 24). Voice is still largely managed by dominant discourses and powerful institutions. If more people are participating because of Web 2.0, they’re still not the ones deciding the terms of participation.

This is not even accounting for the disparity in access and skill between technological ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’. There’s a substantial global inequality – commonly labeled the ‘digital divide’ (see Chadwick, 2006; Couldry, 2007; Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002) – that hinders

those who can't connect to digital communication networks, as well as those who can't make use of them proficiently. In America, the penetration of internet use is roughly 78 percent (divided particularly along education, class, and age lines); in Africa, it's only at 13 percent ("Internet World Stats", 2011). Straight away, this fact means 'participatory culture' is skewed toward the privileged. As Jenkins (2009) says, we must account for "the dystopian realities of a world where people have uneven access to the means of participation and where many are discouraged from even trying" (p. 124).

Inequalities in mind, Schäfer (2011) argues the term 'participatory culture' really labels a complex argument about community, empowerment, and progress, set within a cultural system of established structures and values with established gatekeepers. The participation afforded by the internet is really a volatile mix of increased engagement and democratic potential, but also government intervention and corporate aims. Schäfer says that "in contrast to the romanticized narratives spread in popular discourses, participatory media networks are very heterogeneous and characterized by a plurality of different configurations that are affected by many, often contradictory, interests" (p. 168). Therefore, heralding a new age is "somewhat premature and rather unbalanced, because it often neglects the fact that underlying power structures are not necessarily reconfigured" (pp. 10-11).

For instance, when Atton (2004) explores the online 'alternative media' outlet Indymedia, he speaks against over-reliance on a 'David vs. Goliath' narrative about 'free press' vs. 'corporate media'. Instead, in Indymedia, "issues of centralisation, bureaucracy, 'house style', and even conflict within groups, become acute. The limits of non-hierarchical, horizontal, and fully democratic communication become stretched" (p. 6). Likewise, Eaton (2010) demonstrates how the progressive advocacy site MoveOn.org 'manufactures community' by a

top-down call for a specific type of public engagement. Even in organizations dead set against the institutional hierarchy of traditional media outlets, participatory practices come with their own limitations.

Terranova (2004) opens her book on ‘network culture’ with a warning: “to dare to give one name to the heterogeneous assemblage that is contemporary global culture is to try to think *simultaneously* of the singular and the multiple, the common and the unique” (p. 1). Castells (2009) says the ‘network society’ isn’t a monolith. Rather “it develops in a multiplicity of cultural settings, produced by the different history of each context. It materializes in specific forms, leading to the formation of highly diverse institutional and cultural systems” (p. 39). The old hierarchies still evident in this new age – the same cultural inconsistencies and contradictions – raise some questions. Have we reached the era of you? And if so, which you? We know that participation occurs on unequal terms; we need a better understanding of the communicative and social practices that facilitate this inequality. We know that there still exists potential for participatory engagement; we need a better understanding of the scope, tenor, and structure of this participation.

My goal in this project is a better understanding of who wins and why in this ‘era of you’. Despite Shirky’s (2008) hopes, it doesn’t seem as simple as ‘the best possible content’ rising to the top like collaborative cream. Rather, societal gatekeepers and hierarchical ideologies temper participation. As Kuipers (2002) points out, much of the net content we see in the West is ‘blandly global’: written in English, assuming universality without much of an acknowledgement of non-Western perspectives. Still, the presence of inescapable inequalities doesn’t mean mediated interaction has no value to public dialogue or social engagement. What exists is an “entanglement of emergence and control” (Terranova, 2004, p. 97). As Lévy (2001) argues, such

dyads “are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Within an increasingly interconnected and interdependent universe, such opposing tendencies can even sustain each other” (p. 203). What’s still up in the air is which elements are being sustained, and which are being challenged. The extent that participatory media influence public dialogue and which social groups still control them is still worth questioning. Even five years after Jenkins’ (2006) observations, we’re still seeing cultural practices which occur “according to a new set of rules none of us fully understands” (p. 3). We need to know to what extent institutional gatekeepers and social hierarchies are being challenged, to what extent they’re persisting, and to what extent hybrid reappropriation is occurring. If we’re to link digital media to ‘participatory culture’, we need be sensitive to the processes by which participation occurs and the consequences of privileged participation.

Even if media are leading to more prevalent and consequential public engagement, the term ‘participatory culture’ as often used in studies of emerging media is a misnomer. Every member of any social collective, in a broad sense, *participates* in culture. We engage with others, negotiate representations, and make use of artifacts. This occurs with or without mediation. Norton (2004) says culture is a ‘matrix’, an interplay between representations and materials. This does not depend on Web 2.0. Likewise, Bauman and Briggs (1990) stress how we *perform* culture, and they do so without even mentioning Facebook. Newcomb and Hirsch (1987) called television a ‘cultural forum’ before *Conan* and *Glee* put Twitter hashtags at the bottom of the screen during broadcasts. Briggs and Burke (2009) chart a multi-millennial ‘social history of the media’, of which the whole of the internet is only a recent blip. Cultural participation does not start and stop with the newest technology, even if that technology can afford new degrees of voice and reach.

So while a culture may certainly be more ‘participatory’ when amateur media networks allow for increased voice and reach from cultural participants, wrapping the phenomenon under the moniker ‘participatory culture’ can imply the wrongs things. It can imply that we *weren’t* participating during eras of oral communication, print communication, or broadcast communication. Sensitive to this, I’ll here substitute ‘mediated cultural participation’ for ‘participatory culture’ when referring to circulation-mediated engagement with public discussion or social representation, particularly within those amateur media networks that so mark the potential for voice and reach in digital media. I’ll use ‘participatory media’ when referring to the specific artifacts and networks themselves. Print and broadcast media can be ‘participatory’ as well, in the sense that they can be tools for mediated cultural participation. However, current utopian hopes rest on the potential for voice fostered by digital media. Tied up in the phrase ‘participatory culture’ is the idea that participatory media will broaden this voice for more members of the public. ‘Mediated cultural participation’, as a term, emphasizes that ‘participatory culture’ is premised on the emancipatory power of micro-level mediated engagement. Testing the tone and scope of this participation is a paramount concern when thinking on the cultural implications of amateur media.

We need, in sum, to better understand how public discourses intertwine with networks of mediated cultural participation. After all, Gibson (2007) defines political intolerance as “the unwillingness to put up with disagreeable ideas and groups” (p. 324). If a culture is going to value participation, then it must engage with the diverse ideas of diverse people. A healthy democracy “requires that all political ideas (and the groups holding them) get the same access to the marketplace of ideas as the access legally extended to the ideas dominating the system” (p. 325). ‘Participatory’ media will definitionally facilitate diverse discourses and identities. We

need detailed empirical work on specific sites of participatory practice in order to clarify questions of participation in this participatory age.

Therefore, this project will investigate the practices surrounding one genre of participatory media: the internet meme. As the potential for mediated cultural participation has cemented in public imagination, the meme has become one of its most prevalent, distinct, and understudied phenomena. The rest of this chapter will outline the theory and practice behind the loosely connected corpus of mediated artifacts called internet memes. Internet memes – distinctly reliant on networks of mediated cultural participation in their creation, circulation, and transformation – are well positioned to answer questions on the interplay of participatory media, social representations, and public discourse. Further, because memes are pop culture artifacts, they can provide insight into how ‘everyday’ media texts intertwine with public discourses. This study will be a detailed account of how memes function as participatory texts, how they represent social identities, and how they’re used to comment on political events. By focusing on the relation of memes to mediated cultural participation, we stand to empirically illuminate some of the ground-level social practices defining participation in the era of you.

Internet Memes and Cultural Participation

Introducing the meme. Internet memes are curious artifacts, and the theoretical legacy behind their name is just as curious. This section will introduce both and tie them to questions of mediated cultural participation. ‘Meme’ is a term coined by biologist Richard Dawkins (1976, 1982) to describe the flow and flux of culture. It’s meant as a cultural counter to the gene, which in biology is considered to strongly determine individual traits. It has a fairly-long and somewhat-controversial history within the biological sciences (see Aunger, 2000c; Blackmore, 1999; Sterelny, 2006) and, more recently, in the cultural sciences and humanities (see Bloch,

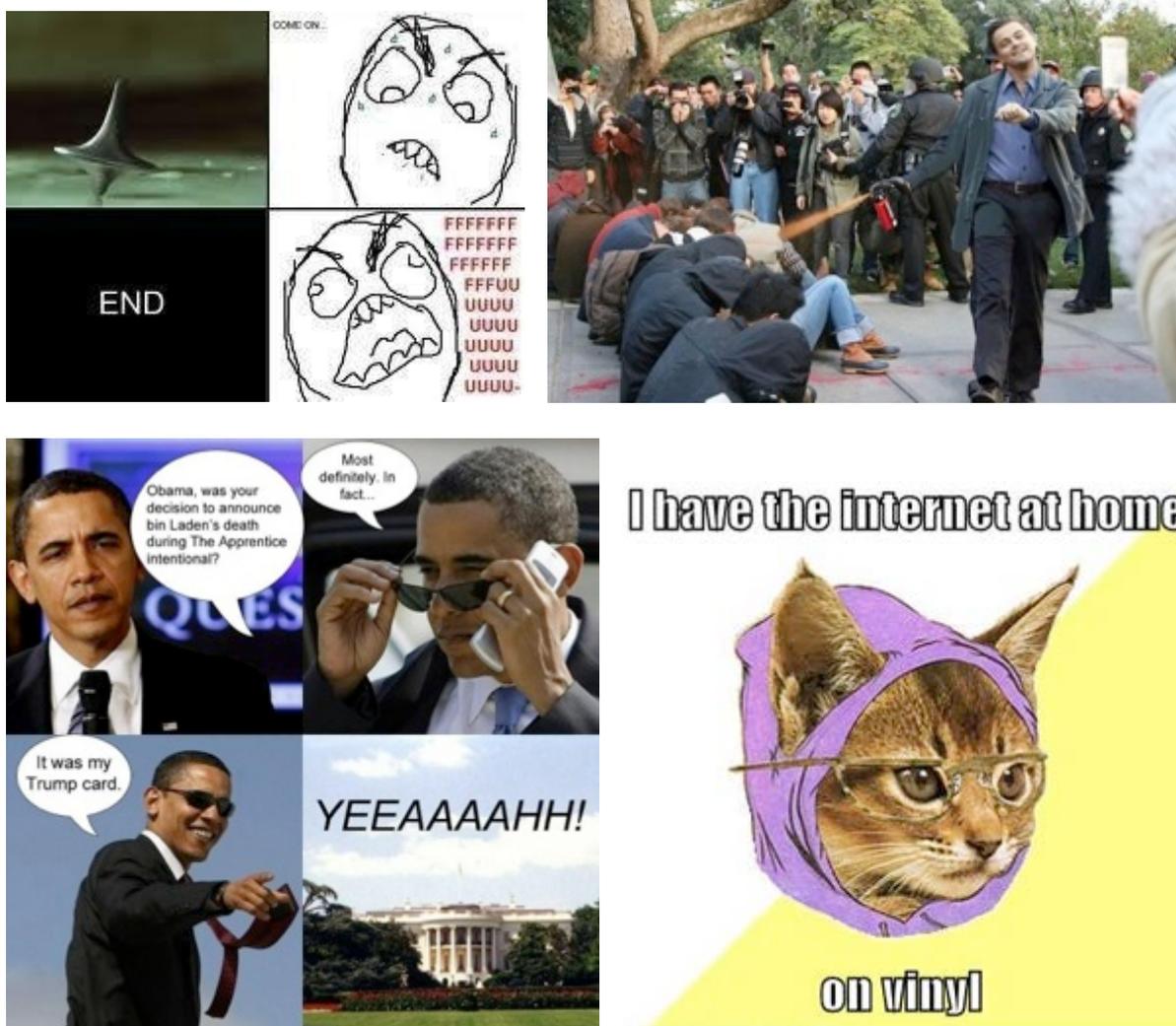
2000; Johnson, 2007; Sperber, 2000). In *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins (1976) begins with the premise that “most of what is unusual about man can be summed up in one word ‘culture’ ” (p. 203). For Dawkins, cultural evolution has surpassed biological evolution as a determinant of human behavior, so a lens is needed to understand that determinant. Below is the genesis of the word ‘meme’:

The new soup is the soup of human culture. We need a name for the new replicator, a noun which conveys the idea of a unity of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. “Mimeme” comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like “gene”. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to *meme*....Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (p. 206)

In short, memes are artifacts that pass from person to person by means of cultural imitation and appropriation. To Dawkins, they can be “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (p. 206). Broad cultural concepts like language, art, technology, and religion are ‘memplexes’ (Dawkins, 1982), built from a series of more micro-level memes.

But – living up to its definitional characteristics – the term has evolved within many networks of mediated participation, to become the label for a flagship participatory artifact. Participants on sites of ‘user-generated content’ like 4chan (4chan.org), Reddit (reddit.com), and Tumblr (tumblr.com) – to name just a few – have co-opted the term. These networks of mediated cultural participation – often the epicenter of participatory media artifacts and discourses – have applied the term ‘meme’ to a large contingent of what they produce. In the increasingly prevalent pop usage, a meme is a piece of mediated discourse that, according to the popular meme

reference site Know Your Meme, is “passed from person to person, changing and evolving along the way” (Huh, 2011, March 28). Memes, as networks of mediated cultural participation use them, are multimodal artifacts, where image and text are integrated to tell a joke, make an observation, or advance an argument:



The four images above are each exemplary of a type of meme. The first image is a ‘Rage Comic’, depicting a response to the end of the film *Inception*. The second is a remixed image (often call a ‘shop’, short for the photo manipulation application Adobe Photoshop) that places an image of actor Leonardo DiCaprio over a shot of protestors at the University of California, Davis being pepper sprayed. The third is a comic made from stacking and annotating still

images. It maps a narrative of US President Barack Obama responding to the death of terrorist leader Osama bin Laden onto a template satirizing the dialogue of the CBS show *CSI: Miami*. The fourth is an ‘image macro’ called ‘Hipster Kitty’. Macros are built around a single image that is given new text by new participants with each new iteration. Each image of Hipster Kitty shares a similar image, while making a new joke based on ‘hipster’ stereotypes. These images play on connotations that hipsters, as a social category, are pretentiously avant-garde, exclusionary, and excessive:



Hipster Kitty’s transmission is memetic in that the cultural artifact is passed from participant to participant, remixed from a stable core along the way.

Countless participants create, circulate, and transform memes on amateur networks of mediated cultural participation. With each new remix, memes are reappropriated in order to produce new iterations and variations of broader ideas, mostly without signature or citation. In this way, the internet meme could be a quintessential participatory artifact: open, collaborative, and adaptable. The technology required to create memes is often relatively simple and entirely free, requiring only that a willing participant know where to download the tools and where to upload the results. For instance, image macros can be made on any number of sites (e.g., memegenerator.net, quickmeme.com). Meme Generator has a free app for Mac that allows

participants to upload an image to caption, or choose from an existing catalogue of established images:



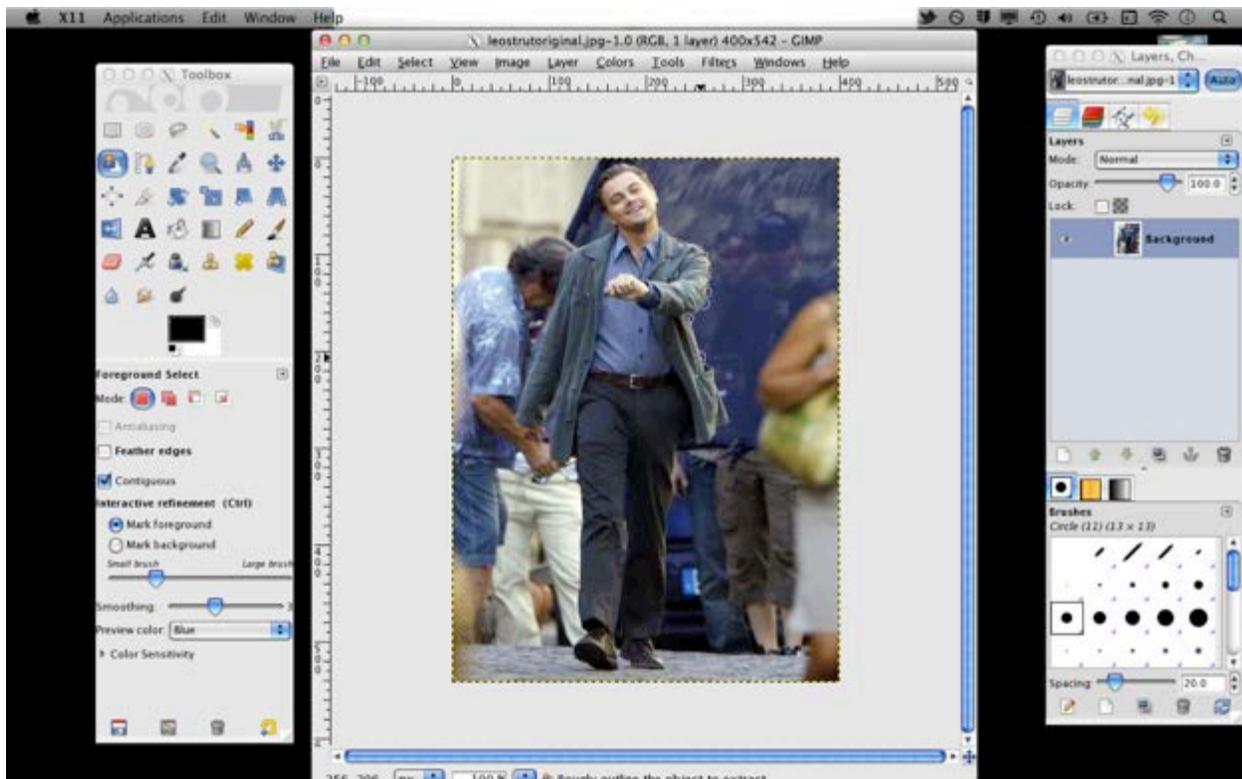
This is a screenshot of content I created. I Google searched ‘old timey bicycle’, downloaded the image to my computer, uploaded it to Meme Generator, and added my own text. The icons on the top right provide easy access for sharing creations through Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, or Reddit.

Creation of comics can follow the same lines. This is a Rage Comic I made using the popular creation site Dan’s Awesome Rage Maker (ragemaker.com):



On comic creation sites, participants can build from a corpus of faces (categorized here by different emotions from ‘determined’ to ‘angry’ to ‘happy’), insert their own text, and export their creation from the site.

Even photo manipulation doesn’t necessarily require the expensive Photoshop suite from Adobe. This is a screenshot of me cutting out Leonardo DiCaprio from an unaltered photo using the free photo alteration app, Gimp:



Individuals with proper proficiency can use apps like this to manipulate visual artifacts in a number of ways, then circulate them via networks of mediated cultural participation. Doing so can contribute to the life of an existing meme or create a new one.

Social texts and public discourse. Initially, it may seem like a mismatch to study the high ideals of mediated cultural participation by examining what are ostensibly silly little diversions, mere jokes meant to pass the last few minutes before work ends or make the bus ride seem quicker. But memes, like other ‘everyday’ texts, are important because social texts are the raw materials in the construction of societal discourses. Social texts are the artifacts by which cultural participants piece together reality. Truths are argued, stances are taken, and the world is seen through these textual artifacts. The study of cultural participation means the study of the social texts that constitute that culture, like memes.

Moreover, the interaction between micro texts and macro discourses is recursive. Just as

texts constitute discourses, so too do those discourses inform subsequent texts. To Bakhtin ([1952] 1986), any societal discourse is ‘cited, imitated, and followed’ at the level of individual utterance. At a fundamental level, a social text like a meme is “a form of cultural capital, as a realization of speech act force, as a mode of naturalizing and familiarizing social realities, as an instrument of authority, and as the medium (and the measure) of political debate” (Hanks, 1989, p. 119). This recursivity is the position of discourse analysts (Fairclough, 2003; Tracy, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2009a) who see social practices as being created *and* reinforced at the level of statement and sentence. Social texts, like memes, are the threads that weave the micro and the macro. If we want to assess how participatory our media are, then we need to assess how they’re operating as a form of public discourse.

‘Discourse’ is difficult to concisely define. Even within the field devoted to it, discourse analysis, the term is applied in many ways depending on critical orientation, research tradition, or individual author. The cultural/critical lineage in discourse analysis draws heavily on Michel Foucault ([1968] 1991, [1969] 1972) who offers insight into the link between texts and discourses. To Foucault ([1971] 1972), ‘the order of discourse’ is discourse before reality, not vice-versa. Societal discourses come before truth, not after truth; truth is made by how we talk about it. That’s why cultural ‘archaeologies’ are built from textual artifacts. But even accepting that ‘discourse creates truth’ doesn’t fully define discourse. Foucault ([1969] 1972) admits to such ambiguity:

...instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word ‘discourse’, I believe I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as the regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements. (p. 80)

The short answer: it could be any of those. We might see ‘discourse’ as a set of specific statements or as the networks of social practice that reflect and influence those statements. Both are valid definitions. But this ambiguity need not be entirely negative. In fact, Fairclough (1989) calls it ‘felicitous’, since “it helps underline the social nature of discourse and practice, by suggesting that the individual instance always implies social conventions” (p. 28). Wodak and Meyer (2009a) liken the social practices that influence statements to the ‘grammar’ that characterizes sentences. So it’s not redundant to say this study explores memes as ‘discourse’ in order to better understand the predominant ‘discourses’ in mediated cultural participation. The first use points to the level of ‘statement’ and the second use points to the level of ‘social practice’. Discourse – at both the level of individual texts and at the level of overarching ideas – structures the social world, influencing and reflecting social perspectives.

This is true even when the discourses are ostensibly banal. Popular culture artifacts like memes are worth assessing as pieces of public discourse. According to Kuipers (2002) jokes – mediated or not – are quintessential pieces of pop culture public discourse because of “their great variability, fast change, along with the absence of a clear author and an existence across national boundaries” (p. 451). The difference between social diversion and public discourse is scant at best. Bourdieu (1984) reminds us that things as seemingly shallow as entertainment, fashion, and even food are in fact immensely important to the creation and dissemination of cultural capital, and are therefore of immense importance to public life. Hebdige (1979) demonstrates that the counter-discourses of subcultures are often “expressed obliquely, in style...at the profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is at the level of signs” (p. 17).

Pop culture distinctions are distinctions that influence public discourse. How we spend our leisure time and how we frame our recreation marks us in terms of class, race, and education.

Things that may not seem ultimately or narrowly political are important to the public discourse. A long line of researchers see the value of popular culture to public discourse (Dahlgren, 2009; Hermes, 2006; van Zoonen, 2005). Postigo (2008) sees videogame modifications as a form of political appropriation. Flores-González, Rodriguez, and Rodriguez-Muñez (2006) tell the story of minority political awareness at a music-centered after school program. Even Habermas' ([1962] 1991) idealized public deliberation occurred in salons and coffeehouses, in places seemingly banal and populist. Dahlgren (2009) says expanding what we consider valuable to 'public discourse' means expanding who gets to participate in that discourse. More people will get to participate "via more accessible formats and styles of presentation, helping people feel more incorporated into society as citizens" (p. 46).

But the reciprocity between public discourse and popular culture means some are worried the former is being negatively influenced by the latter (Babcock & Whitehouse, 2005; Corner & Pels, 2003; Weiskel, 2005). Kirby (2009) worries our age has seen too many 'children's texts' being adopted by adults. His fear is that we take child's play too seriously, rather than deeply engaging with the world around us. He likely would have a problem with memes, which substantially reappropriate old cartoons and other 'youth' texts for their remixes. They also, like participatory media in general, trend toward 'youth' perspectives and issues in their content (Ito et al., 2010; Jenkins, 2006). Serazio (2008), who studies amateur music mashups, says "as politically defining pop goes, I believe the mash-up movement is surprisingly vapid" (p. 91). To Serazio, mashups are irony only for irony's sake, are bricolage where nothing of value is built. They're the same thing as reading *The Onion* and saying it's political subversion. The discourse, in a word, is cheapened. From this perspective, the integration of popular culture into public discourse isn't expanding our awareness; it's putting us to sleep. And we're 'sleepwalking

toward the end of the earth' (Weiskel, 2005).

Both sides agree that popular culture is inextricably linked to public discourse. The question is whether this sort of pop participation is healthy for public discourse, not whether it occurs. A micro-level discursive analysis of memes can provide insight into the nature of public discourse as it occurs through the shared cultural discourses that so pervade our social engagement. When assessing the scope, structure, and tenor of mediated cultural participation, pop culture artifacts are not only sufficient. They are exemplary.

Memes as participatory media. This analytic utility is only compounded by the fact that memes are so thoroughly mediated in their creation, circulation, and transformation. Memes – and the amateur networks producing them – are premised on the ideal of mediated cultural participation. They also carry some of the inherent tensions and ambiguities that counter such ideals. They are created on sites that have come to symbolize 'net culture' for all its assets and faults; they exemplify the 'cultural logos of participation' (Shifman, 2011) undergirding Web 2.0. Memes would not exist without the technological keys to digitally-mediated participation: replicability, interactivity, and reach (N. Baym, 2010). While we need to empirically assess the participation occurring through memes, we know they are premised on the cultural ideals central to such participation.

Replicability is crucial to participatory media, and crucial to meme collectives. Digitally-mediated communication affords the ability to easily reproduce communication across time and space. Since digital data can be so easily replicated, so can messages. This is part of the reason former New York Representative Anthony Wiener was unable to shake his suggestive Twitter photo. Even after he deleted his damning tweet, replicability ensured it remained in the public eye. Replicability is why G. Baym & Shah (2011) call *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*

‘post network’ television; they are distributed as web clips passed between sites as much as they are watched on a traditional television.

Replicability is essential to meme collectives in that replicability affords remix. Without remix there are no memes. In the same way musical mashups depend upon on the ability to creatively replicate previous sounds, memes depend upon the replicability of words, images, and ideas. To use Dawkins’ (1976) idea, memes would not be memes if they did not mutate. Dawkins argues cultural artifacts are passed on “quite unlike the particulate, all-or-none quality of gene transmission”; instead “meme transmission is subject to continuous mutation, and also to blending” (p. 209). Murphie and Potts (2003) – arguing that “the digital manipulation of stored imagery opens up the possibility of a massive amount of variation and combination of images” (p. 77) – see this remix as fundamental to our shifting engagement with media artifacts. The “diversity and the constant divergence into new forms” we see in participatory media is “one of the digital aesthetic’s defining features” (p. 84).

Digital media also afford increased interactivity. Fornäs et al. (2002) argue this interactivity occurs among individuals (social interactivity) and between participants and the media itself (technical interactivity). Social interactivity affords increased connection between once-separated individuals, sometimes leading to connections across age, race, class, and culture. This means collectives can come together online from across the nation and world, spreading ideas farther and faster. Technical interactivity affords increased influence over the medium used, whether uploading information to a blog, editing a wiki, retweeting a tweet, or self-diagnosing on WebMD.

Interactivity – in both senses –facilitates the prolific output memes need to spread. The result of this buzzing interactivity is that “some memes are more successful in the meme-pool

than others” (Dawkins, 1976, p. 208). Across multiple sites, multiple memes are being created and put through their competitive paces. Competition fits well with Shirky’s (2008) model for interactive content creation in participatory media. Shirky argues a ‘publish-then-filter’ model of content creation works for participatory media even though it reverses traditional ‘filter-then-publish’ notions of artifact production. In mediated collectives with diminished gatekeepers and increased interaction, censorship can be ‘crowd-sourced’, allowing competition to produce the most appealing content. “Failure is free, high-quality research, offering direct evidence of what works and what doesn’t” (p. 236). Shirky says this works because “open systems, by reducing the cost of failure, enable their participants to fail like crazy, building on the successes as they go” (p. 246). But we’ve seen this potential is contested. Despite the ability for many perspectives to participate in the competition of meme creation, the deck might be stacked in favor of certain perspectives, values, and references. The possibility of competition does not mean the open and equal competition of ideas, even in ‘participatory’ media. But since memes are premised on mediated cultural participation, they’re worth using to measure how potential matches practice.

Last, N. Baym (2010) points to the reach afforded by digitally-mediated communication. While interactivity deals with personal engagement, reach deals with mass audience. A message with greater reach can find new audiences. Reach is part of the reason, so the folktale goes, Justin Bieber’s YouTube videos caught the attention of R&B star Usher and eventually got him signed to a label. Reach is also another reason Anthony Weiner’s suggestive Twitter photos went beyond his intended recipient. A private tweet found a public audience.

For meme collectives, reach means a whole slew of artifacts to draw from, a new audience to share creations with, and increased life and fame for memes that catch on. Thanks to reach, the sketches and scrawls produced by meme creators can take on a life of their own.

Memes can be reappropriated as they're spread across context. G. Baym & Shah (2011) focus on reach and replicability in their study of the viral dissemination of clips of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* across thousands of sites. They demonstrate how "any number of individuals, organizations, and institutions can reappropriate that content: extract it from its original context, insert it into new discursive forms, and in so doing, reshape it into a resource in pursuit of a myriad of ends" (p. 3). If memes reach a wide enough base for a long enough time, they can stabilize, and "the meme pool therefore comes to have the attributes of an evolutionary stable set, which new memes find it hard to invade" (Dawkins, 1976, p. 214). The meme-creator site, Meme Generator, ranks memes by popularity. The meme reference site of record, Know Your Meme (knowyourmeme.com), has popular and trending lists. These categories, of course, are political. Investigating which memes stabilize into popularity on memes sites will help us understand the cultural standards and gatekeepers guiding this reach.

Ultimately, memes are exemplars of participatory media because they are created and circulated by you. However, it's likely a more complicated you than *TIME Magazine* alluded to in 2006 (Grossman, 2006, Dec. 25). Memes often reappropriate dominant discourses: summer blockbusters like *Inception*, public figures like Barack Obama, pop culture staples like the hipster, and political movements like Occupy Wall Street. But reappropriation, by definition, does not mean complete independence from these discourses. Memes are used to represent discourses and identities, and anytime this occurs there's political work occurring too. Situated actors create memes for situated purposes, even as they are built through collaborative transformation. Some of these purposes may embody the best of participatory media: democratic participation, diverse dialogue, and relevant debate. Some purposes may be the worst of mediated discourse: cultural gatekeeping, marginalized representations, and cheap distraction.

This project will specifically address how memes function as texts, how they represent social identities, and how they comment on political events. Chapter Two will tie each of these concepts to mediated cultural participation. Chapter Three will present a critical discourse analytic method for answering questions raised in Chapter Two. Chapters Four, Five, and Six will present results on the participatory dimensions of textual process, social identity, and political commentary. Chapter Seven will connect these results and apply them back to a broader discussion of mediated cultural participation. The goal of this analysis is to more thoroughly understand the formal, social, and political parameters of participatory media. The ultimate end will be a better picture of *TIME*'s content creating, diversely participating, democratically engaging 'you'. It will be a better picture of the rules that guide content, the representations that frame identity, the commentary that shapes engagement.

CHAPTER TWO

Arguments: Processes, Identities, and Politics

Dimensions of Participation

To evaluate memes as participatory public discourse, we need a few criteria. This chapter focuses specifically on the processes that influence the creation of media artifacts and cultural artifacts more broadly, the identities privileged by these artifacts, and the political discourses they facilitate. By emphasizing process, identity, and politics, a study of memes can illuminate arguments about participation in media and culture. First are questions on the processes that guide the creation, circulation, and transformation of memes. Discussions of memes as a cultural theory and discussions of literacy in the creation of media artifacts both hinge on the processes that constitute cultural participation. More agency in the processes that produce culture and more literacy in the processes that produce media mean more participation. Second are questions on the identities that are privileged and marginalized in memes, the social representations evident in their content. Discussions of group distinctions in mediated collectives and discussions of social representations in media artifacts both hinge on the ability of media collectives to effectively encourage diversity. More openness to other identities and other groups means more participation. Third are questions on the nature, tone, and depth of mediated political discourse. Discussions of mediated political discourse and discussions of pop culture in politics both hinge on what's ideal discussion in the public sphere. More voices drawing on more diverse understandings means a more participatory public sphere; but the value of this participation is contested. The sections below will outline how the processes, identities, and politics prevalent on meme sites can teach us about mediated cultural participation.

Processes: Agency and Literacy in Transformative Texts

Questions of process, questions of form. Key to deciding if a cultural practice is participatory is deciding if it encourages the application and innovation necessary for open engagement. Its processes need to be readily manipulated by those who wish to participate. The social structures that guide its form must be fluid. Two diverse fields ask very similar questions in this regard. Meme theory researchers have long debated whether the processes behind the creation, circulation, and transformation of memes should be thought of as determined by impersonal social or biological forces, the result of the choices of individual agents, or as a mix between the two (see Dawkins, 1982; Aunger, 2000c). Second, scholars of participatory media are beginning to ask about the literacy required to create, circulate, and transform amateur media artifacts, and how this literacy balances consumption and production, remixing the familiar and the innovative (see Jenkins 2006; Ito et al., 2010). Both of these questions are questions about the processes that guide cultural practices and cultural artifacts. Both can be informed by investigating memes on the formal level of their structure. In the formal elements of textual artifacts, we can see how individual choice and cultural connections intertwine. Asking how memes are made means understanding how participation occurs.

Therefore this section has two goals. First, I will delve into the definitional controversy that has emerged as scholars of culture and media have grappled with the application of the biological sciences model to social participation. The individual agency of social actors in the creation, circulation, and transformation of memes has long been up for debate. If ‘meme’ is going to be a relevant term to apply to participatory media, then it must conceptually handle the micro-level participation that occurs every time a new participant makes a new meme, not just dissemination of cultural determinants. Second, I will outline what we know about digital

literacy and the transformative creation of media artifacts, asking what memes might teach us about the creation of content in amateur media networks. Memes are textual artifacts. They are discursive constructions that articulate comments and arguments. And, like all texts, they exist within genres and contexts. They exist within social structures made up of micro-level discourses. The forms these artifacts take and the processes guiding them influence how they're created, circulated, and transformed, even as individual artifacts reciprocally influence back. Understanding what meme theory has to say about cultural processes and what media literacy has to say about textual creation both will help us understand this reciprocity in mediated cultural participation.

Both of these questions are questions of social process. They both acknowledge that memes are created, circulated, and transformed through social interaction. They ask what decisions and what proficiencies guide that creation, circulation, and transformation. Therefore both of these questions are also about agency in these processes. Here, this means how much voice social actors have in cultural discourses and how much power they have to influence public dialogue. To be a participant in public discourse is to have a say at an individual level in that discourse. Questions of agency in structural processes – of how cultural antecedents influence participants and how capably they're able to contribute their own discourse – are central to questions of participation.

Agency in meme theory. Memes as media artifacts have a troubled connection to their namesake from biological anthropology. While Shifman (2011) effectively uses the meme theory to analyze amateur YouTube videos and their remixes, Kuipers (2002, 2005) studies remixed 'internet disaster jokes' about 9/11 and the War on Terror without even mentioning the word. Instead, Kuipers speaks extensively about "visual *collages*, assembled from phrases and pictures

from popular media which derive their humorous effect from a combination of elements” (p. 450), but does not call them memes. Just because these artifacts have taken the name ‘meme’ does not mandate meme theory is the best way to understand them. As a theory explaining cultural processes, it’s one contested both from within and beyond media studies.

Meme theory has seen some attention from those researching technology and society. Terranova (2004) finds meme theory an appropriate way to understand mediated cultural transmission, since “what Dawkins’ theory allows is the replacement of the individual by the unit” (p. 124). Using the biological metaphor works for Terranova because of “the immense *productivity* of a multitude, its absolute capacity to deterritorialize itself and mutate” (p. 118). Blackmore (1999) sees communication technologies powerful memetic tools for the multitude of people engaging them. To Blackmore, “memes do not yet have precise copying machinery as DNA has. They are still evolving their copying machines and this is what all the technology is for” (p. 204). An investigation into the formal structure of memes and the social structure of the networks that create, circulate, and transform them will help us better understand the interplay between media and participants in mediated cultural participation. These processes are the heartbeats of memes, so their openness is key to open participation.

Determinism and meme theory. There are those who bristle at the connection between participatory media and biological anthropology (see Jenkins, Ford & Green, in press). Perhaps the most prevalent critique of meme theory is that it favors a biological or cultural determinism instead of valuing the agency of social actors. In Dawkins’ (1976) original conception, the memes is strongly deterministic. He conceives of memes as mostly acting on passive recipients and unwitting dupes. When tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, and religious systems are passed from one person to another, individual choice is barely a matter worth noting. In fact, Dawkins refers

to memes as ‘self copying’ and ‘self perpetuating’, claiming that if a meme “catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain” (p. 206). Aunger (2000b) points out that the ‘meme as germ’ metaphor tends to cast memes as deterministic entities which latch onto hosts, and spread with those hosts unaware. He claims the softer ‘meme as gene’ metaphor mixes an appreciation for the power of cultural predispositions (such as class, race, religion) with the room for individual variance within those predispositions.

Much of the debate in Aunger’s edited volume (2000c) centers on the question of the agency of social actors in the creation, circulation, and transformation of memes. Blackmore (1999), even while extensively focusing on the power of imitation in culture, argues we “must be careful” with an overreliance on a biological metaphor in memes, which she says has “led many people astray” (p. 66). To Blackmore, “nothing is purely genetically *determined* and nothing purely environmentally *determined*. We human beings, like all other creatures, are a complex product of both – and this is true of the way we behave as well as the shape of our legs” (p. 33). Kuper (2000) sees a problem even in the ‘memes as genes’ metaphor, for “arguing by analogy certainly has its dangers. There is a risk that a metaphor will come to be treated as if it were a homology” (p. 185). This is why Conte (2000) argues we need to pay attention to the agency of social actors in the transmission of culture when we theorize memes. Bloch (2000) agrees, even if she is ‘well disposed’ to the utility of the concept.

In media studies, determinism is the explicit critique of Jenkins, Ford, and Green (in press), who wonder at the very utility of the term (and the related ‘viral’) when it implies to advertisers and marketers there’s a top-down method for ‘infecting’ a population with a transmutable unit of culture. They worry of the ‘false security’ that comes with a reliance on a deterministic metaphor. In the end, Aunger (2000a) points out that “memes are perhaps more and

more likely to be a rallying cry for Darwinists of all stripes when discussing culture, while simultaneously being an object of derision among those inspired by the humanities” (p. 228).

The agency of individual actors to respond to and influence cultural transmissions is the heart of this divide. Investigating the structural norms that guide memes as artifacts could shed light on this tricky theoretical issue. Through an investigation of how memes are structured and shared, how the term is employed and the concept engaged, we can make an evaluation as to whether it’s worth keeping.

Imitation and meme theory. A related critique of the meme concept is its overemphasis on strict cultural imitation and its underemphasis on cultural mutation, remix, and reappropriation (see Blackmore, 1999, 2000). A deterministic focus tends to favor *imitation* during cultural transmission; a constructionist focus tends to favor *transformation* during cultural transmission. In the most biological conceptions of meme theory, that culture changes as it transmits is a hindrance to the utility of the model. It hurts the metaphor, since genes are copied with high fidelity. But in culture, Dawkins (1982) says, “the copying process is probably much less precise than in the case of genes: there may be a certain ‘mutational’ element in every copying event...These differences may prove sufficient to render the analogy with genetic natural selection worthless or even positively misleading” (p. 112). Richerson and Boyd (2005) refuse to even use the term meme when speaking of cultural transmission, because they “have good reasons to believe that a lot of culturally transmitted information is neither discrete nor faithfully transmitted” (p. 63).

However, others have worked to expand the concept to value the messy mixture that occurs when social realities are transmitted. Plotkin (2000), pointing out that “nowhere is Occam’s Razor more misplaced than in a science of culture” (p. 80), argues we need to think

about more than imitation in the transmission of memes. Even Dawkins (1976) observes that memes enter into a memepool populated by other complex networks of memes and memplexes. A meme's survival depends on how it adapts to this information rich environment. To Bloch (2000) and Hull (2000), the answer is to understand the complex social processes that occur as social actors engage with memes. Hull argues:

Another bias introduced by the gene-organism perspective is setting out general accounts of selection in terms of *entities*. Genes and organisms are entities...However, selection is a process. Hence it might be better to explicate this notion in terms of processes, not entities. (p. 53)

From these perspectives, a focus on memes should mean a focus on the social processes that constitute their circulation, as well as their transformation.

From here, it's not too hard to see a tie between memes and the communicative processes that constitute cultural practices. Sperber (2000) wonders if 'meme' is just a "mere rewording of a most common idea: anthropologists have always considered culture as that which is transmitted in a human group by non-genetic means" (p. 163). Aunger (2002) calls symbolic signals the 'instigators' that transmit memes. He fundamentally defines a meme as "an idea that becomes commonly shared through social transmission" (2002, p. 2). Van Leeuwen (2009) defines discourses as "socially constructed ways of knowing some aspect of reality" (p. 144). The two definitions are remarkably similar. When accounting for the social processes that constitute memes, it makes sense to understand the complex discursive relationships that tie ideas together. In this regard, studying discursive artifacts like internet memes may well indeed inform our understanding of the meme as a conceptual element of cultural transmission. Looking at the processes that guide the creation, circulation, and transformation of internet memes gives us the

tools to better understand how cultural participation occurs. Degree of agency and degree of transformation will be exhibited in micro-level discursive practices. Hull (2000) and Bloch (2000) speak of our need to account for the processes that govern the creation, circulation, and transformation of cultural memes. A structural analysis of internet memes means a clearer understanding of the aptness of the meme metaphor and the role of individual choice in the evolution of media artifacts.

Transformative literacy. This definitional debate can be informed by a look at just what it takes to create a piece of participatory media like an internet meme. After all, if memes as artifacts emphasize transformation in a way that meme theory does not, then it's fitting to ask what processes and practices undergird the textual transformation so important to memes. If memes are participatory, then it means they'll also be textually accessible. Thinking on what's required to create, circulate, and transform memes means further understanding the processes of cultural transmission and transformation that constitute them.

Reading and writing media artifacts. In the case of mediated artifacts, knowing the process is about literacy: knowing how to read the texts and create your own. Mediated cultural participation is not as simple as deciding you want to engage and then doing so. As Burgess and Green (2009) say of the video sharing network YouTube:

YouTube is a potential site of cosmopolitan cultural citizenship – a space in which individuals can represent their identities and perspectives, engage with self-representations of others, and encounter cultural difference. But access to all the layers of possible participation is limited to a particular segment of the population – those with the motivations, technological competencies, and site-specific cultural capital sufficient to participate at all levels of engagement the network affords. (p. 81)

We already know the digital divide occurs due to a lack of access to networks of mediated

participation as well as a lack of skill in using those networks. Many scholars argue that participation in amateur media requires literacy (see Ito et al., 2010; Jenkins, 2006; Livingstone, 2007). An examination of the participatory potential of these amateur media networks demands we investigate the formal proficiencies needed to engage them. If agency and transformation are housed in memes, then they are in these proficiencies.

Several scholars discuss literacy as it relates to digitally-mediated participation. To Warnick (2002) “media literacy involves understanding how media represent and construct what they depict, what media techniques are used, what effects are produced, and how media products are created” (p. 7). However, the ability to read multimodal mediated cultural texts is just the first step. The ability to create such texts is also essential to taking full advantage of networks of mediated cultural participation. When Jenkins (2006) talks about the literacy demonstrated by *Harry Potter* fans creating their own artifacts online, he explains:

...literacy is understood to include not simply what we can do with printed matter but also what we can do with media. Just as we would not traditionally assume that someone is literate if they can read but not write, we should not assume that someone processes media literacy if they can consume but not express themselves. (p. 170)

Likewise, Livingstone (2007) defines ‘internet literacy’ as “the ability to access, understand, and create information and communication online” (p. 501). She sees the creation aspect of this triad as crucial since “the changing media environment potentially serves to democratize content creation and dissemination in hitherto unprecedented ways” (p. 509).

Transforming texts. Taking literacy even further, Lange and Ito (2010) focus on how creation occurs through transformative translation as well. Machinima, mashups, and even

memes – all of which pull on existing texts to create new ones – require a special kind of creative literacy in their production. This ‘recontextualization’ requires the ability to successfully reinterpret and transform texts depending on personal expression or social context. If internet memes are guided by the transformative use of individual participants, then a literacy in transformative media processes – how to Photoshop, how to annotate with text, how to play with language and image to create innovative artifacts – will be essential. The question of process in both cultural memes and internet memes comes down to the use and influence of micro-level transformations.

House music (or techno) is often an example in discussions of transformative creativity. House music has received quite a bit of acknowledgement as a predecessor of participatory media. Atton (2004), Gere (2002), Kirby (2009), Lévy (2001), and Murphie and Potts (2003) all feature house or techno in their discussions on text, art, and information in the digital age. Lévy (2001) is particularly impressed with the participatory affordances of house music:

In techno each actor in the creating collective selects sound materials from a flux circulating within a vast technological network. This material is mixed, arranged, transformed, and reinjected as an “original” work into the stream of digital music. Every musician, every group of musicians, functions as an operator on a continuously changing flux within a cyclical network of cooperators. (p. 122)

Lévy says because of this ‘endless cycle’ of production, remix, and reappropriation, the musicians producing house music all operate within a ‘continuously changing flux’ they are consistently co-creating.

House music is an oft-cited example because it requires transformative literacy; it’s premised upon the construction of an entirely new text from entirely old ones. Transformative

literacy means the ability to not only read media texts, but also reappropriate and reapply them in creative new ways. Imitating established texts is necessary for this literacy, but not sufficient. New texts must be built from transformed versions of old ones. Atton (2004) argues ‘sampling’ is an important theoretical term for the era, not just for music. Likewise, Lange and Ito (2010) place reappropriation as one of the things that makes youth media use unique. They call for a better understanding of the transformative literacy involved in remix and reinterpretation. Schäfer (2011) points to the long cultural history of using ‘collage’ to build unique texts, claiming this kind of textual development can be applied to other productive processes, like collaborative software development. Memes – operating within what Serazio (2008) calls the pop culture ‘holy trinity’ of hybridization, recycling, and irony – might be especially powerful in that they exist as especially transformative texts. In an argument about the role of determinism and agency in the creation of culture, of imitation and transformation in the circulation of discourses, transformative media are an illuminating case. The processes that constitute their creation, the forms that are made and remade along the way, are worth assessing to understand the role of transformative literacy in the construction of mediated cultural artifacts.

Fundamentally, this transformative literacy may be essential in creating a media landscape that’s more open, collaborative, and even democratic. McGee (1990) made this argument even before Web 2.0 participation. To McGee “the only way to ‘say it all’ in our fractured culture is to provide readers/audiences with dense, truncated fragments which cue them to produce a finished discourse in their minds” (p. 288). In this way “text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse” (p. 288). Kuipers (2002) makes this point when she demonstrates that ‘visual collages’ are accessible as jokes because they can speak to a broad range of readers. However, their creation requires the ability to

negotiate a “visual, fragmented, commercial, popular culture” (p. 468). When creating these visual collages, cultural participants must not only be able to read mediated texts, but also must produce from the discourses they consume.

Memes are fitting artifacts to test transformative literacy in participatory media networks, as well as expand how we think of that literacy. An investigation into the structural components of meme creation, transmission, and transformation means a better understanding of the proficiencies and understandings required to participate in networks of mediated cultural participation. Further, a micro-level analysis of the formal features of memes, and the social processes that constitute them, can give us a better understanding of the agency of social actors that go into their creation. Thinking on literacy will provide insight into the cultural and social antecedents to participation in meme collectives. Agency and literacy go hand-in-hand, and a structural examination of memes can reveal how mediated cultural participation factors into both. Micro-level individual texts intertwine with broader cultural and social contexts. Social structures and discursive processes are essential in shaping individual artifacts just as individual artifacts in time shape social structures. We need to understand both the formal and social processes that guide memes to clarify the structures undergirding their transformative nature. Therefore, here I’ll ask:

RQ1: How are memes guided by structural processes?

Identities: Social Representations in Networks of Mediated Cultural Participation

From process to identity. These social processes are not decided or enacted in a vacuum, but are the fundamental elements of collective identities. The ability to participate

transformatively in the creation of public discourses means power in defining and expressing social representations. Calhoun (1994) argues “identity is always constructed and situated in a field and amid a flow of contending cultural discourses” (p. 12). Hall (1996) says “precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices” (p. 4). Norton (1988) says two things construct identity: difference and language. Identities, then, are ultimately perspectives of self and society, mediated through text and discourse. So textual artifacts like memes can answer questions about identity as it’s enacted in discourses online. This section will establish memes as important representatives of social identity in mediated collectives and outline the ethos that undergirds these collectives. The next section will argue memes are worthy artifacts to investigate the dominant ideologies in these collectives. Participatory media will facilitate diverse identities while diminishing ideological exclusion.

Collective identity, group identity. Identity is a personal perspective, but it is fundamentally decided at the group level. Postmes and N. Baym (2005) claim personal identities “are simultaneously properties of the group itself because they could not exist without some degree of consensus from the group” (p. 224). This loose consensus is often revealed in text and discourse, so text and discourse can teach us quite a bit about the social identity elements of a collective. In fact, Carbaugh (2005) says “in cultural conversations is the presumption and expression of shared identity, that is, the expressive orientation of interactants to a common social and cultural life” (p. 126). He calls this process ‘membering’, and describes it as “the parts of social interaction that alert and connect people to their common ways of living together” (p. 126). When thinking on public participation, the social dimensions of mediated identity carry

weight.

Memes are often produced on sites where social collectives come together and define themselves at least loosely as a group, and set themselves against other outsider groups. In the social-psychological tradition (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner & Reynolds, 2001), studies of social identity and studies of intergroup relations are thoroughly enmeshed. Tajfel and Turner (1986) offer this classic definition of a group:

We can conceptualize a group, in this sense, as a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it. (p. 15)

In this understanding of ‘group’, the emphasis is on social identity. Mediated cultural participation means dispersed social collectives can more thoroughly engage with others who share similar social identities, and can also gatekeep outsiders. Online communication, with its interactivity and reach, means the ability to carve out spaces to engage with the likeminded. These spaces have persisted and thrived even though they often lack organization, cohesion, or structure. For instance N. Baym (2007, 2010; N. Baym & Burnett, 2009) – after looking at the behaviors of fans of Swedish independent music – argues online groups operate in terms of ‘networked collectivism’. Just because there’s not ‘swedishindieforums.com’ to serve as a central hub of engagement with obscure Swedish music, doesn’t mean a collective hasn’t thrived. The same might be said for the collectives that produce memes, since this engagement occurs publicly and privately across multiple sites.

An intergroup understanding helps us appreciate group distinctions between sites

producing memes. Networked collectivism does not mean we should assume a single perspective exists for any collective. While fans of Swedish indie music might exist and interact across sites, we can't assume every site has the same practices. Meme collectives are no different, even if artifacts and participants do travel between sites. Elliot (2004) finds the 'Goa Trance' network of fan sites he studies was 'discursively policed' by unofficial and ambiguous standards. An intergroup understanding – both when considering interactions between sites and interactions with discourses beyond them – will help frame the nuances of social identity in meme collectives.

Mediated groups, mediated ideologies. With collective identities can come dominant ideologies. Kendall (2002) tells us that “although there is no single ‘net culture,’ the demographics and history of the internet have fostered certain cultural tendencies over others” (p. 185). Even if the processes by which memes are created, circulated, and transformed are open and participatory, this does not mean their content is not exclusionary or that the participants producing that content are diverse and open. Specific identities may be privileged, specific stories may be told. Markham (1998) and Hine (2000) each find norms and values in their ethnographic studies of subcultures online. Lévy (2001) argues ‘collective intelligence’ comes with an ethos: autonomy and openness to alterity. However, others (like Jenkins, 2006; Kendall, 2002) find online collectives that make exclusions based on insider and outsider. While ‘net culture’ might have changed in the decade since Kendall (2002) made the point, there's still likely a core ethos guiding certain ‘cultural tendencies’ in certain collectives. Meme collectives, coming from the geek fringe that built net culture, might carry an old ethos, favoring old inequalities with greater public consequence given their increasing popularity.

From identity to ideology. Speaking of how diverse groups interact online, Terranova

(2004) says “there is nothing idyllic about this political configuration. As a political milieu, a network culture looks more like a permanent battlefield than like a neo-socialist utopia” (p. 154). SIDE, the Social-Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (Lee, 2008; Postmes & N. Baym, 2005; Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998), explains that “in cases where intergroup divisions are marked and salient, and where individual users are rendered anonymous and depersonalized, contact is likely to increase intergroup divides rather than bridge them” (Postmes & N. Baym, 2005, p. 230).

SIDE tells us any time social identity becomes more salient than personal identity in online contexts, exclusion, gatekeeping, and bigotry will often follow. When group discourses become codified as social ‘truths’, they are often spoken of as if they’re not political and partial, even in the midst of other truths to counter them. When this happens, social identity can give way to exclusionary ideology. According to Reisigl and Wodak (2009), “ideologies serve as an important means of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations through discourse: for example, by establishing hegemonic identity narratives, or by controlling the access to specific discourses” (p. 88). Since “systems of knowledge are systems of power” (Norton, 2004, p. 113), it’s not a long trip from a salient collective identity to a dominant and exclusionary ideology.

There’s been extensive study on how discourses serve to promote and reinforce exclusionary ideologies. Cotter (2001) says ideology is in the media; Johnstone (2001) says it’s in our narratives; Wilson (2001) says it’s in our political discourse. In fundamental ways, discourse is “coloured by and productive of ideology” (Locke, 2004, p. 1). Van Dijk (1997) goes so far as to call discourse analysis ‘ideology analysis’. Discourse is so closely tied to ideology because the threads that weave the social world – texts and utterances – weave identity into that world. They reproduce an ethos and constitute a set of norms. After all, “there is no neutral

language” (Norton, 2004, p. 15). The Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (Bourhis & Giles, 1977; Giles & Johnson, 1987) is premised on this link, as are theories of ‘linguistic intergroup bias’ (Fiedler & Schmid, 2001; Maass et al., 1989). The indoctrination concealed in something as automatic as language is unsettling:

Language forces people to step into the shoes of their predecessors and even walk a bit in the direction they took. Language use is partly routinized, without conscious effort or intent on the part of the individual, and the processes as well as their results are sometimes beyond the individual’s control. (Fiedler & Schmid, 2001, pp. 275-276)

There are ideological dimensions to how memes talk about specific social groups and social roles. And this is saying nothing of the multimodal dimensions of their symbolism.

There’s no studying any cultural artifact without sensitivity to how ideologies function within that artifact. Ideologies can be transmitted through discourse without specific intent, when they’re built into the assumptions of those producing and reading the discourse. This is true in mediated cultural participation as well. After all, the ‘you’ honored by *TIME* (Grossman, 2006, Dec. 25) is a partial and privileged you. That being said, recognizing old inequalities in participatory media shouldn’t deter us from investigating them for emancipatory potential as well. Like Lévy (2001) says, “every new communication system results in exclusion. There were no illiterates before the invention of writing. Printing and television introduced the division between those who publish or appear in the media and everyone else” (p. 221). Meme collectives should be analyzed with an eye for how exclusionary ideology is either enforced or overcome in their discourse.

Gender, race, and class in mediated collectives. If meme collectives have a dominant

social identity, then it's not too hard to expect that their discourse will sometimes demonstrate ideological dimensions. As members of mediated collectives "overestimate the diversity of their members" (Kendall, 2002, p. 23), and "focus on the commonalities needed for communication" (Ess, 2009, p. 115), ideology can creep into their discourse. Depending on the site or communicative context, exclusionary ideology might be more or less pronounced. Still though, a few prominent ideological issues are important to many online collectives, and will be important to this investigation: gender, race, and class.

Historically, online collectives have been male-dominated, both in population and in discourse. These male-dominated spaces have therefore been masculine, if uniquely masculine:

The early hackers at MIT and Stanford established one of the central archetypes of computing subculture, which continues to this day, that of the intellectually advanced but socially and sexually awkward male, who is prepared to devote most of his time to an engagement with the possibilities of digital technology, to the exclusion of almost anything else. (Gere, 2002, p. 132)

Gere's point fits well with Jordan and Taylor's (2004) arguments about the alternative masculinity of hacker culture. Likewise, Kendall (2002) says "since the 1980s, the previously liminal masculine identity of the nerd has been rehabilitated and partly incorporated into hegemonic masculinity. The connotations of this term thus vary by social context" (p. 81).

So while the ideologies of online collectives might be empowering when compared to dominant notions of masculinity, they still leave much to be desired when it comes to cross-gender relations. Kendall (2002) demonstrates this when she analyzes how participants in the BlueSky Multi-User Domain (MUD) joke about their chances with women: "the joke is intended to be on the participants themselves, regarding their nonhegemonic masculinity, but women are

the ultimate butts of the joke” (p. 87). To these participants, less sports talk and more vocabulary means a move away from the ‘stereotypical’ male. However, in their interactions with and about women, many oppressive ideologies are still evident. Further, even in jokes, inequality is discursively reproduced.

This subtle sexism isn’t outright bigotry, but still can be dangerous. The problem is masculine forms are often ‘invisible’ – and therefore discursively ‘normal’, while feminine forms are ‘marked’ – and “thereby highlight the femininity of the person as an essential aspect” (Fiedler & Schmid, 2001, p. 264). Such demarcations can mean a hostile environment for marginalized groups, thus souring participatory potential. In Kendall’s (2002) analysis:

...the gendered social context on BlueSky casts women as outsiders unless and until they prove themselves able to perform masculinities according to the social norms of the group. Women who are able to do so find acceptance within the group, but their acceptance reinscribes masculine norms, which continue to define women as assumed outsiders and outsiders, by definition, as not men. (p. 100)

In this way, a cycle continues which normalizes partial forms of understanding. This is the premise of Kramarae’s (1981) ‘muted group theory’: dominant masculine ideologies are embedded in the language itself. Succeeding in certain contexts means performing masculinity, thus embedding the ideologies further.

Dominant masculinity can be embedded even in counter-cultural responses to that masculinity. Warnick (2002) demonstrates this in her analysis of the ‘cybergrrl’ mediated subcultures of the 1990s. Cybergrrl groups were a response to the perceptions that the internet was ‘masculine’ and that girls on the net were a peripheral object of lust or wonder, instead of active social agents in networks of mediated cultural participation. In their participation,

cybergrrls chose ‘grrl’ as a discursive marker against male norms. The goal, in part, was to “masculinize the feminine (i.e., to adopt identities colored by stereotypically male traits such as independence, aggression, and technological know-how)” (p. 83). Cybergrrls took these traits and applied them to artistic expression, social support, and media commentary. However, in doing so, cybergrrl subcultures walked the line between reappropriating masculine tendencies and playing into them by reproducing their systems of values.

Such alternative masculinity has persisted through the years in online collectives, but – at first glance – they seem more accessible to women than the hacker culture of the early internet or MUD chats pre Web 2.0. The internet itself is getting more accessible and universal, even as participatory divides still exist. Mediated cultural participation, as an ideal, is contingent upon that fact. However, in Shifman’s (2011) analysis of YouTube memes, she finds women are held to conventional standards of beauty and participation, while men are sympathetically portrayed as flawed heroes or antiheroes. The videos expand the role of the hero – right in line with the ‘hacker’ masculinity of years gone by – while keeping women in very traditional positions. As the internet becomes more accessible, and culture is labeled more participatory, we should ask how old gender ideologies are integrated into new forms of text and discourse.

Not only are online collectives marked for gender, they are marked for race. In Western contexts (and in America especially), this also implies another fundamental category: class. Online collectives have, historically, been as discursively white and privileged as they are masculine. So even in noncorporeal environments, we have ‘the politics of skin’ (Hughey, 2008). In Kendall’s (2002) analysis of the BlueSky MUD, she finds whiteness is assumed unless explicitly stated otherwise, as is class cohesion. This happens even though “group discussions rarely refer specifically to class. Class instead emerges in discussions of other topics, including,

in addition to education, income, lifestyle, and discussions of US politics, especially economic issues such as welfare” (p. 191). Given the racial dimensions of many of these class discussions, Kendall finds it hard to separate the two.

Much like masculinity, Jackson, Shin, and Wilson (2000) call whiteness a ‘constructed centrality’. Again, the problem is that “if whiteness is unmarked, it becomes distributed throughout social spaces and eventually functions as a ‘universal insider’ ” (p. 72). Because of this:

White people do not have to change who they are, how they talk, or how they behave. The talk and behavior of whites occupy a legitimized cultural space of social interaction, in which the identity of whiteness is acknowledged as normal and standard. (p. 82)

Kendall (2002) finds similar results. BlueSky participants defend their lack of racism by arguing they hardly notice if anyone they talk to is ‘black’. After all, how could they in a disembodied online environment? But “in these statements, the ultimate test of whether race matters online is the ability of black people to pass unnoticed as black. This emphasizes the presumed desirability of hiding blackness and the assumption that people online are white” (p. 210). It also boils race down to an easy binary: white or black, white or not white.

This ‘constructed centrality’ is also why things seemingly innocuous as jokes can go a long way to reinforce oppressive ideologies. Billig (2001) makes this argument about KKK joke sites. On the sites, oppressive ideologies – many premised on supposed science or definitional characteristics of minorities – support an ideological humor. This means “the person finding the joke funny is implicitly accepting these stereotyped assumptions about the nature of the other” (p. 277). But it doesn’t take a Klan site to find discourses built on racist premises. Devine, Plant

and Blair (2001) remind us prejudice happens even among those who would deny overtly racist views. Overt hostility is often replaced by more covert, aversive racism. Hughey (2008) finds that ‘othering’ occurs even on a minority fraternity website. Even though it is never officially or overtly exclusionary.

Meme collectives, given their lineage, their disembodied discourse, and their recourse to joking are likely susceptible to some ideological pitfalls when it comes to race, class and gender. Of course no two sites will exhibit the same tendencies. The KKK sites Billig (2001) analyzes are a far cry from the generally well-meaning BlueSky MUD Kendall (2002) studies. Owens (2004) even finds a variety of ideologies on race and gender within the same genre: online personal ads. However, issues of equality must be investigated on any collective tied to participatory media. A partisan ‘you’ can be damning to broader cultural engagement if it means the exclusion of nondominant views under the participatory banner. The ethos of online collectives has implications for how social identities are enacted in public discourse. Mediated cultural participation requires not only that many voices engage, but also that exclusionary perspectives do not define the discussion and the groups creating it. Even if memes focus primarily on accounts of little social quirks, identity and ideology intertwine. The public discourse produced by meme collectives will certainly express norms and values tied to social identity. The nature of these norms and values is still undecided, and has implications for mediated cultural participation. Ideologies die hard, so we should ask:

RQ2: How are social identities articulated through memes?

Politics: Pop Participation in the Mediated Public Sphere

From participation to politics. Memes matter as public discourse both for the structural processes that guide them and the social identities they represent. Democratic cultural participation requires an openness of form and content. But perhaps the most stringent test of cultural participation is influence on political discourses. An open process when creating discourse and an openness for multiple voices to engage in that process are initial steps. When those processes and those voices are applied to political engagement, mediated cultural participation is most powerfully mobilized. Zuckerman (2008) makes this argument as he traces the ‘cute cat theory’ of civic engagement, tying net culture to political participation. Shirky (2008) does as well, as he charts the mobilization of networks of mediated cultural participation from everyday use to political advocacy when need beckons. Political participation is also Jenkins’ (2006) end game in his discussion of mediated cultural participation. ‘Photoshopping for democracy’, to Jenkins, is a powerful use of participatory media. This section will argue memes as both media artifacts and pop culture artifacts are well suited for examining and evaluating the micro-level realities of participatory political engagement.

If memes have political ‘teeth’, it’s in their ability to allow broader commentary on political and social issues. This section addresses two dimensions of this political ability. First, memes can combine the pop and the political in unique ways. The Obama comic in Chapter One combines news of bin Laden’s death with a format satirizing the CBS show *CSI: Miami*. Pop is important to public discourse as a lingua franca for participation. The political implications of this fact are contested though. The following subsection will address whether the combination of pop and politics means democratic participation or shallow engagement. Second, memes are mediated artifacts that exist and spread largely in disembodied collectives. Broad participation in

political discourse depends upon more voices having access to channels of engagement, and the civic efficacy that might result from it. If more people can log onto 4chan, Reddit, or Tumblr and engage in political discussion from more perspectives, then that might be good for democracy. However, mediation also comes with disembodiment, which leads to a host of concerns about the nature and tone of political engagement. If the apex of mediated cultural participation is political engagement, then mediated collectives have to balance access and openness with depth and civility. The concluding subsection of this chapter will argue memes are apt for assessing this tension. Assessing political participation is assessing the inclusion of multiple voices and the vibrancy of multiple perspectives engaging in political discourse.

Pop goes political. Whether perpetuating oppression or encouraging liberation, popular culture texts have political implications. Van Zoonen (2005) speaks about ‘popular culture’ not as a mere synonym for ‘entertainment’, but as the “discourses of everyday life” that can stand in “opposition to elite affairs and politics” (p. 10). In this way, van Zoonen says, ‘popular genres and means’ allow for richer participation in public discourse. Dahlgren (2009) says pop culture discourses – both pop culture texts and our responses to them – can be ‘proto-political’, because “popular culture offers a sense of easy access to symbolic communities, a world beyond oneself. This can at times be seen as preparatory for civic engagement, prefiguring involvement beyond one’s private domain, by offering ‘cultural citizenship’ ” (p. 141). Van Zoonen (2005) would likely drop the ‘proto’ prefix. She claims entertainment and public discourse have always been intertwined in American public life, and there’s no reason to assume this means a cheapened discourse. Even the Lincoln-Douglas debates, she says, “were simultaneously entertaining social events crowded by popular artists, magicians, and quacks” (p. 2). If sharing clips from *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* “can be seen as a political act or a performance of citizenship – a

means of engaging with and intervening in matters of personal and public concern” (G. Baym & Shah, 2011, p. 5), then we might see memes as a participatory and populist way to engage with public discourse.

Van Zoonen (2005) makes an impassioned plea for a broader understanding of public discourse that includes popular culture artifacts and ideas:

Popular culture does have its flaws, but it needs to be acknowledged as a relevant resource for political citizenship: a resource that produces comprehension and respect for popular political voices and that allows for more people to perform as citizens; a resource that can make citizenship more pleasurable, more engaging, and more inclusive. In other words, a resource that can entertain the citizen. (p. 151)

Van Zoonen, much like Dahlgren (2009), worries that calling pop engagement ‘cheapened discourse’ is a way to shut out alternative forms of understanding. It’s a way to keep the political world narrow and exclusive. Shirky (2008) reminds us it’s not always easy to trace a simple binary between popular culture and political activism, especially with mediated discourse online. He reminds us flash mobs are used both for benign and political ends. Atton (2004) says musical sampling can be used to make commentaries, critiques, and satires, by juxtaposing words and sounds in enlightening ways. In this regard, remixed artifacts “might be considered as media criticism, differing only from that published in articles and books in terms of the nature of the quotations they employ” (p. 96).

Humor and satire in mediated politics. Memes are almost entirely jokes, even if they are sometimes jokes that cover political issues. But popular culture texts can function as powerful political satire. G. Baym (2005, 2007, G. Baym & Shah, 2011) sees *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* as a hybrid of lowbrow comedy and critical journalism. He concedes they’re

entertaining, but says this makes them even more important to the public. His point is that “such emerging media forms function simultaneously as sources of entertainment and information, and have become increasingly central locations for political communication” (2007, p. 361). Nitz et al. (2003) make a similar point about the jabs featured on late-night talk shows, arguing these jokes have real implications for how political candidates are perceived by voters. Smith and Voth (2002) claim, as they look at Presidential Candidate portrayals on *Saturday Night Live* that “political humor has matured in American culture to the point that its contribution to democratic process verges on a significance equal to politics itself” (p. 110). Kuipers (2002, 2005) brings these points to memes specifically, arguing that after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, people remixed pictures, told jokes, and passed around images in order to offer commentary and make sense of their ambivalent feelings about the events.

But memes could just as likely could be ‘pastiche’, which Murphie and Potts (2003) say is the “recycling of the past without the critical edge of satire or the subversive role of parody” (p. 59). If this is the case, then all the transformative literacy in the world will not amount to more vibrant political participation. Serazio (2008) levels the ‘pastiche’ charge at mashups. Mashups, as they’re often understood in the online context, are musical arrangements scored out of two or more pop culture texts remixed into a single artifact. Serazio discusses a YouTube remix of Nirvana’s *Smells Like Teen Spirit* and *Booyliscious* by Destiny’s Child: *Smells Like Teen Booty*. He calls it out as a particularly uninspiring example of pastiche. And even the collages highlighted by Kuipers (2002, 2005) that circulated the internet post 9/11 might be called unelaborate commentary (an image of King Kong guarding the World Trade Center) or visual hyperbole (an image of the Statue of Liberty cloaked in a burka). Even if these images play off political events, the depth of their contribution could be questioned.

For good or for ill, humorous commentary does play a role in public political discussion. A meme might not have the argumentative depth of an *Atlantic* or *New Yorker* piece. However, Hermes (2006) argues, “it is time to turn round our ideal of the public sphere, and recognise that it should be open to many forms of literacy” like these forms of pop culture commentary (p. 40). Popular culture texts must be considered in a discussion of public discourse. We should recognize their influence, even as we investigate the implications of that influence.

Mediated political engagement. Participatory media only further entangle public discourse and popular culture. A core theme in Jenkins’ (2006) *Convergence Culture* is that people use the increased connection afforded by digital media to engage more vocally and powerfully in public discourse. Jenkins doesn’t go to political blogs or *New York Times* comments to support this point, but rather to Photoshop jokes, amateur mashup films, and *Harry Potter* fan fiction. Grimes (2006) links the mediated connection between videogame players and producers to the opportunity for debates over intellectual property. Lange and Ito (2010) argue youth use media to exercise more control over their lives, even as they do banal things like make photo collages and bypass school firewalls to visit banned entertainment sites. As Dahlgren (2009) claims, “in the contemporary media world, popular culture and politics cannot be fully separated. They are discursively structured in many similar ways, and they inform each other, feed off each other” (p. 141).

Media and the polyvocal public sphere. Memes are helpful here because of one recurring argument about the effects of mediated cultural participation: that it will do something to the ‘public sphere’. Habermas ([1962] 1991) popularizes the concept even as he laments its demise. To Habermas, the public sphere was the liminal space where private citizens engaged in public deliberation about the social and political. Often, the term is applied to narrow and official

political action or deliberation like petitioning, canvassing, or protesting. But, in Habermas' conception, the public sphere was primarily unofficial and non-legislative. It was a communicative space, a place of discourse housed physically in parlors and coffeehouses and metaphorically in the pages of the press. Habermas sees the public sphere as a historical artifact: the product of the public life of the Enlightenment-era European Bourgeois. Similarly, Putnam (2000) argues the American public sphere has been steadily declining over the last half century, famously observing that instead of engaging with our communities, we're 'bowling alone'.

Some caution, though, that this decline isn't the whole story. Many have critiqued the original notion of the public sphere as an idealistic fantasy (Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Fraser, 1993; Schudson, 1993). They argue we should re-conceptualize the idea to account for modern diverse, affective, and fragmented publics. Zukin et al. (2006) say we're not necessarily seeing a 'decline' in the public sphere, we're just seeing new types of engagement. These new forms of engagement are less narrow and are tied up with changes in the marketplace as much as the government. Dahlgren (2007, 2009) says the fragmentation of public culture, increasing mediation of messages (both mass and personal), prevalent consumerism, and the rise of 'networked individualism' instead of interdependent community all influence the shifting public sphere. While these might seem to point to a decline in the public sphere, Dahlgren, like Zukin et al. (2006), says they just mean a different way of engaging it. If the public sphere is made up of public discourse, then we're just talking about different public issues in different ways.

Schudson (1993) says whether the public sphere is in decline is less important than how we work to make it better. 'The internet', as a new communication medium, is a prominent place to look. After all, it is billed as the ultimate participatory medium, and participation in public discourse has long been the gold standard of a healthy public sphere. Dewey (1927) sees

American rail and telegraph connections as means to turn ‘The Great Society’ into ‘The Great Community’. Fishkin (2009) proposes we begin formal, citizen-level deliberations to enrich public engagement. Dahlgren (2009) says “for democracy to happen, citizens must be able to encounter and talk to each other. They need access to each other to develop their collective political efforts, and contexts in which they can act together” (p. 114). Without vibrant and productive public discourse, there is not much hope for a healthy public sphere.

The call for diversity in the public sphere comes down to a single idea: polyvocality. I adapt the term from Bakhtin’s ([1970] 1986) ‘polyphony’, which means ‘many sounds’ – many multivocal and always-unfinished texts – always intertwining. A healthy public sphere intertwines many voices. This means both more people engaging and more ideas being engaged. As Dalton and Klingmann (2007) argue, “democracy is designed to aggregate public preferences into binding collective decisions. Necessarily this requires an active citizenry, because it is through interest articulation, information, and deliberation that public preferences can be identified, shaped, and transformed into collective decisions” (p. 13). Political strands are woven together through public discourse. More voices mean a richer tapestry. To Dalton and Klingmann, this is worth the challenges that come from trying to ‘aggregate’ diverse demands as more participants enter into public discourse. The challenges are symptoms of a healthy change. The hope for mediated polyvocality is that interactivity and reach will mean new outlets for public discourse. The previously marginalized will have a means to find information and engage public dialogue with more equal footing. People will be able to interact with diverse members of the public, to engage purposefully with discourses previously ignored or misunderstood.

Media – in mass, broadcast forms – are often seen as a hindrance to the creation of a vibrant, participatory, public agora. It’s no secret that traditional media are immensely powerful

creators of discourse. Those institutions and organizations that select, produce, and distribute our news, entertainment, and information have long held prominence as the disseminators of societal discourse. The texts they produce are the texts of record, the true texts. The production of truth within the media is a central focus in critical discourse analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Wodak & Meyer, 2009a; van Dijk, 1997). The media are a powerful entity in public discourse because “they are the space of power-making. The media constitute a space where power relationships are decided between competing political and social actors...The media, as a whole, are not neutral” (Castells, 2009, p. 194). Such power can lead to a monopoly of discourse, and contribute to a disenfranchised public sphere, one where not all members feel represented or engaged.

Participatory media – seen as a personal answer to mass media – are enticing as a tool for broader public participation (see Atton, 2004; Milioni, 2009). While alternative media are, of course, older than the internet, what’s changed is their potential for voice. We now have needed sites of alternative engagement with public discourse (see discussions of Indymedia by Atton, 2004, and Milioni, 2009). The internet affords alternative media some key abilities: “timeliness; a diversity of voices that emphasizes native reporters; the scope for unlimited postings; a wide range of international sources” (Atton, 2004, p. 59). The internet provides the interactivity and reach necessary for dialogue, debate, and discussion, even in a fractured public sphere. Dahlgren (2005, 2007, 2009) sees digital media as a central facilitator of productive engagement with public life. To Dahlgren, the internet’s “ease and adaptability of use permit those with less relative social power to participate as citizens in political activities. They can more readily express their views, and counter those of the more powerful...expressed in the dominant mass media” (2009, p. 190). In this sense, “the internet represents a massive boost for the public

sphere; it is making a positive difference in terms of political involvement. While increasingly meshing with the mainstream media, the internet is emerging as a clear factor in promoting participation” (pp. 169-170).

Participation is tied so closely to the inclusion of subversive voices in public discourse because “such media formations, through their very practice, will tend to critique notions of truth, reality and objectivity that we find at the heart of mainstream media practices” (Atton, 2004, p. 9). Work on ‘hacktivism’ (see Jordan & Taylor, 2004) is an example. Activist hacker groups, like Lulzsec and Anonymous, are stripped-down, loosely-organized, and narrowly-focused entities. They frame their actions as a means to engage with powerful purveyors of public discourse. Gibson (2007) argues failure to allow a place for minority ideas is one of the greatest impediments to democracy. Alternative media, through polyvocality, benefit public discourse because they widen the pool of perspectives, and require citizens to engage these perspectives.

Allowing many voices means more diverse and fluid political commentary. Shirky (2008) tells of a part time journalist: a girl in Thailand who had a fashion blog but began reporting extensively on a coup in her nation. As the news became less pressing, she returned within the same blog to quotidian posts about being a fashion student. So “what seems like a fixed and abiding category like ‘journalist’ turns out to be tied to an accidental scarcity created by the expense of publishing apparatus” (p. 76). When more people have access to a means of publishing and an audience, more people can adopt a journalistic role, even haphazardly. In examples like this, we see evidence digitally-mediated cultural participation has meant “the development of decentralized forms of political practice that function alongside of, and perhaps in response to, the increasing disinterest in formal politics characteristic of contemporary western

democracies” (G. Baym & Shah, 2011, p. 4).

And while Atton (2004) uses ‘alternative media’ to define a narrowly journalistic corpus, there’s no reason we can’t see alternative media practices in broader contexts. Twitter feeds, comments on news stories, wall posts, or memes all may be alternative media outlets when political need beckons. Shirky (2008) argues “however minor they may seem, any tool that improves shared awareness or group coordination can be pressed into service for political means, because the freedom to act in a group is inherently political” (p. 187). Any time we subscribe to a subversive or empowering Twitter account, any time we provide an elaboration or critique of a news story to be read by those viewing the story, any time we make a meme about a social or political issue, we’re contributing to alternative media. Memes, whether they agree with dominant discourses or not, whether they’re popular culture or not, are the vocalizations of members of the public sphere. As artifacts outside the official purview and control of the media (but still tied to it), they can teach us about the amateur discourse definitive of participatory media. Participatory political discourse will have substantial room for alternative perspectives and forms of commentary from citizens active in alternative ways.

Complicating polyvocality. However, as much as they might afford alternative engagement with public discourse, networks of mediated cultural participation also afford enough customizable information to find whatever we want whenever we want it. This self-selection might undermine any positive effects of discourse online. It’s easy to assume participatory practices and participatory texts will lead to polyvocal public discourse. But, even in the era of you, challenges to empowered public discourse still exist. Sites where people share content participants find compelling necessarily *don’t* share what participants *don’t* find as compelling. Even the common practice of organizing posts by popularity can be detrimental to

polyvocal discourse. As Jenkins (2009) says, “while such mechanisms seem democratic, they have the effect of hiding minority perspectives” (p. 124).

‘Echo chambers’ (Sunstein, 2007) are the negative corollary to polyvocality. In a boomerang effect, the wealth of public discourse online might lead us to seek and engage in only opinion-confirming public discourse, creating nothing more than a giant room where we shout an opinion and hear the same opinion bounce right back. Papacharissi (2002) argues the internet does enable democratic deliberation, but also affords fragmentation of public discourse. Chadwick (2006) fears echo chambers even as he sees the internet’s potential to widen public deliberation. Kobayashi and Ikeda (2009) find evidence of ‘selective exposure’ in how we look for public information online. Their evidence suggests we gravitate toward information that confirms our ideologies. This is true even if we do not engage in ‘selective avoidance’, meaning we do not completely ignore disconfirming information when we come across it.

The digital divide compounds the ‘echo chamber’ tension. As of 2011, only three-fourths of Americans regularly use the internet, and this number is divided along race, class, education, and age lines; likewise, far less than half of the world’s population is online, and this number greatly favors developed nations (“Internet World Stats”, 2011). The problem is this: despite all our talk about polyvocality and empowerment, if only a privileged segment of the population can use participatory media to engage in public discourse, then we’re too close to the narrow notion of the public sphere Habermas ([1962] 1991) is critiqued for. Poor (2005) makes this point when he examines the website Slashdot as a public sphere. He says it contains the public deliberation over public issues Habermas ([1962] 1991) idealized, but is subject to a familiar lack of diversity. Networks of mediated cultural participation may be sites of alternative engagement with social and political issues, but they are populated by a narrow set of actors. Their

participatory polyvocality should therefore be questioned.

If “political homogeneity in social networks reinforces political intolerance” (Gibson, 2007, p. 336), then the threats of selective exposure and insufficient access might undermine the democratizing polyvocality afforded by the internet. But Wright and Street (2007) call for a more moderate understanding of polyvocality in discourse online. To them “both sides in this debate are creating a false dichotomy. It is no more plausible to conclude that online discussion forums destroy deliberation than it is to suggest that they make it possible” (p. 850). As with questions on participation more broadly, the answer to whether online public discourse encourages deliberation or stifles it is likely both.

However, if engaging only with similarity is a fear, so is inappropriately engaging with difference. Political ‘participation’ is of little value if that participation is marked by the hostile antagonism of oppositional political factions. As Dalton and Klingmann (2007) explain, diverse voices in public dialogue can mean problems ‘aggregating’ diverse demands into consensus as oppositional groups vie for scarce resources. The fact that digitally-mediated political discourse exists as disembodied social interaction, potentially absent of the social cues and social norms of face-to-face discourse, might lead to ‘flaming’ and ‘trolling’, antagonism and aggression. In an echo chamber, we gloss over differences in social identity and see only agreement with our own lens. When we flame, it is because we other conversational partners to the point where we only see oppositional social identities (see Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998; Lee, 2008). It’s from too much polyvocality, not too little.

The antagonistic engagement of disembodied identities complicates the potential for polyvocal discourse. Even if public discourse online is polyvocal, this does not mean it is enriching to the public sphere. A diversity of voices interacting doesn’t necessarily mean public

dialogue worth having if the ethos of those interacting encourages social identity clashes. The absence of an echo chamber does not mean an ideal agora. This is why Kirby (2009) sees in online message boards naught but “parochialism, provincialism, isolation, bigotry, rage, prejudice, simple-mindedness, and anonymity. What message boards do is, toxically, distribute these human failings to everyone across the planet in no time at all” (p. 107). Disembodied discourse might dampen any positive political potential in meme collectives due to inherent antagonism.

There are those who acknowledge heated debate is a political reality, but don't see it as a negative. In fact, healthy, vibrant participation could be premised on such debate, provided *antagonism* is channeled into a more measured and productive *agonism*. Mouffe (2005) defines antagonism as ‘relations between enemies’ and agonism as ‘relations between adversaries’. She argues that “conflict in liberal democratic societies cannot and should not be eradicated” (2009, p. 551). Social identity necessitates the existence of factionist discourse, since “when dealing with political identities, which are always collective identities, we are dealing with the creation of an ‘us’ that can only exist by its demarcation from a ‘them’ ” (p. 550). In political discourse, antagonism is an ever present possibility, but “it is in our power to create the practices, discourses, and institutions that would allow those conflicts to take an agonistic form” (2005, p. 130). To Mouffe, this is done by embracing public participation that encourages adversarial ‘pluralism’. Participation must be premised on the “values of liberty and equality for all” even if it also embraces “dissent about their interpretation” (pp. 121). Antagonism rejects those values outright, pushing voices out of the public sphere. Agonism is inclusive discourse, even if not always polite discourse. Participation is essential. So essential in fact, it's worth the inevitable dissent that comes with it. In agonistic conceptions of public discourse, participation is

important, even when its ugly.

This perspective can be applied to mediated communication as well, and answers fears about disembodied debate. Dahlberg (2007) says disembodied debate can be channeled into a productive agonism. Papacharissi (2004) reminds us there's a difference between 'civil' and 'polite'. 'Civil' discourse can be very *impolite*, but still be enriching public deliberation. She argues that instances of incivility – like outright bigotry or baseless ranting – are less common than we think in online contexts. Further, she observes that they are mostly either ignored or responded to in a manner consistent with civil values. Agonism is more common than antagonism. When I studied the mediated public discourse of videogame fans (Milner, 2010, 2011), I found agonistic debate that was issue-oriented and not overly ad hoministic. In fact, an overarching social identity – that of 'the gamer' – undergirded the debate. Milioni (2009), in her study of Indymedia Athens, finds that "even though these debates are often swarming with aggression that fails to reach consensus, participants debate argumentatively about the issues under consideration and define, autonomously and intersubjectively, the rules and terms of their own discussion" (p. 427).

Memes are essential to investigate as a nexus of digital media, popular culture, and political discourse. Polyvocality and pop culture are intertwined. When Dahlgren (2009) and van Zoonen (2005) argue for the value of popular culture in the public sphere, they're arguing for more polyvocality in public discourse. To van Zoonen, "antagonism runs parallel to the opposition between people and elites, and the dismissal of the popular functions as an instrument of elite dominance" (p. 144). Dismissing 'populist' participation means embracing an echo chamber and stifling agonistic debate. Polyvocality, in participatory media, means the ability to use media to engage with diverse texts, and therefore discourses and identities. Memes draw on

these diverse texts to make their points and prove their claims. They, almost by definition, are just jokes. Mediated collectives produce them, so they're a means to evaluate concerns about polyvocal participation. If artifacts even as seemingly trivial as memes are polyvocal political discourse, then we have evidence participatory media provide enrichment to the public sphere. If the era of you has opened up new voices and perspectives into public discourse, then we should explore how those voices operate. Participatory media should mean more voices from more sources have more access to political dialogue. To assess this we need to ask:

RQ3: How are political perspectives articulated through memes?

The next chapter will outline a critical discourse analytic method for assessing these research questions. Chapters Four, Five, and Six will address process, identity, and politics in meme collectives. Chapter Seven will connect these ideas and apply this project's findings to a broader discussion of mediated cultural participation.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods: The Critical Analysis of Mediated Discourses

Collection

Narrowing the field. To review, the next three chapters will discuss process, identity, and politics as they exist in the networks of mediated cultural participation that create, circulate, and transform memes. The chapters will center on these three research questions:

RQ1: How are memes guided by structural processes?

RQ2: How are social identities articulated through memes?

RQ3: How are political perspectives articulated through memes?

Here, I will outline a critical discourse analytic method for answering these questions on mediated cultural participation. This section will focus on how data was collected for the project; the next will explain its analytic strategies.

To get the clearest understanding of how memes function as participatory media, I collected data from multiple networks of mediated cultural participation. This provided a more holistic analysis than focusing on just one meme site (see N. Baym, 2006; Hine, 2009). This began as an exploratory action, visiting a wide range of sites where participants make, share, and comment on memes. Mautner (2005) advises this sort of exploratory orientation in any study to mediated public discourse:

...first establish, through an extensive search on the web, as comprehensive a picture as possible of the range of voices involved. After all, using web-based data is ultimately about broadening one's analytic field of vision, and narrowing that field down too soon can easily defeat the whole point of the exercise. (p. 817)

Therefore, in the genesis of this study, I intentionally searched out meme sites I wasn't familiar with, and paid more attention to the sites I was already visiting. The goal was to narrow the sites I formally collected from to a manageable, yet informative, set.

Jäger and Maier (2009) provide guidance for narrowing a field in a study of public discourse. First, researchers should choose a discursive 'strand': a 'flow of discourse' from a common topic or context. As I became confident through exploratory orientation that meme collectives were apt for the study of mediated cultural participation, I narrowed to specific collectives. Jäger and Maier (2009) argue researchers should justify and create a corpus of data: a set of specific sites to trace a discursive strand. In order to build a better corpus, I honed in based on a few criteria.

As my 'discursive strand' became clearer, I became more aware of what I needed in sites to best reflect the collectives producing memes. First, I needed sites with variations in their level of establishment. Some meme sites have been around long enough to gain some notoriety or fame even outside of niche internet enthusiasts. Others have smaller audiences or have gained less fame. Second, I needed sites with varying levels of 'discourse' surrounding memes: forums, comments, links, etc. On many meme sites, memes and the comments that surround them are part of the same discussion. Even if this project focuses on images more than the comments tied to them, those comments are essential in understanding the discursive norms and diverse perspectives being negotiated through the memes themselves. Understanding how people do – or do not – talk about memes provides insight into memes as a discursive strand. Third, I needed sites that interacted with each other. Often discourses on meme sites refer to other meme sites specifically. These meta references often require participants on the site to think intentionally about their core ethos, in order to contrast to an 'outgroup' site.

Based on these criteria, I chose five research sites: 4chan, Reddit, Tumblr, the Cheezburger Network, and Canvas. These sites represent variations in levels of establishment. They also vary in the amount of discourse surrounding memes. These sites also have some interplay with each other. Each of these sites has this in common: they are hubs of meme creation, circulation, and transformation. Beyond that, they each have their own unique affordances.

The first site I focused on is an imageboard called 4chan (4chan.org): a site often tantamount to ‘meme’. While the site is divided into a multiple boards – forums for a multitude of interests from anime to fitness – its ‘random’ board (known as ‘/b/’ the URL for 4chan.org/b/) is the most notorious (screen capture from July 07, 2011):

The screenshot displays a portion of the 4chan /b/ board. It features several threads, each with a post header, a title, and a body of text. The threads include:

- A thread titled "hey /b/, what's your favorite joke?" with a post by "Anonymous 07/21/11(Thu)22:06:51 No.34235966" and a link to a file named "1311302116.png". The post body contains a joke about mathematicians at a bar.
- A thread titled "What's blind and screams?" with a post by "Anonymous 07/21/11(Thu)22:37:43 No.342359870" and a reply by "Anonymous 07/21/11(Thu)22:38:41 No.342360133" containing the text "Stevie Wonder answering a hot iron." and a link to a file named "whatthefuckamreading.jpg".
- A thread titled "Advice on girls thread." with a post by "Anonymous 07/21/11(Thu)19:48:17 No.342326681" and a reply by "Anonymous 07/21/11(Thu)22:32:31 No.342356855" containing the text "I has experience." and "oh you figured that out, did ya?". The thread also includes a diagram of a circle with a vertical line and a horizontal line, and a small image of a person.
- A thread titled "things to know when on a date???" with a post by "Anonymous 07/21/11(Thu)22:36:54 No.342359664" and a reply by "Anonymous 07/21/11(Thu)22:38:39 No.342360124" containing the text "i.e. how to treat girl, convo topics, where to go".
- A thread titled "Do any of you guys ever get double songs in iTunes? If so how do /brothers get rid of them with out physically going through and doing every single song i have like 40 days worth of songs." with a post by "Anonymous 07/21/11(Thu)22:38:39 No.342360126" and a link to a file named "1311302318.png".

/b/ is built on the premise of anonymity. Participants are not required to post with any pseudonym or credentials, and most don't. Threads are not archived (becoming inaccessible as

new threads push them away) and are scantily organized on the barebones site.

4chan has developed an ‘anything goes’ reputation. It’s avant-garde or lewd, depending on who you ask and the thread you’re reading. This environment of anonymous collaboration and contestation is fertile ground for memes. 4chan’s most popular definition on the venerable net culture reference site, Urban Dictionary (“Urban Dictionary: 4chan”, n.d.), says:

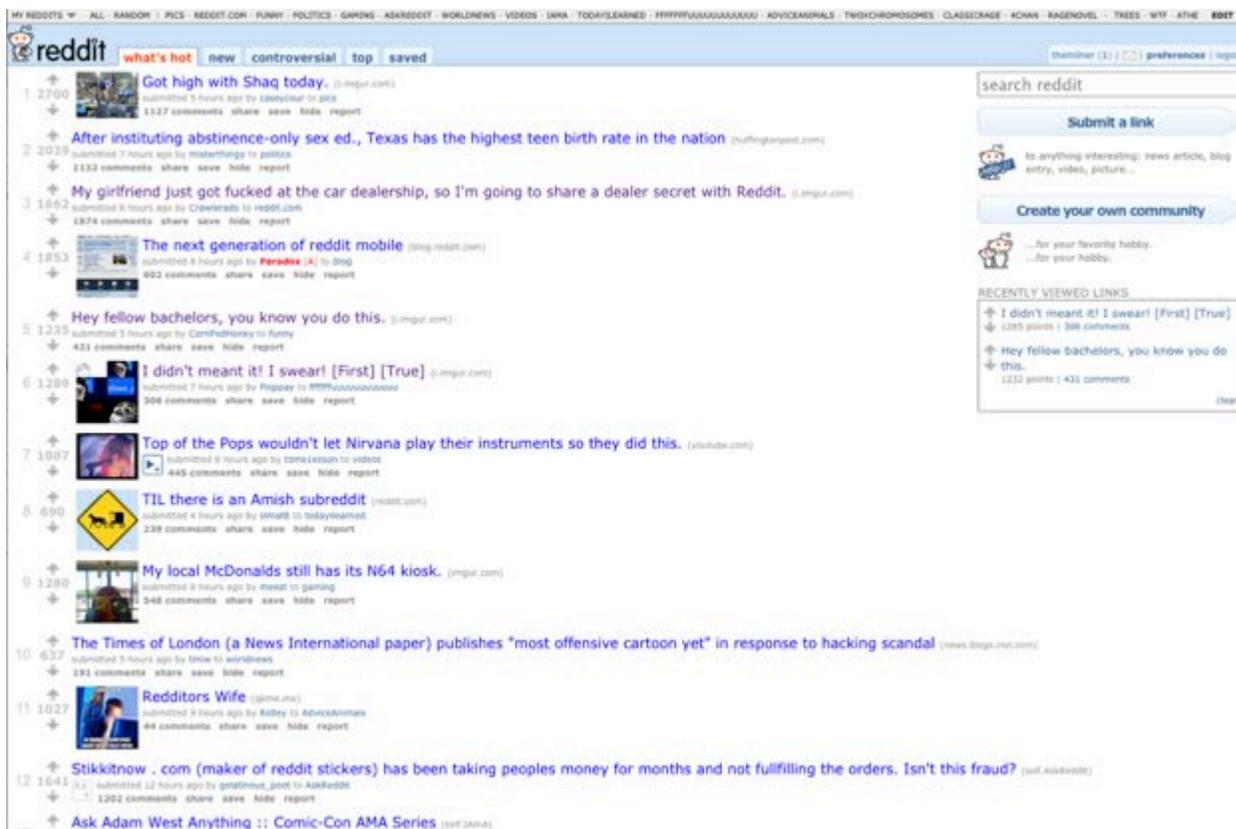
you have just entered the very heart, soul, and life force of the internet. this is a place beyond sanity, wild and untamed...we are the anonymous army. cross us and you will fail...4chan is a place of sheer genius and utter stupidity, and there is often a thin line dividing the two. here you will see a state of mind that exists in most human beings, but is rarely if ever shown. this is a place where taboos do not exist.

Its second most popular definition says it’s “the sphincter of the internet. Where integrity goes to die”. Its prominence and prolific output alone merit it a position in this corpus. Its notoriety makes for an intriguing site to examine how memes might intertwine with public discourses.

Second, I investigated the discussion site Reddit (reddit.com). Reddit, like 4chan, is a large site, increasingly notable in internet culture. Its most popular Urban Dictionary definition (“Urban Dictionary: Reddit”, n.d.) says it’s “a user generated Web 2.0 news website with a lefty, libertarian and geek slant”. Its second most popular says it’s “like 4chan with a condom”. Like 4chan, it also contains boards (called ‘subreddits’) devoted to multiple topics. In Reddit’s case, these subreddits are innumerable, since participants create them. Some are quite large, with several moderators and constant new posts. The most popular posts *are* often ‘lefty’, ‘libertarian’, or ‘geek’, and discussions on the site are often complex and intricate.

Reddit’s technical sophistication eclipses 4chan. New posts – and comments within those posts – can be ‘upvoted’ and ‘downvoted’ by other users. Upvotes mean ‘karma points’ for

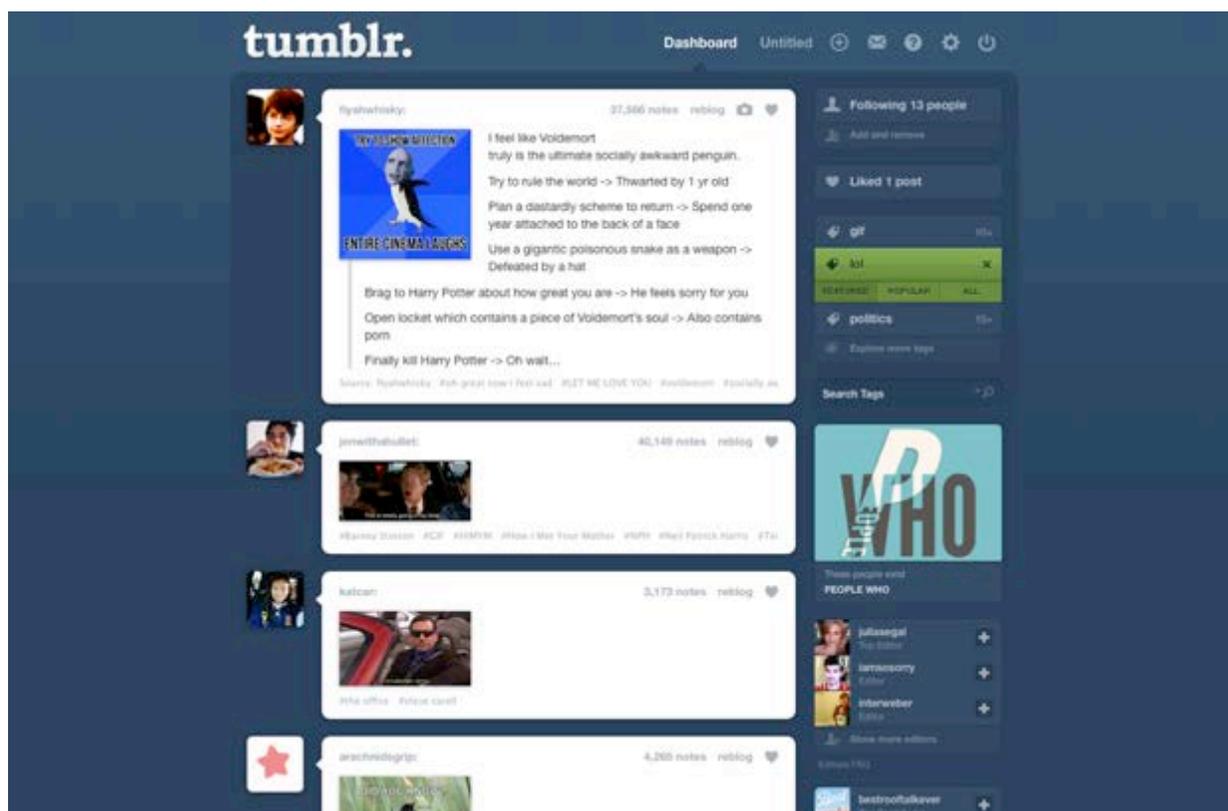
posters, quantifying their contribution to the site. The highest-voted comments reach the top of the post, the highest-voted responses to those comments reach the top position under parent comments. The highest-voted posts reach the tops of their subreddits. Those top posts are seen on the ‘frontpage’ of the site, based either on the subreddits a participant subscribes to, or, if not logged in, by a rank of default subreddits (screen capture from July 07, 2011):



Memes are also prevalent on Reddit. They often make their way to its front page, generating hefty discussion. There are quite a few active subreddits devoted to memes (e.g., ‘r/ffffffuuuuuuuuuuuuuu’, ‘r/ClassicRage’, ‘r/Vertical’, and ‘r/AdviceAnimals’).

Third is Tumblr (tumblr.com). Tumblr is a ‘microblogging’ service, where participants – individuals, sites, or organizations – create short posts and upload them to a blog-style profile called a tumblog. Posts are shared with others through profile connections or keyword tags. While the site allows text posts, it’s prevalently used for image posts. Its third-most popular

Urban Dictionary definition (“Urban Dictionary: Tumblr”, n.d.) says that “unlike blogs, tumblogs are frequently used to share the author’s creations, discoveries, or experiences while providing little or no commentary. If blogs are journals, Tumblr is a scrapbook”. Posts can be organized by tags (e.g., ‘LOL’, ‘GIF’, or ‘fashion’), which then can be browsed by popularity (this is the Tumblr ‘LOL’ tag, captured July 07, 2011):



Tumblr allows for comments on posts, but many people choose to ‘reblog’ a post over commenting on it, sharing it on their tumblr with a click. In this way, Tumblr posts get passed around through networks of participants. Some tumblogs produce new content, others catalogue content created by others.

Tumblr has ‘hipster’ connotations, and often has aesthetic dimensions to its popular tags (e.g., ‘art’, ‘tattoo’, and ‘vintage’). Its most popular Urban Dictionary definition says “you just

won't understand", adding that:

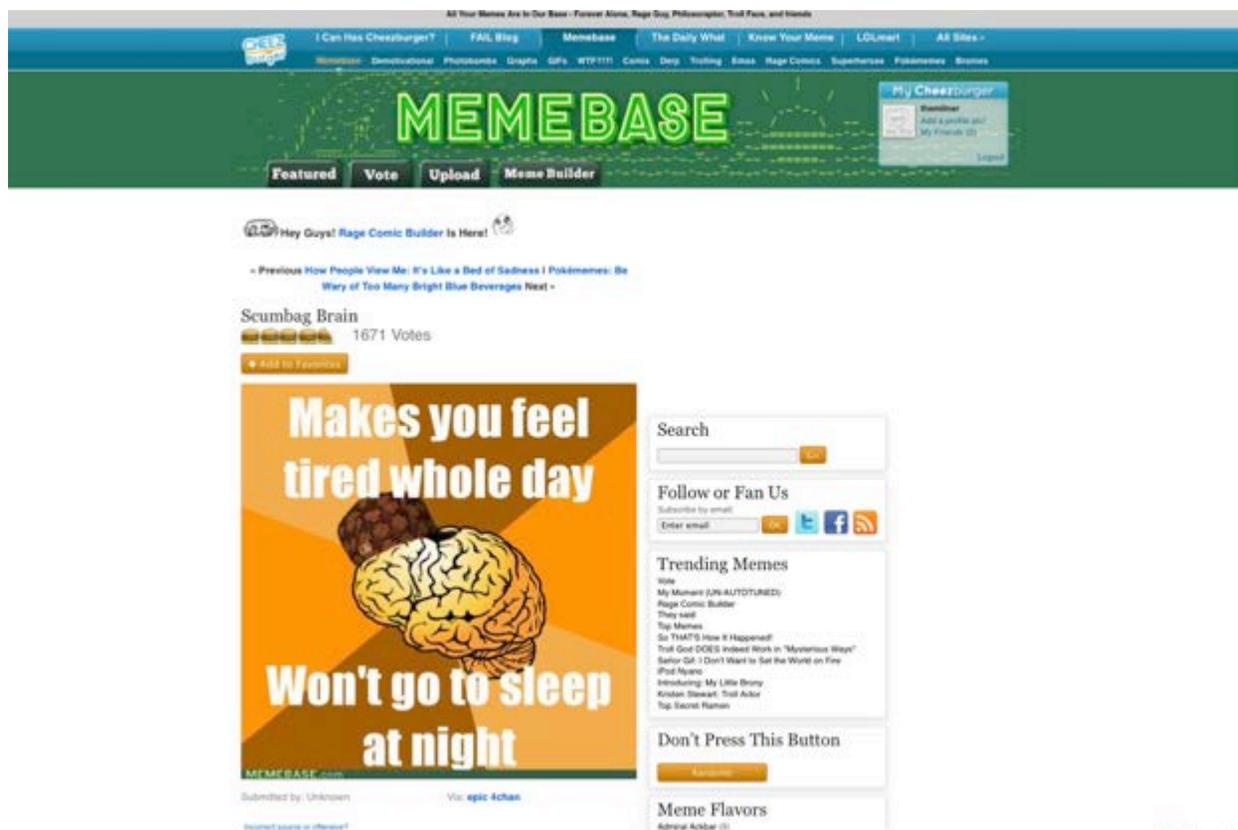
It is the epitome of culture and the total antithesis of the modern day pop culture which is so ingrained in today's children. There is no possible way to explain such a phenomenon to others. You either get it or you don't.

Memes are a prominent part of Tumblr posts; the 'LOL' tag is permanently seated at the top of the 'popular tags' list, with 'GIFs' right behind it. These tags are ripe with memes. Many are similar to those that dominate 4chan and Reddit, but others are unique. Tumblr provides triangulation for 4chan and Reddit, both technologically and culturally. It's generally the least anonymous and pseudonymous of the three, and the most akin to a traditional social network site.

All three of these sites have distinct but overlapping reputations: the 'antisocial' 4chan, the 'leftist' Reddit, and the 'hipster' Tumblr. These three sites have carved niches in net culture, and serve as three diverse sites of mediated cultural participation. While 4chan, Reddit, and Tumblr are sites where memes are transmitted and transformed, the last two sites in this corpus are designed for memes specifically. The Cheezburger Network and Canvas are newer and more specialized than the three sites above, but they are unique in that they are designed specifically as social sites of meme creation, circulation, and transformation.

The Cheezburger Network (cheezburger.com) is really an umbrella label for a group of sites built around different types of memes. It's named for an early and enduring meme practice: captioning funny pictures of animals in 'lolspeak' (one of the most enduring is a picture of a smiling cat, captioned with the question 'I Can Haz Cheezburger?'). The network has sites devoted not only to captioning pictures of animals, but also to uploading videos, sharing

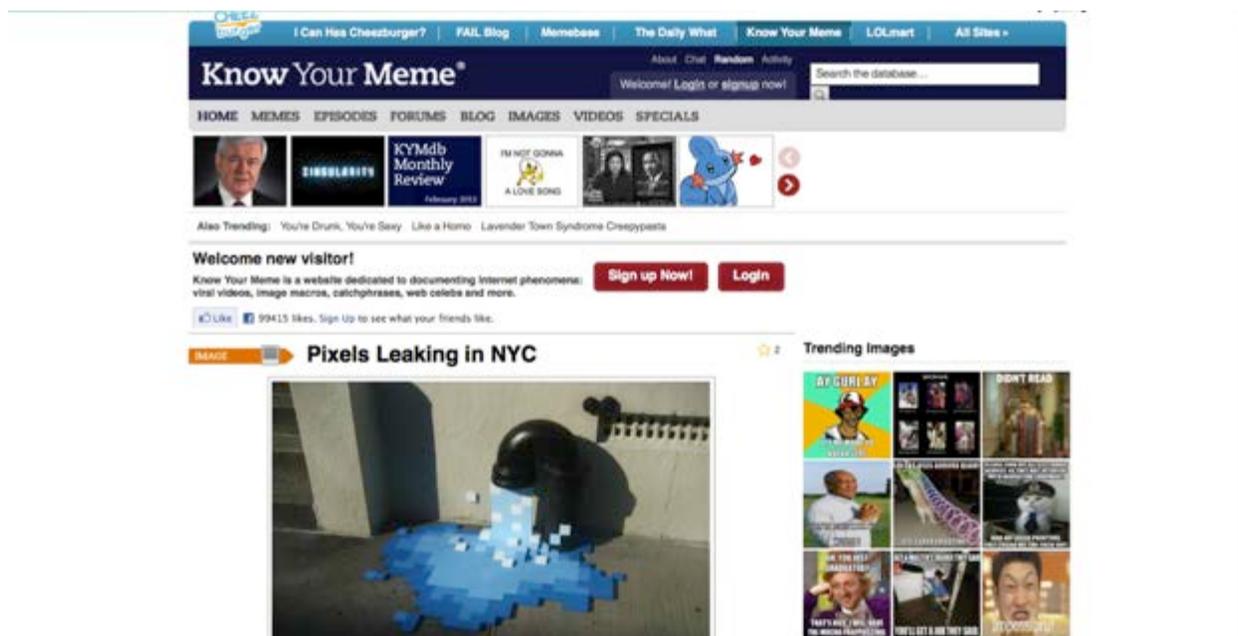
awkward Facebook posts, and cataloguing moments of ‘win’ and ‘fail’ in everyday life. This is a shot of its most explicitly ‘meme’ site, Memebase (memebase.com, captured July 07, 2011):



The sites on the Cheezburger Network are mostly structured as straightforward image sharing platforms. Participants upload images, which others can rate on a scale of five or comment on. Participants can (and often do) create a barebones profile with a unique user name to upload, rate, and comment on posts. However, interaction can be done anonymously. Successful posts reach the ‘featured’ or ‘top’ pages. The sites also keeps track of ‘trending’ posts, letting participants know which tags are being used most prominently. The Cheezburger Network also has internal meme generators, which export created macros and comics to the Network after they’ve been tagged with a boilerplate for the target site. This intentional branding is less prevalent on other meme sites in this corpus. The site also filters adult content most strictly.

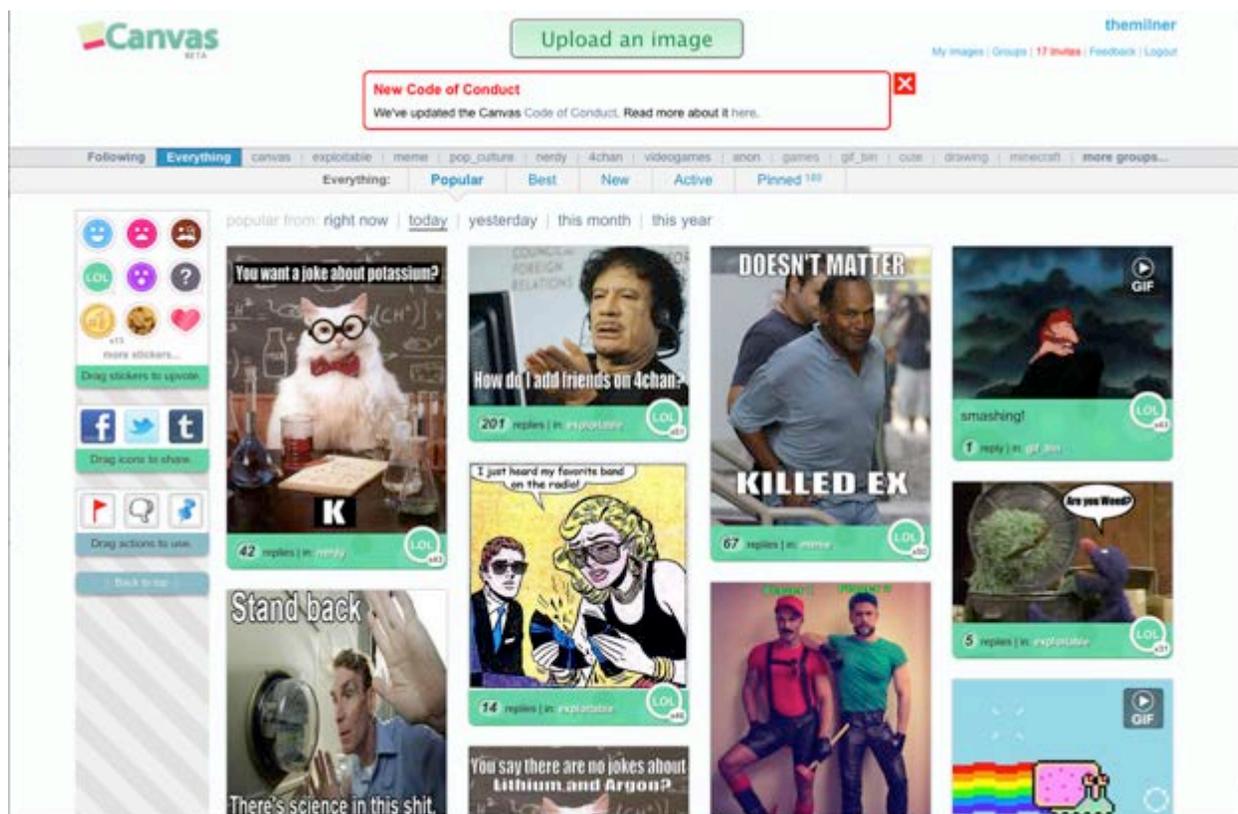
The Cheezburger Network houses the popular meme reference site, Know Your Meme

(knowyourmeme.com, screen captured on March 04, 2011):



Know Your Meme calls itself ‘The Internet Meme Database’. A meme’s page on Know Your Meme will trace its site of origin, its popularity (including appearances in traditional media and a graph of search popularity by date), and its derivatives. Half IMDB, half Wikipedia, the site catalogues memes, organizing them into families of related entries. The entry page for each meme houses exhaustive examples of the meme. Know Your Meme also features short webisodes on popular or notable memes.

Last is the newest of the five sites: Canvas (canv.as). It left its beta invite-only phase in September 2011. Canvas is the brainchild of 4chan’s founder, Christopher Poole (known around meme collectives by the handle of ‘moot’). According to its homepage, it is “a place to share and play with images. Explore new content created by other users, vote on your favorites, and even make your own image remixes”. It’s probably no coincidence that Canvas is the newest site in this corpus and is also the one that most intricately and most purposefully builds on remix. When logging into Canvas, you are greeted with a flurry of images (screen capture from July 07, 2011):



Clicking on any one of these images jumps you to a thread centering on that image. Posts in this thread can be text, but are most often ‘remixes’ of the same image: ones that take the same base image and add new text or visuals to modify the image. In this way, the same ‘thread’ shows the spontaneous mutation of the same artifact. Any image in the thread can be voted on using ‘stickers’: badges placed to visually express sentiment toward the picture. Stickers include smiley faces, frowny faces, monocled faces, hearts, and even a cookie. Canvas strives to be a ‘safe for work’ site, but does allow profanity and non-nude sexuality.

Collecting the corpus. I collected ‘popular’ memes on each site based on the sites’ affordances. Every site except for 4chan has some form of ‘most popular’ list, which catalogues the memes resonating most with the collectives creating them. For 4chan, collection was a matter of visiting the site at regular intervals and collecting the threads that were currently active. Here,

popularity might best be measured by level of activity in the thread, so ‘vibrancy’ stood in for popularity. On Reddit, I browsed the ‘top’ (most popular) and ‘what’s hot’ (currently active) lists of the front page, which I tailored to heavily feature subreddits devoted to memes, social issues, and political events. On Tumblr, I spent my time primarily browsing the popular ‘LOL’, ‘GIF’, and ‘meme’ tags. On the Cheezburger Network, I collected the ‘featured’ memes on the front page of individual sites, the ‘trending’ memes, and ‘best of the week’ memes. On Canvas, I pulled from the ‘popular’ images and delved into the remix threads they belonged to. It was also helpful to look at what *didn’t* resonate on each site, so I also devoted attention to new posts on the Cheezburger Network and Canvas, and looked at the ‘most controversial’ tab on Reddit (which indexes posts with many upvotes *and* downvotes). On 4chan, ‘dead threads’ eliciting little or no response were an antithesis to vibrant ones. These ‘negative cases’ (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) provided another layer of perspective.

As exploratory analysis moved to the purposive analysis of discursive strands (Jäger & Maier, 2009), I narrowed the types of discussions I pulled from meme collectives. In order to provide the best data for answering questions on structural process, social identity, and political events in networks of mediated cultural participation, I purposively sampled memes from these sites dealing with political and social issues. I collected data from these sites with increasing precision beginning in March 2011, with data collection peaking in fall 2011. However, even as I began to write up results in early 2012, I gave these sites regular attention, and collected exemplary posts. All memes were saved and catalogued using the application Zotero, which allowed me to preserve a link to a specific meme post, as well as a snapshot of the post that would last even if the original link was altered or destroyed (an inevitable case with 4chan posts). Zotero also allows categorization of sites saved; they can be organized into folders and

labeled with new titles and tags. I used this feature to organize memes into increasingly refined formal and content categories.

Memes are malleable enough as social texts to be used for almost any social purpose. They can be shared privately as inside jokes or interpersonal communication, or they can be shared publically as mass address to a broader audience. The memes in this study are collected from public communication on public sites, and therefore focus on publically relevant issues. Sometimes they are ‘everyday’ commentaries on ‘everyday’ events. Sometimes they are self-referential commentary on participants who make memes or frequent the sites where memes are made. Sometimes they are explicitly political, running as a backchannel to the events dominating *NPR* or *The New York Times*. Whether subtly or explicitly, memes provided for public consumption prevalently feature representations and commentary relevant to questions of mediated cultural participation. These were the images collected for this corpus.

Regarding social representations, demographic categories like age, religion, and sexual orientation were all the subject of scrutiny and commentary through memes. Most important to this project were three fundamental categories of social stratification: class, race, and gender. As participants in meme collectives made jokes and argued points about the world around them, they often did so by focusing on these broad social categories. How they discussed those categories was crucial to analyzing participation in these ostensibly participatory media. Regarding political discourses, two strands in particular became most important to my analysis. First, in 2011, the Middle East made frequent news in the West and was subject to frequent commentary in meme collectives. The protests in countries like Libya, Syria, and Egypt were commented on through meme, as were the death of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and the tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. Second

was the Occupy Wall Street movement. The Occupy movement was (and still is, in an altered form) a series of global protests against financial injustice, social inequality, and corporate influence in politics. The Occupy movement led to fierce commentary on both professional and amateur media networks in the fall of 2011. Memes were not exempt, and in fact were in many ways at the forefront of this discourse. Both were purposefully catalogued strands in this corpus.

There were specific areas of each site that dealt most explicitly with social issues and political events. 4chan's random /b/ board dealt with social and political issues heavily, but so did its 'international' (/int/), 'technology' (/g/), and 'politically incorrect' (/pol/) boards. Reddit's 'r/Politics', 'r/TwoXChromosomes', and 'r/Atheism' subreddits all dealt with political and social issues. 'r/WorldNews' was a particularly relevant subreddit when looking at discussions of the Middle East and a vibrant 'r/OccupyWallStreet' subreddit emerged in the fall of 2011. Tumblr's 'politics', 'news', and 'LGBTQ' tags were each politically and socially active. It also came to host several tumblogs pertaining to the Occupy movement, such as "Pepper Spray Cop", "We are the 99 Percent", and "We are the 53 Percent". The Cheezburger Network had participatory sites devoted to news and history, and Know Your Meme often quickly and thoroughly catalogued memes that responded to news or even made news. On Canvas, the 'politics', 'nerdy', and 'anon' groups were just a few that contained social and political commentary.

Ultimately, I archived 3161 'threads' on Zotero from regular visits to meme sites. These threads not only came from the five sites emphasized above, but to a lesser extent from selected 'secondary' sites that featured memes or discussion on memes. These secondary threads were purposively collected based on their pertinence to the research questions and case studies emphasized in this project. For instance, as the Occupy Wall Street movement gained prominence, so did its attention from networks beyond the five primary sites in this study.

Tweets under the ‘#OWS’ hashtag, a ‘hipster cop’ macro about an officer assigned to Occupy featured on the site Mashable (mashable.com), and an *NPR* story on Pepper Spray Cop all engaged with memes and the Occupy movement. They were all collected for this reason. Also, I collected discussions of memes and meme sites on news sites and blogs as I encountered them. This coverage helped frame memes and meme sites in broader discourses. Most of the ‘threads’ collected here are from the five primary research sites above and fit the traditional net usage of the term: a series of comments from multiple participants surrounding an image or topic contained in a single URL. However, the secondary ‘threads’ in this corpus are archives of just a single image, a tweet, or a news story relevant to memes I encountered beyond the five sites I focused on. From these 3161 total threads, a final corpus of 4890 image files was selected for categorization and analysis.

Analysis

Analyzing culture. Methodologically, this study is a critical discourse analysis (CDA). There are a few reasons it’s a fitting method for the study of mediated cultural participation: its emphasis on the social construction of culture, its emphasis on empiricism, and its emphasis on the connections between texts and discourses. The paradigm emerged in Amsterdam in the early 1990s out of both the humanities and social sciences (Wodak & Meyer, 2009a). According to Wodak and Meyer “the manifold roots of CDA lie in Rhetoric, Text Linguistics, Anthropology, Philosophy, Socio-Psychology, Cognitive Science, Literary Studies and Sociolinguistics” (p. 1). Critical discourse analysts used this background to build diverse approaches to the study of ‘talk and text in context’ (van Dijk, 1997), always with an eye for the discursive creation of cultures and subcultures. Diverse CDA paradigms follow a few central tenets on the study of social reality, outlined by Fairclough and Wodak (1997). At its heart, a CDA approach acknowledges

that power relations are discursive, that discourse constitutes society and culture as individual texts and broader social practices recursively intertwine, that discourse does ideological work, that discourse is historical, and that the link between text and society is mediated. A methodological paradigm sensitive to these core tenets fits well with a study of the textual, social, and political dimensions of participatory media.

Many in CDA also adhere to a definition of ‘critical’ that fits this study’s aims. While issues of power and hierarchy are of concern here, I’m interested in empowerment as much as I am oppression. Participatory media might be tools for either. Fairclough (2009) says ‘critical’ scholarship has both negative and positive emphases. On the one hand, it does strive to confront and resist hegemony. On the other, critical scholarship also investigates “the many ways in which the dominant logic and dynamic are tested, challenged, and disrupted” in order to improve happiness, autonomy, and wellbeing (p. 164). Networks that could be used for either need a method sensitive to both.

CDA is also a fitting methodological tool for the study of social artifacts and the social practices that inform them. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) see social practices as “habitualised ways, tied to particular times and places, in which people apply resources (material or symbolic) to act together in the world” (p. 21). To Chouliarki and Fairclough, social practices produce even as they’re reflected in social life. A notion of discourse as social practice owes its lineage to Foucault ([1968] 1991, [1969] 1972, [1980] 1991), who has been called a ‘theoretical grandfather’ of CDA (Wodak & Meyer, 2009a). Fairclough (1989) calls Foucault’s work ‘central’ to an understanding of the relationship between language and social truth. To Jäger and Maier (2009), critical discourse analysts should be very concerned with Foucaultian questions:

What is valid knowledge at a certain place and a certain time? How does this knowledge arise and how is it

passed on? What function does it have for constituting subjects? What consequences does it have for the overall shaping and development of society? (p. 34)

Questions cultural participation via mediated discourse are, ultimately, questions of social truth and social power.

Analyzing artifacts. CDA's empirical emphasis is the second reason it's a methodological fit. CDA is fundamentally focused on the practical implications of discursive artifacts, of the creation of the social world through texts. CDA's empiricism is appealing because it has reflexive dimensions that problematize narrow notions of scientific investigation, even as it emphasizes a thorough analysis of specific social practices. To quote van Dijk (2001):

Crucial for critical discourse analysts is the explicit awareness of their role in society. Continuing a tradition that rejects the possibility of a 'value-free' science, they argue that science, and especially scholarly discourse, are inherently part of and influenced by social structure, and produced in social interaction. (p. 352)

CDA is an empiricism that bridges the critical and the scientific. It is an empirical investigation of specific forms of talk and text, but one that is sensitive to the role of the researcher in the process, and the social implications of the practices discovered.

This empiricism means we have several specific methodological guides for conducting CDA (see Wodak & Meyer, 2009b). Fundamentally, Wodak and Meyer (2009a) point to several empirical emphases in CDA: naturally occurring language, nonverbals, interactions, and context. These emphases situate the analysis of language within a broader social reality. This means being sensitive to both the 'macro-level' of discourse in society and the 'micro-level' of talk in interaction.

Regarding ‘macro-level’ contextually-sensitive analysis of texts, Fairclough (2009) says in order to understand how language works to situate, we should be mindful of the genres, discourses, and styles evident in an interaction. To Fairclough (2003), investigating discourse contextually means looking at how semiotic elements are built into texts, which are operationalized and recontextualized across diverse contexts. Broad generic conventions and individual stylistic tendencies intertwine in specific discourses. Discourse analysis ‘oscillates’ between focus on specific texts and the social practices and structures berthed from those texts. This means I asked how memes as texts engaged with other texts and broader discourses. I was mindful of genres developing across memes, discourses referenced and even influenced by them, and the styles of argument and communication evident in them.

In bridging the macro and the micro, Reisigl and Wodak (2001, 2009) highlight a few discursive ‘strategies’. While they developed the strategies to specifically address how people communicate racism, they’re of broader value. These strategies are fundamentally ways people use language to construct a reality. In this way, specific utterances compound into social realities. First, referential or nomination strategies are how we, through discourse, create social categories and social roles for social actors. By grouping or naming certain people or ideas in a certain light, we construct their social position. Next, predicational strategies are what we use to predict future behavior or evaluate ‘universal’ traits. It is through this selective and partial process that we build expectations for individuals or groups. Argumentation strategies are how we ‘talk about’ our perspectives on a meta level, advancing truths as we do. Framing strategies are how we apply our paradigms to specific instances, what we report, quote, describe, or narrate. Last, intensifying or mitigating strategies are used to either escalate regimes of truth or question them, how we ‘sharpen up’ or ‘tone down’ specific paradigms in our discourse. The list

is admittedly blurry in practice, but it's a helpful guide for the analysis of discourse and identity evident in memes. I asked how memes referred to individuals, groups, or ideas; how they evaluated or predicted truths; how they argued for specific paradigms over others; how they were used to frame ideologies; how they were used to intensify or mitigate truths. Through these strategies, access and inclusion are embraced or rejected.

Honing in even further to micro-level discursive elements, van Dijk (1995) gives us a few methodological tools for analyzing specific utterances in order to understand the perspectives they articulate. He says we can look to syntax: how a text is structured (e.g., who is given agency as the 'subject' of the sentence, rather than the 'object'). We can look at lexicon: what words are used (e.g., who is called a 'terrorist' and who is called a 'freedom fighter'). We can look at semantics: what meanings are attributed to specific discourses (e.g., how paradigms are softened and masked under things like 'jokes'). We can look at schematic structures: how texts are organized (e.g., what information gets downgraded and what gets highlighted). We can look at what van Dijk labels rhetoric: how style is used in discourse (e.g., what metaphors, similes, and comparisons are used to create associations or distances, like connoting 'Jew' with 'rat'). Last, we can look at pragmatics: how discourses operate contextually and materially (e.g., how denials of racism can be used to frame racist discourse or diffuse racist behaviors). Each of these elements was essential in analyzing memes and the discourses surrounding them. I asked what words memes used, what meanings they alluded to, mentioned, or challenged. I asked how they were organized, how they worked stylistically, and how they were situated contextually.

CDA provides many methodological tools. Jäger and Maier (2009) provide guidance in selecting strands of discourse and building corpora. Fairclough's (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2003) emphasis on broader social practices help contextualize research on a

macro-level. Reisigl and Wodak's (2001, 2009) strategies shed light on how micro-level texts were used to weave macro-level discourses. And van Dijk's (1995, 2001) linguistic strategies focus on the micro level of textual composition. All of these strategies are premised on assessing cultural participation through social texts.

Analyzing connections. CDA also gives us a lens for studying connections between texts, discourses, and identities. This is an essential methodological tool when asking questions about power and representation. CDA emphasizes intertextuality: how texts refer to other texts; interdiscursivity: how discourses refer to other discourses; and multimodality: how words, sounds, and images intertwine. Sensitivity to each of these concepts means sensitivity to how ideas refer to each other, as well as what's not being referred to. They're also analytical means to understand ideology, since abstract connections between texts and discourses are ways to reinforce or challenge social paradigms. Each of these elements is central to internet memes. Memes are drastically intertextual; each new text builds on the premise before it, and established texts connect to each other in subtle and powerful ways. They are also interdiscursive, tying pop to politics, identity to events, and commentary to irony. They, of course, are also multimodal, mixing image, text, and sometimes video and audio to create a multi-faceted artifacts.

CDA is fundamentally focused on the intertextual relations between texts and other texts, and the interdiscursive relations between discourses and other discourses. Reisigl and Wodak (2009) say intertextuality and interdiscursivity are the bridge by which statements can be 'recontextualized': transferred from one setting to another in order to create a juxtaposition, produce a metaphor, or posit a universal truth. Fairclough (2009) calls interdiscursivity a 'core analytical category' for CDA and encourages analysts to look at how talk and text are recontextualized in different ways in order to understand how they argue for truths. Jäger and

Maier (2009) admonish researchers to be mindful of ‘entanglements of discursive strands’ since ideological associations are made in these ‘discursive knots’. A statement like ‘immigrants are taking our jobs’ knots up complex discourses on national identity, social entitlement, and economics in just a few words. Further, Mautner (2005) says text and discourse can intermingle in new ways thanks to the multimodality and hypertextuality of online discourse, so critical discourse analysts studying online communication should be especially sensitive to how texts refer to other texts and discourses refer to other discourses. Hypertext and digital manipulation mean texts can intertwine with more regularity, ease, and proficiency. A study of participatory media like memes necessitates the study of connections between texts and discourses.

Ideology is most evident in the connections between texts and discourses. This is important because a rigid dominant ideology will discursively undermine broad cultural participation. To Wodak and Meyer (2009a), “people with diverse backgrounds and interests may find themselves thinking alike in startling ways. Dominant ideologies appear as ‘neutral’, holding on to assumptions that stay largely unchallenged” (p. 8). Van Dijk (2009) is mindful that “to ‘read off’ ideologies from discourse is not always possible, precisely because ideologies need to be very general and fairly abstract” (p. 79). However, he provides some methodological insight into just how we might connect discourse and ideology. When we look at the discursive actions of any social group – membership devices, ‘typical’ acts, explicit aims, relations to others, and resources used – we can get empirical clues to the dominant ideologies of that group. In this way, we can not only “*describe* text and talk, but also to *explain* how real language and socially shared beliefs affect discourse production and how these are in turn affected by discourse” (p. 79).

But memes use more than words. Sometimes they don’t even *have* words. They’re

fundamentally multimodal, and there's an increasing call among discourse analysts to appreciate this facet of discourse (see LeVine & Scollon, 2004). Van Leeuwen (2004, 2009) says multimodality is particularly important for CDA, since ideology is often not stated outright, but projected in more subtle visual ways. To van Leeuwen, "critical discourse analysis needs to take account of nonverbal as well as verbally realized discourses and aspects of discourse, and of image as well as text, because these often realize quite different, sometimes even contrasting meanings" (2004, p. 15).

An overly-textual emphasis favors specific logics and produces unnecessarily narrow analysis. To Lemke (2002), multimodal sensitivity means breaking out of the confines of 'logocentric' Western forms of argument. It means the freedom for a more nuanced understanding of how texts and discourses work on multiple levels. We need to appreciate discourse as both logical and aesthetic. Oftentimes, both of these considerations are present in a single artifact. Van Leeuwen (2004) says we should view textual artifacts (like memes) "as single, multimodal communicative acts, especially inasmuch as the cohesion between the verbal and the visual is usually enhanced by some form of stylistic unity between the image, the typography, and the layout" (p. 7).

Lemke (2002) says this is especially true of digitally-mediated discourse, since any given site or text can be a combination of so many modes of communication. Text, image, video, sound, and hyperlink can all exist on the same communicative plane. Lemke says we must appreciate online discourse for its 'hypermodality' and be sensitive to the unique ways that multiple modes of communication overlap. If images, sounds, and movements make arguments, then we should appreciate how those arguments function, and how multiple modes engage intertextually, even within the same text. After all, an animated GIF file – not quite picture, not

quite movie, and sometimes partially text – is a uniquely multimodal artifact. Its prevalence in meme collectives is due to hypermodality.

To summarize, in this project, I study memes primarily across five sites that create, circulate, and transform them. My goal is to understand how memes are guided by structural processes, represent social identities, and comment on political events. To analyze the memes I collected, I relied on CDA's strategies for understanding discourse and identity. I asked what perspectives and what ideologies were evident based on discursive categories like genre, style, reference, association, lexicon, and grammar. I specifically explored the interrelations between the macro and the micro in these discourses. I analyzed connections between texts and discourses, sensitive to multimodal forms of expression. I took up this methodological strategy with a goal of better understanding mediated cultural participation in meme collectives. The next three chapters will focus on processes, identities, and politics in meme collectives before the concluding chapter evaluates what this project means for mediated cultural participation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Processes: Conventional Transformation and Subcultural Literacy

Conventional Transformation

A taxonomy of forms. To better understand the most fundamental formal and structural levels of mediated cultural participation in meme collectives, this chapter asks the following question:

RQ1: How are memes guided by structural processes?

Most fundamental here is that memes are premised on transformation, but this transformation adheres to social conventions. Memes interweave established tenets, characters, and themes into new iterations. This ensures that cultural participants are able to add their own transformative engagement to a text, while still giving audiences a recognizable premise with which to engage. Even here, we see imitation and transformation occurring in equal parts. Just as several jokes begin with ‘knock knock’ or ‘a guy walks into a bar’, so too do memes share stable elements that can be innovated upon. In this regard, the memeplexes already in the memepool do indeed partially determine a meme’s form. However, given that memes are entirely premised on the transformation of content, memes exist because of the individual creative spark of social actors. This section will provide a taxonomy of the conventional images commonly shared in meme collectives. It will then move into the structural features of prevalent meme genres, emphasizing the social processes that constitute these features. The final section of this chapter demonstrates how the construction of memes occurs by the decisions of subcultural collectives. Participating in these formal decisions requires subcultural literacy. The ultimate goal is a clearer articulation

of how mass participation is structurally guided in meme collectives.

Functionally, a discrete taxonomy of internet memes is difficult. There is so much remix on meme sites, so much hybridization in any given artifact, that classifying one as X and another as Y is often a moot point. Already, the complicated task of parsing out different forms of memes demonstrates the power of transformation in the processes undergirding memes. If participation is the application of and innovation from established texts, then memes are formally participatory. Still, a rough sketch can be established, even if it can't be taken as an exhaustive list or mutually exclusive set of categories. Chapter One emphasized a few meme genres: macros, stacked stills, Rage Comics, and Photoshops. Figures 4.1 and 4.2 expand on these initial types, outlining the many conventional forms of images shared in networks of mediated cultural participation. Most fundamentally are two categories: 'remixed' images (which transform an image from an established set of practices or established artifacts) and 'stable' images (which are passed along without transformation from mediated participants). While remixed images are the primary focus here (as they are the sites of the transformation most clearly indicative of mediated cultural participation), the fact that so many stable images are also utilized in creative ways as part of the discussion on meme collectives demonstrates how reappropriation and application can occur beyond micro-level alteration.

'Remixed images' include two subsets: 'single' images and 'stacked' images. Single images are remixes that occur within a single frame. Stacked images are those that combine multiple single images into a new grouping of images, often to make a more complex point. Hipster Kitty is a single image. The Obama *CSI* comic is a stacked image. Within the 'single image' family are several single image remixes. 'Annotated images' interact with the text

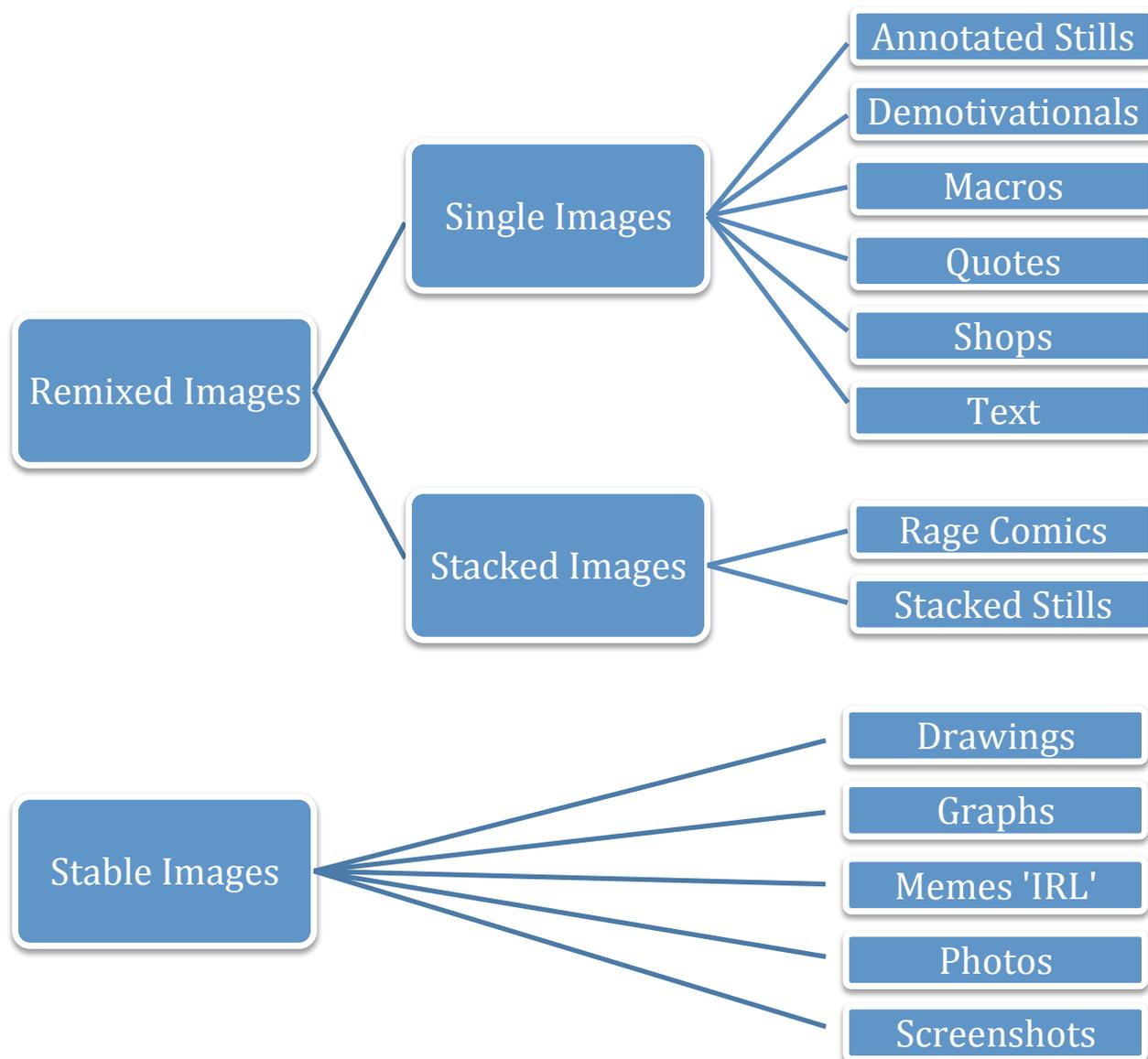


Figure 4.1: A Taxonomy of Conventional Image Files Shared in Meme Collectives

explicitly, making addendums, adding dialogue bubbles, etc. ‘Demotivationals’ remix image and text in a parody of ‘motivational’ posters that frame images in a black box. They add two levels of white text: a primary clause placed in larger font size over a supporting clause. ‘Image macros’ – the most prevalent artifact collected for this project – apply text over the image itself, often a clause on the top of the image to set up a premise and a clause on the bottom to deliver a

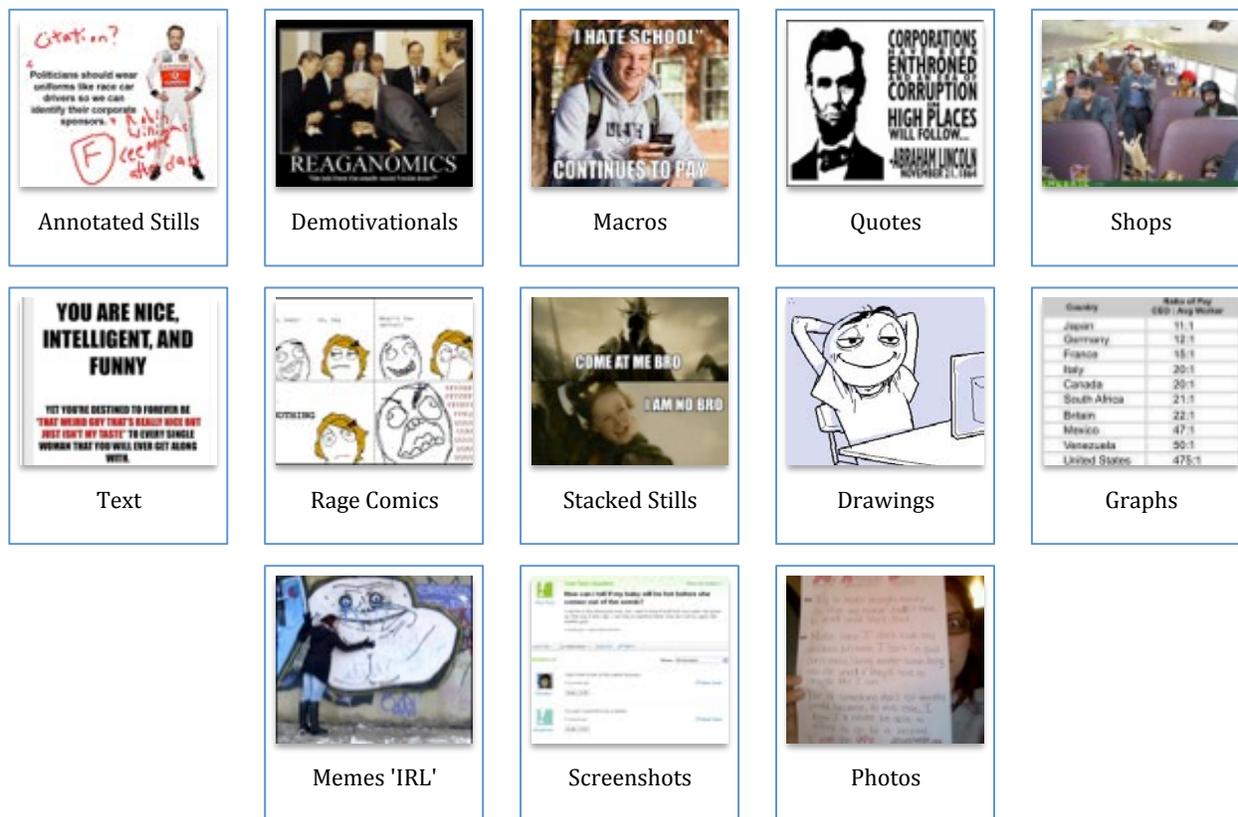


Figure 4.2: Examples of Conventional Image Files Shared in Meme Collectives

punch line. Image and text are also remixed into quotes in meme collectives, often combining a bust of the quoted figure with text from the quote itself. ‘Shops’ (short for ‘Photoshops’ after the Adobe photo editing application) craft a new image by combining elements of multiple other images. Shops might also add effects like altered color to images. Finally, sometimes image files forego pictures entirely, sharing graphical text only. However, these texts are still image files and still are often remixes that pull on the same aesthetics of multimodal memes. Multiple remixed images combined add a layer of complexity to these remixed images. ‘Rage Comics’ build from a corpus of established ‘Rage Faces’ and text. ‘Stacked stills’ take either macros or annotated stills and combine them into multi-panel images.

But remixed images are not the only images shared in meme collectives. ‘Stable images’ – those that are not remixed at the level of image itself – are also prevalently shared. These images fundamentally spread by imitation, but they often contain transformative elements in their use. Drawings are animated images that are used to make or support a point. These can include web comics that are the work of a named or unnamed author rather than built from a remixed core. Graphs, often adapted from popular press infographics, visually display data. These were predominantly shared in political discussions. ‘Memes IRL’ (meme collective shorthand for ‘in real life’, an ambiguous term for discourses and practices that occur outside of net culture) are stable images that capture the creation of memes in more traditional aesthetic modes. Making a t-shirt featuring Hipster Kitty or painting him on a wall would be a ‘meme IRL’. While the images depicting memes ‘IRL’ are themselves stable, the act of transferring a meme beyond the computer screen is a transformative process. Textually, the shared image is stable. However, it is a depiction of a transformative social process. Screenshots are unannotated captures of mediated communication (they are often the base for annotated stills). Facebook conversations are popular screenshots, especially when they are being critiqued by meme collectives. Unannotated photos are also shared. These are the raw materials by which macros are often made. They can also be transformative extratextually. When members of meme collectives take photos of themselves ‘planking’ (laying rigid in unlikely places) or post pictures of themselves with ‘99 Percent’ notes (popular during the height of the Occupy Wall Street movement), the image is stable. However, the cultural practice is memetic: transformative innovation of an idea.

Of course, many memes trouble such easy categories. Practically, this taxonomy is more a guide for determining which formal elements exist within an image, even if many combine

these elements:



The first image is an image macro in the sense that it places text over stable image. However, it also positions that text not top or bottom center, but up and to the left, in a way that could imply it's in a dialogue bubble next to Obama's head. The placement of the text itself is a subtle interaction with the image that might skew closer to annotation than being a traditional image macro. The second image is clearly a macro; it's a top-text set up and a bottom-text punch line. However, the joke ('Hipster Jesus' in this case) is dependent upon a shop. The 'hipster glasses' placed on Jesus make the joke. The third image is a single panel, but it places a 'Rage Face' over the image in that panel and uses a font more characteristic of Rage Comics than image macros. Its white background suggests it was made using a generator like Dan's Awesome Rage Maker. Though a single image, it follows some 'stacked image' conventions.

These hybrids are as prevalent as clear-cut cases. In this sense, the taxonomy is limited. However, this complication only demonstrates the prevalence of transformative remix as a process undergirding memes. Memes heavily pull from established conventions, but they are quite often transformative in their application. This chapter will highlight two prevalent genres in this taxonomy – image macros and Rage Comics – in order to fully assess this balance between

imitation and transformation.

Macro fundamentals. Image macros are one of the most common genres of memes, and are one of the clearest examples of the interplay of imitation and transformation in the processes that guide the construction of memes. Macros are so prevalent they consisted of over half of the corpus for this project. Macros consist, predominantly, of a still image overlaid with text (though animated GIFs will also frequently receive the same treatment). The text is predominantly white and all caps; the font is predominantly Impact. The goal, of course, is predominantly humor. As Kuipers (2002) points out, “even the simplest variety, adding a phrase to an existing picture, effectively creates a new picture with a new message” (p. 462):



The three macros above use similar conventions to make different points. All three use the standard white, all caps, text with Impact font; all three divide the joke into a top line and bottom line, using the image as a sort of visual ellipses to break the set up from the punch line; all three bring image and text to bear to add another layer to the joke. They depend on the ‘humorous clash’ between expectations and evidence that Kuipers (2002, 2005) sees as central to the incongruity that defines humor. The clash is between different uses of the word ‘cool’ in the first image, between a doting grandmother and her overt bigotry in the second, between a feared Middle-Eastern dictator and a harmless pop aphorism from the West in the third.

However, each macro above reappropriates memetic customs, mixing pattern and deviance. Imitation does not exist without transformation. The ‘hipster dog’ on the left tells a joke that would stand up just fine as solely text. The dog both pulls on a meme custom of featuring cute animals and gives us the visual cues of the hipster: the thick rim glasses and the plaid scarf. If anyone is qualified to tell the audience a hipster joke, it’s surely this distinct dog. In the second macro, the image makes the joke. It contrasts a ‘sweet grandma’ with an antiquated, bigoted statement on ‘the blacks’ and ‘the gays’. The third image draws on a phrase oft repeated on meme sites, ‘haters gonna hate’ and remixes it with former Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi walking auspiciously.

Each of these images is also one of a set. Transformation requires an understanding of representational conventions associated with specific groups or individuals. Wodak and Reisigl (2001) say we discursively build ‘collective symbols’ which are – as metaphor and synecdoche – “immediately understood by members of the same speech community” (p. 381). Collective symbols are the base of memes; they are the conventions by which transformation occurs. Many memes make this connection by stereotype, relying on collective symbols that define group members. ‘Stereotype’ and ‘prototype’ are of prevalent focus in social identity research (both in its cultural and social psychological traditions). They are the ‘collective symbols’ shared by social actors in the creation of conventional representations of individuals and groups. hooks (1992) talks about how overarching notions of ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ are used as constructive representations of ‘the other’. To hooks, stereotypes ‘like fiction’:

...are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real. They are there not to tell it like it is, but to encourage pretense. They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound when there is distance. They are an invention. (p. 341)

In the social psychological tradition, these representations are often referred to as ‘prototypes’, especially when applied to constructions of a group member. Hogg and Tindale (2005) say prototypes embody ‘fuzzy sets’ of attributes defining an ‘ideal group members’. These prototypes are the application of the ‘person models’ we construct regarding social categories. To Norton (2004), these “abstractions permit us to bring the particular within our limits” (p. 137).

These abstractions guide transformation because they provide the conventional core from which to remix. More than just classifications of how a group member would act or should act, memes also function with recourse to the behaviors of specific characters. In a very literary sense, memes often are constructed around what a certain character would do or should do in a specific context. More than just relying on social classification, these dimensions of meme construction require the understanding of a specific character. In this interplay, imitation and transformation coexist. The overarching normative notions of how a character would or should act are applied in creative ways to specific contexts. Many memes are characters based on stereotypical conventions.

Hipsters are a clear example. Beyond Hipster Kitty, ‘hipster’ images abound on meme sites and often rely on thick rim black glasses (either photographed or shopped) to connote hipster subculture across diverse contexts:



Each of the images above combines the aesthetic clue of thick-rim black glasses with stereotypical hipster values: the emphasis on the ‘obscure’, the appreciation of ‘underground’, the rejection of the ‘mainstream’. They each also apply hipster stereotypes to other texts and discourses: Disney’s film *The Little Mermaid*, the 2011 Chilean mine collapse that made international news, and Vincent van Gogh, the painter who cut off part of his own ear.

But a macro like Hipster Kitty is a character as much as a prototype. Often, macros become so codified as to receive formal names and specific character traits. ‘Hipster Kitty’ has received a named identity within meme collectives. This happens with other hipster characters as well. Another is a macro called ‘Hipster Barista’:



Each of these images not only stereotypically portrays hipsters, but also assigns a specific behavior to a specific character. The first image pulls on the hypocrisy of professed radicalism while working for a corporate organization. The second image applies this shallowness to a hypothetical job interview scenario. The third requires context to read. It's a Reddit image made in response to the news of the death of Apple CEO Steve Jobs. Here, the conventional behavior of a fictional character – Hipster Barista – is applied transformatively to the news. Hipster Barista responds here by invoking another radical figure (Nietzsche) to a materialistic identity (Apple fandom). To read this image, participants need to know of the stereotype that hipsters are zealous Apple fans, as well as understand it's referring to the death of Steve Jobs. Knowing Hipster Barista as a character gives even further context. It is these micro-level expansions of the character that cultural antecedents and individual expression intertwine.

Likewise, the stereotypical elderly are often recreated through meme, as with the grandmother macro that began this section:



The first macro shares its image with the sweet grandmother macro above, and uses similar racism and homophobia themes. The second satirizes the nontraditional student, bringing the ‘wrong’ type of expertise to the classroom. The third plays on the supposed technological naivety of the elderly, as the woman in the macro is being taken in by an advertisement those familiar with the internet would know to avoid.

The Gaddafi image that begins this section also draws on a pair of generic conventions. First, the phrase, ‘haters gonna hate’, is common in meme collectives:



The phrase, from American hip-hop vernacular, is used to express disregard for those who disapprove of you. The images in these macros contribute to the sentiment. Simon Pegg looks on defiantly from a pink child’s bike. A panda – who might not be permitted to ride playground equipment – seesaws carelessly. Film star Leonardo DiCaprio strolls with a merry strut and a

dismissive smile. When image is mixed with text, the combined message is a humorous disregard of those who'd question your perspectives or actions. The phrase is transformatively imitated in new texts.

Further, Gaddafi himself became a prevalent feature in memes as his regime toppled and he was executed in summer 2011:



The first image straddles the line between macro and annotation, making the comparison between Gaddafi and Prince John in Disney's *Robin Hood*. The second has a 'facepalming' Gaddafi alongside text commenting on his death ('Dies' is a common punch line for failure in macros). The third – part of a thread on Canvas remixing the same image of Gaddafi sitting and staring in apparent confusion at a computer screen – plays on the popular phrase on meme sites: 'I see what you did there'. The phrase is used to begrudgingly acknowledge a pun, clever point, or joke. Gaddafi does not get the joke.

As is evidenced in the images above, macros work because they provide an access point to partake in the discussion and frame the joke. Formal conventions guide transformation. The meme literate can use shared conventions as a foundation to transformatively create. They form an understandable base to craft from. They're called 'macro' for this reason. In computing, the term is used to describe the application of specific instructions to diverse tasks. The use of these conventions stabilizes image macros to a degree, and allows a jokes to build from a prototypical

hipster, grandparent, or even the more specialized ‘hater’. It means that new macros fitting established conventions can be created easily, and readers can form a common understanding as to the elements of the joke.

Of course, many of these stereotypes are not completely internal to meme collectives. Hipsters are the butt of many pop culture jokes, and memes aren’t the first to make the observation old people can be racist. However, some practices in meme collectives are largely internal, even if inspired by broader cultural discourses. For instance, the appropriation of phrases like ‘haters gonna hate’ and ‘I see what you did there’ take on new specialized meanings to those literate enough to understand them in context. These phrases help cohere the speech community around a common vernacular. These are just two of many phrases that pop up in image macros and the discussion that surrounds them:



“You must be new here” is used in meme collectives to respond to a naïve comment, or a post made by the subculturally uninitiated. “Cool story bro” is a sarcastic response to a post deemed overly long, tedious, entitled, whiny, etc. “He mad” or “U mad” is used to point to a post deemed antagonistic or resentful. These sorts of posts, typically used on 4chan, are ‘reaction shots’ (or MFWs for ‘my face when’). Here the form of the macro is applied to offer a representation of social cues that accompany a response during a conversation.

For instance, here's the use of a Barack Obama macro as a reaction shot, which again reappropriates American hip-hop vernacular (the number 326264636 is a hyperlink back to the post being reacted to):



Many reaction shots, like these three others of Obama, use the customary white all-caps text macro:



They can also come in the form of stable photos:



In these images, Obama's expressions are applied to convey the emotions of the poster during discussion. Even without text, the common use of Obama photos demonstrates transformation adherent to social conventions. The texts are stable. The practices are built by a transformative process.

But for all its formal complexity and diversity, the single image macro is only one way meme collectives use image and text to comment on the world. In a notable derivative, when macros are stacked with other images, they become what I call 'stacked stills' and read as a comic:



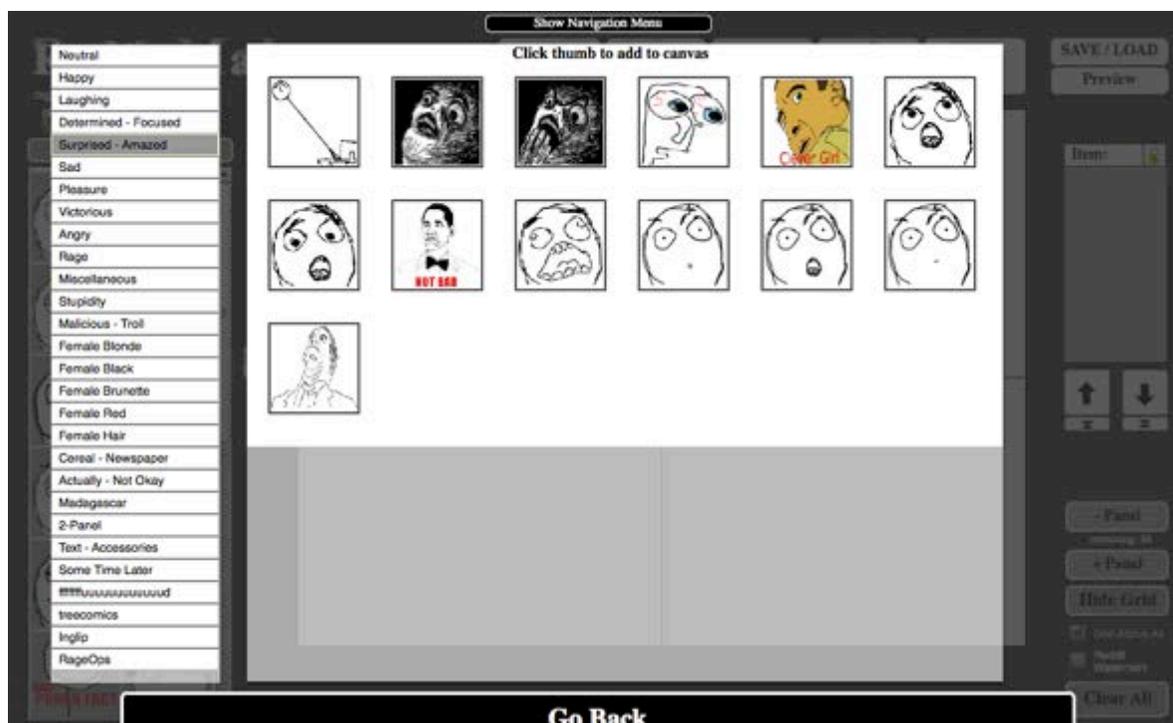
This comic is a basic example of what meme collectives call a ‘vertical’, a prevalent type of stacked still. In this vertical, a picture of British Actor Ian McKellan is stacked on top of a macro called Futurama Fry. In the macro, Fry, a character from the show *Futurama*, squints ‘not sure if’ he can tell the difference between two things. In this case, Fry is unsure if McKellan – famed for his role as the sorcerer Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* – is homeless or a wizard. Stacking a stable image on top of a macro gives the reader context for a more complex joke. It also allows the joke to be specific to a context – in this case McKellan himself – instead of having to work on the abstract premises often necessitated by a one-panel macro. Reading verticals from top to bottom (fitting for a medium usually engaged by scrolling down a window in a computer screen), tells a simple story.

Of course, these comics become more complex. They often contain four panels, but they can range from a few panels to panels in the double digits. Longer comics are unique in their unwieldiness on a medium other than a computer screen. They are too long to fit on a standard piece of paper; they flow better along with the scroll of the mouse. Verticals can be crafted from standalone images, or they can follow a macro template, like these vertical comics inspired by the film *Inception*:



The first two comics – one making a dirty joke on a popular line from the film and the other arguing for a plot hole – each have the same image set with different text overlaid. The third plays on the template, cutting off the top image, bumping up the second and third, and adding a pun on the film’s name in the new third panel.

Creating rage. While verticals are an easy example to transition between single image and stacked image, they are not the only – or even the most popular – form of comic shared on meme sites. An even more prevalent example of comic remix is called the Rage Comic. Even though they build from a different corpus of images, Rage Comics are still constituted by a stable core. They are perhaps even more codified, limited, and refined than image macros. When building Rage Comics on a site like Dan’s Awesome Rage Maker, the predetermined set of images that can be used with ease provides a quick corpus for creation. On the site, there’s a dropdown menu on the left that sorts the scores of faces available for Rage Comics into families based on emotion: from ‘determined’ to ‘victorious’ to, of course, ‘rage’. Each family has faces numbering into the double digits:



By using sites like Rage Maker, users can construct their own narratives from preset templates.

Rage Faces are strands by which more complex comics are crafted. They are the conventional elements by which participants can create transformative texts. Many have their own names to go along with their characteristic emotions:



Above are three notable examples: the Troll Face, Challenge Accepted Guy, and Rage Guy (or F7U12 Guy). The Troll Face, often used independent of Rage Comics and often cited as a prototypical Rage Face, is used to express the ‘troll’ ethos prevalently cited in meme collectives.

The troll, a trickster of sorts, spreads maliciousness and mischief for his own amusement or advantage. Below is an exemplary Troll Face comic:



'Trolling' is an established term in online forums and discussion boards. It labels posters contributing intentionally inflammatory or controversial discourse in order to generate heated responses. The origins of the face are conflicted. The Trollface Know Your Meme article says the face was derived from a similar post on the amateur art site Deviantart.com in 2008 ("Trollface/Coolface/Problem?", n.d.). However, a user on 4chan argued its origin came from the film *Earnest Scared Stupid*, in a scene where Earnest defeats an actual troll in battle by running over it with his truck. A common practice on 4chan, the argument was presented in stacked still form. Below is an excerpt:



The post – an argument for redefinition of the Troll Face from trolling to defeating the trolls of the world – could very well have been trolling itself. Or perhaps the creator of the stacked still saw the film, decided that Ernest’s face looked like the Troll Face, and offered a bit of revisionist history. No matter the case, the image demonstrates that the characters in *Rage Comics* have conflicted histories, that the mythology of these characters are worthy of discussion to members of meme collectives, and that collective consensus is sought in defining the essence of these characters. They are artifacts negotiated and decided by consensus of a social collective. Every formal feature in memes is the result of social processes.

The second image in the trio above is Challenge Accepted Guy. While the first use of the comic is not entirely clear (Know your Meme says it’s from a forum for the videogame studio Bungie; “Challenge Accepted”, n.d.) the consensus for the term ‘challenge accepted’ is that it comes from a character on the popular sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* named Barney Stinson.

situated in specific social collectives, memes still foster individual variation. The formal story of memes is one of innovation from an accepted convention.

Subcultural Literacy

Discursive constructions of a mediated subculture. Even if they're the result of social agents, the story of memes is not so utopian as unfettered creativity. Memes are quite restrictive in their formal components when we consider the gatekeeping practices of the collectives producing them. Even as memes are built upon individual reappropriation, they are still beholden a broader system of social processes. In this regard, the creative participation that occurs in meme collectives happens by degree. The ideas that get traction are those that balance the imitation needed to resonate with audiences, but the creativity to be seen as something new. Memes, at a formal level, intertwine participation and restriction. Participation in meme collectives is a process that demands demonstration of social competency. This competency is a prerequisite for innovation.

As with any speech community, being able to pull on common practices (in this case ones linguistic and visual) means the dual benefit of ease for insiders and a learning curve for outsiders. All this means participation in meme collectives comes at the same cost as participation in many other social groups: commitment to and assimilation of communicative practices. In this way, established social conventions are not only a stable core for transformative creation. They also gatekeep, overwhelming the uninitiated. Warnick (2002) says of the parody sites she studies that "rather than opening up the text by expanding the matrix of intertextual production, the intertextual allusions on these sites bound them together in a nest set of self-reinforcing cross-references" (p. 112). This is true on meme sites as well, where layers of connection between texts just make a denser layer of references to penetrate.

Memes require a level of engagement with the collectives producing them to fully understand their specific implementations. Even if ‘Hipster Barista’ is recognizable as a stereotypical hipster to the uninitiated, ‘Hipster Kitty’ may not be unless you’re familiar with the networks of mediated cultural participation producing memes. Other examples get even more obtuse. Rage Faces like the Troll Face, Challenge Accepted Guy, and Rage Guy need a degree of understanding to implement according to the standards of the collectives where they’re valued. Digital literacy studies have been concerned with understanding the technological tools needed to participate in mediated discourse. However, with memes, digital literacy is not enough. It also requires *subcultural* literacy: the ability to ‘read and write’ in the social language accepted by subcultural insiders. Scollon and Scollon (2001) point out that literacy is as cultural as it is technical. Lievrouw (2011) lists subcultural literacy as one of the core elements of effective mediated culture jamming. Meme collectives can be understood subculturally; the textual and technological literacy needed to participate in them is subculturally bound.

Hebdige (1979) ties the term ‘subculture’ to “the subversive implications of style” (p. 2). He says that “the expressive forms and rituals of those subordinate groups...who are alternately dismissed, denounced, and canonized” (p. 2) constitute subcultural identities. These subcultural collectives measure themselves against abstract constructions of a discursively created ‘mainstream’ of nonmembers. Fairclough (2003) echoes the sentiment, arguing that ‘styles’ are discursive markers of identification. As Thornton (1996) says, “subcultural ideologies are a means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated class” (p. 10). These distinctions are evaluative in that they “are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of others” (p. 10). The

networks of amateur participation that produce memes can be considered subcultures insofar as they use symbolic artifacts to stylistically differentiate an imagined ingroup from a larger, dominant imagined outgroup. Further, they make evaluations of the differences between these groups. At least during interaction on sites like 4chan, Reddit, and Tumblr, members of ‘the internet’ are cast against the world beyond. After all, the first rule of /b/ is that ‘you don’t talk about /b/’. On Reddit, ‘when does the narwhal bacon?’ is ironically cited as the secret code one Redditor can ask another to identify subcultural status in other contexts. And Tumblr’s Urban Dictionary definition reminds us that “there is no possible way to explain such a phenomenon to others. You either get it or you don’t” (“Urban Dictionary: Tumblr”, n.d.).

It’s fitting that networks of mediated cultural participation would house subcultural collectives. To Thornton (1996):

Micro-media are essential mediators amongst the participants in subcultures. They rely on their readers/listeners/consumers to be ‘in the know’ or in the ‘right place at the right time’ and are actively involved in the social organization of youth. (p. 151)

The mediated networks that produce memes require participants be ‘in the know’. Participants must be able to demonstrate proficiency with the formal conventions that constitute memes, as well as be able to engage with the subcultural norms guided by the collectives producing them. In this regard, the participation standards that ensure meme subcultures are high on agency also mean they’re strongly gate-kept. In both senses, participants have to willingly enter into the conversation and learn its formal parameters to participate. This section will outline this subcultural literacy as it applies to both Rage Comics and a macro subset called ‘Advice Animals’.

Accepted advice. Entering into the conversation in meme collectives requires a degree of understanding on the history, hierarchies, and interrelations of memes. Some memes become more popular than others. Some become popular for a time, then fade from interest as new memes circulate. Those memes that reach the greatest level of stability often get branded with their own names and are loosely canonized in a corpus of popular images. For instance, named macros become the core of a series of macros known on many meme sites as Advice Animals. The term Advice Animals is a catchall for macros with a distinct personality and message, many of which originated on 4chan (though 4chan participants have a reputation for shunning such categorization or labeling). The term has become codified through Reddit's r/AdviceAnimals subreddit. At their most basic level, Advice Animals are just that: macros of animals telling you how to live your life. These animals are guided by a singular personality trait that defines the premise of the macro. One of the oldest is Courage Wolf:



Each of these examples presents a set up in the top text, an image at the center, and a punch line in the bottom text. The image serves as a visual anchor, tying the text to 'Courage Wolf' as a character. In the case of Courage Wolf, each macro dispenses specifically masculine advice on relating to others. Courage Wolf is macro advice for courageously relating to the rest of the world, where 'courage' is often interpreted as masculine, heterosexual success.

There are other common Advice Animals, many using the Courage Wolf aesthetic of multicolored triangles behind a recurring character. Foul Bachelor Frog focuses on stereotypical single male behaviors:



In the second post above, ‘FAP’ is common parlance in meme subcultures for masturbating (which was a common topic of discussion in meme collectives). Socially Awkward Penguin is used to express failure or discomfort in social situations:



Foul Bachelor Frog and Socially Awkward Penguin are two of the most enduring Advice Animals, and have spawned their own derivatives, which are less popular but are still labeled and recognizable. Foul Bachelor Frog’s female counterpart is Foul Bachelorette Frog, who is portrayed as having the same off-putting standards for cleanliness, health and relationships:



Socially Awkward Penguin, when inverted and given a red background instead of a blue one, becomes Socially Awesome Penguin:



Each of these examples draws on stereotypical behaviors. Literate participants can innovate on the stable core. The inverse, however, is that reliance on these stereotypes means building humor based on situated understanding. Limited conventions mean limited transformation.

Not all Advice Animals are so narrowly ‘animals’, and not all follow the primary color aesthetic. Advice Animals have evolved, particularly within the r/AdviceAnimals subreddit, to a wider group of distinct, character-driven, macros. One of the most notable is Good Guy Greg. The macro template is a picture of a young man with a broad smile and a joint in his mouth. Good Guy Greg is used to express opinions on what it means to be a ‘good guy’. These generally consist of above-and-beyond courtesy in social situations:



He helps friends move, cleans up their place, and refills their beer. These portrayals emphasize what's a 'typical' social situation (the top line premise) and what's a 'good guy' move in that situation (the bottom line punch line). The inverse of Good Guy Greg is Scumbag Steve, who is discourteous and irresponsible in social situations:



He creeps on teenagers, buys videogames instead of paying rent, and tries to steal girlfriends. Here typical social situations in the top line premise are made antisocial and atypical by the bottom line punch line. Good Guy Greg and Scumbag Steve often serve as comparative parallels on a continuum of social behavior.

Another popular Advice Animal character is known as Naïve College Freshman or Uber Frosh. Stereotypically, he's the clueless teen over his head away from home at college:



The joke with College Freshman is that he does not know the social rules needed to navigate the college experience. He's hypocritical about his beer taste, shallow in his selection of friends, and even buys all the recommend textbooks. Again, participants use the macro to argue for both what's typical and what's a violation of that typicality.

That macros like Courage Wolf, Foul Bachelor Frog, Socially Awkward Penguin, Good Guy Greg, Scumbag Steve, and College Freshman became popular is telling of the communities that created them. Many are situated in youth conventions: how (and how not) to revel, live single, and navigate college life. Many also deal with how (and how not) to interact with the opposite sex. Many take the male perspective in this advice. Their content can be different degrees of crude and offensive, depending largely on the site they're posted on (fitting with its reputation, 4chan's content was the most edgy). In all, they are crafted from conventions, but these conventions are only distinctly easy to read for a specific subcultural collective. They provide a common ground to build discussion and a barrier of entry for the uninitiated.

The interplay between conventional transformation and subcultural literacy in memes can mean complex negotiations with the broader social world. This is exemplified in threads like the following from Reddit post about stolen laundry. The 'Original Poster' of the thread ('OP' is an oft-used term in net slang for the originator of a thread on a forum; it is a sort of combination of author and presider) began by alleging that his laundry had been stolen from his building's laundry room. He used photos to chronicle his eleven day 'occupation' of the laundry room,

where he put up new macros on the wall each day, demanding his laundry back. It started simply enough, with a picture of a macro based on the *Dos Equis* Most Interesting Man in the World modifying his catchphrase from his television commercials. In the commercial, he claims “I don’t always drink beer...but when I do I prefer *Dos Equis*”. In this case, his text reads “I don’t always accidentally take the wrong laundry...but when I do I bring it back to the laundry room”:



As the days wore on, the occupation grew. The OP reportedly put up at one photo per day for eleven days:



By day eleven, the wall above the sink was covered.

Each of the memes in this photo is a macro made from either an established Advice Animal or a popular culture reference, and all are tied to the central theme of stolen laundry. On the top left, Jay-Z only had 98 problems until his laundry was stolen (a reference to his song ‘99 Problems’, oft-quoted on meme sites). *Toy Story*’s Buzz Lightyear tells whoever stole the laundry to ‘GTFO’ (‘get the fuck out’) on the center left. A classic lolcat complains about stolen laundry in the bottom left with a ‘WTF’ (‘what the fuck’). Good Guy Greg makes an appearance in the second column top, of course, as a paradigm of social responsibility. ‘Y U NO Guy’ wonders why the laundry wasn’t returned right below Greg. Futurama Fry is below Y U NO Guy, with his typical stare of confusion, wondering if the act was premeditated theft. In the

bottom center, Dave from *2001: A Space Odyssey* reacts in an annotated image to encountering the stolen laundry.

Above the Most Interesting Man is rapper Xzibit, who uses the established ‘Yo Dawg Yo’ to ask for a charity receipt. Right center is an elderly man, much like the prototypical grandmas encountered above, complaining about degrading manners in laundry handling. Last, Antoine Dodson – who had a video spread after the local news spoke to him about an intruder attempting to assault his sister – chimes in with a monologue: “Weeeellll, obviously we have a thief in here, in the laundry room...He’s climbing in your dryer, snatching up your clothes up...Hide yo reds, hide yo whites They takin errbodys laundry”. Each of these images takes a visual and subcultural literacy to sufficiently decode. To the uninitiated, this slew of characters and phrases could be dizzying. The laundry thief and many others in the laundry room may not have understood all the references (if indeed we actually believe the OP’s claim about the stolen laundry and that the signs were posted over a period of 11 days). However, for those engaging with the post on Reddit, the situation was an engaging premise to play on established characters and established generic conventions.

And play they did. The OP asked other Redditors to come up with their own Advice Animals in response to the stolen laundry. They responded in spades. Scores of macros poured in to the comments, with discussion, debate, and comparison surrounding the submitted artifacts. The process was steeped in application and innovation. Fitting for the situation, Scumbag Steve was prominently employed:



Foul Bachelor Frog, Hipster Kitty, and Socially Awkward Penguin made appearances too:



The goal for these posts was to work the laundry angle into the established bounds of the character.

Many characters were represented. Below, Lame Pun Coon makes a lame pun; Philosoraptor makes a philosophical pun; Business Cat is not quite himself at the office:



This thread inspired more memes in the comment section than most other Reddit threads. While Reddit comments are often about discussing the situations presented in the OP's macros, this thread presented a scenario that spawned ample creative remix. The OP set up a premise by which to play; commenters took it from there.

Remix became the focus of the thread. Questions on whether the OP was presenting a factually true premise, whether this was the best means to get stolen laundry back, whether that laundry ever came back were secondary. Comments that jeered at the OP's actions or questioned the value of posting Reddit jokes on a laundry room wall were downvoted to the bottom of the thread. The vast majority of the discussion was about how well or not well macros were utilized to match the premise. The clear emphasis in the thread was spreading the premise through new macros in order to creatively engage in memetic remix from an established core.

This self-referential play on meme sites at times explicitly acknowledged the implicit rules that govern accepted memes. In one Reddit thread, Redditors posted 'meta memes' that replaced specific content with an expression of the formal criteria needed to understand memes:



To understand Business Cat you need know that the premise is office related and that the punch line is cat related. For Scumbag Steve, you need to know that the top line implies courteousness before the bottom violates it. The last image argues that Courage Wolf fits a fairly mundane

pushing Rage Guy off the high dive; Challenge Accepted Guy is deciding to jump off the roof of the pool house. Other troll derivatives include a Jersey Shore style ‘Troll Bro’ surrounded by female Rage Faces in the kiddie pool on the left, a garishly dressed Troll Face chasing after a Astonished Guy, who is used to express shock or surprise, and Troll Dad floating solo in the middle of the pool.

Troll Dad – simply Troll Face attached to a pipe and a top hat – is from a Rage Comic subset in which a dad makes jokes at his children’s expense. Awwww Yeahhh Guy, who is used to express satisfaction or elation, is riding a tricycle happily in the foreground. Okay Guy, a Rage Face used to express disappointed resignation, is sitting sadly because he is wheelchair bound and not allowed to swim. Forever Alone Guy, who is used to express social or romantic loneliness, is sitting solitary on a bench adjacent to the pool house. Even the sun itself is a character. This one is called Me Gusta – Spanish for ‘I like’ – and is used to express pleasure or enjoyment. Reading this image, like reading the laundry wall full of macros, requires literacy primarily achieved through the informal learning provided by exposure to the discourse itself (though catalogues of Rage Faces, origins, and meanings exist on threads and on sites like Know Your Meme).

Talk of literacy is especially appropriate for Rage Comics because Rage Comics are most specifically narrative. They tell stories that require a situated understanding to read. They’re sometimes constructed at the basic level with a premise and a punch line, sometimes only a panel or two:



Other times they can be visually and narratively complex, with panels numbering into the double digits (the following image is a single comic split halfway through for readability; the ‘left column’ here was originally read vertically above the ‘right column’):



A fairly-standard (even if abridged) narrative is evident in the panels above, one Johnstone (2001) or Labov (1972) might recognize. There is an orientation, where we meet the hero (the father who has authorial voice) and the villain (the rival father who is othered for his incompetence and rudeness). The complicating event occurs as the villain refuses to listen to the reason of the hero. The hero makes an evaluation of the situation as he expounds upon the

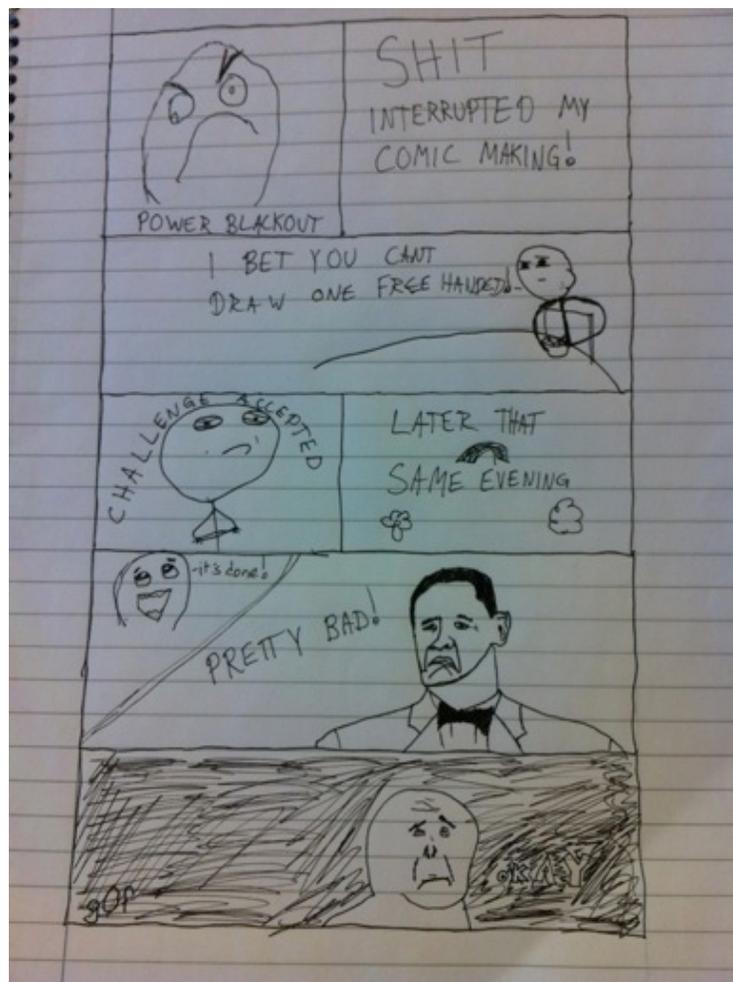
metaphor between the villain's phone and his son's toys. The resolution is stunted here; it is implied in the form of the command in the last panel. The audience is left, somewhat, to fill in the success or failure of this venture, but the final panel leads toward a resolution.

The two framing devices of a narrative – the abstract to give a brief account at the beginning and the coda to sum up the moral at the end – do appear to be absent from the narrative. And, when looking at just the text of the comic itself, this may be the case. However, as the comic exists hypertextually on a meme site (in this case Reddit), the devices that frame the story exist beyond the comic itself. The title of the Reddit post which houses the comic – “Impromptu parenting class at the park goes well (long)” – serves as an abstract for the comic that will come when the title is clicked (the ‘long’ tag even tells readers something about its form). It's the lead to the story that captures its essence.

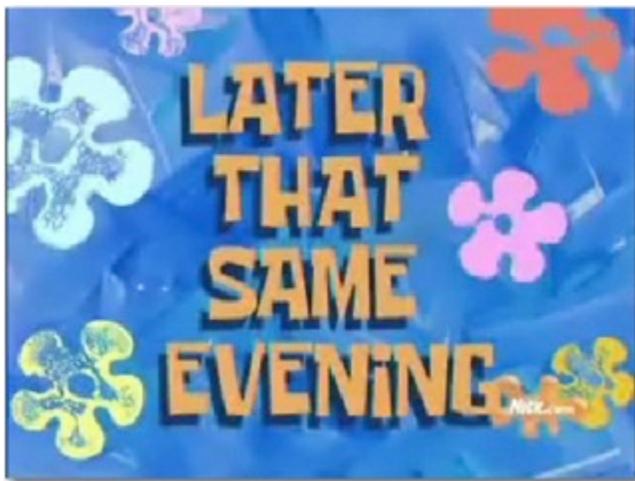
The framing device that ends a narrative, the coda, is also evident paratextually. If the coda of a narrative offers a moral evaluation of the action and gives its lesson, then the comments that came after a Rage Comic on Reddit offer that in spades. This post's top-voted comment offered an evaluation: “if you actually did this...you're a baller. High five”. Another highly ranked comment read “this made my morning. People who don't pay attention to what their kids are doing at all should be shown what they're doing wrong and your example is dead on”. Even less complimentary posts offered a moral evaluation, as this comment did in bold face: **“Relevant information: Original poster was 4 inches taller and 30lbs heavier than the antagonist in this comic”**. Evaluations such as these framed the narrative with a point of broader commentary while bringing it back to a present discussion. So if we see Rage Comics as artifacts that are framed hypertextually, we see a polyvocal narrative that occurs as comics are created,

circulated, and discussed across sites and participants. In this way, a participatory process builds the coda.

The fact that memes intentionally reference the practices of subcultural insiders and outsiders often means creative new uses for older or broader content. In this way formal literacy becomes transformative literacy. Even though the Rage Comic aesthetic – stick figures conveying basic human emotions – seems to require a small barrier for entry, renegotiating a new perspective from established conventions is rewarded (just as ‘not doing it right’ is scorned). When deemed clever, Rage Comic creators can be successful with minimal artistic effort, or even *because* of it, as this ‘free handed’ Rage Comic posted to Reddit demonstrates:



This comic is an indicator that a simple drawing is not necessarily a simple artifact. To understand the meta joke in this comic, participants have to understand quite a few discursive norms of Rage Comics. They have to have literacy to read the crude representations of Rage Faces that make the joke. Participants have to have met Cereal Guy, Challenge Accepted Guy, and Okay Guy. They have to know the digital corollary for ‘later that same evening’ (panel five) and have to be familiar with ‘Not Bad’ Obama to understand why ‘Pretty Bad’ Obama (panel seven) is striking:



Literacy in the use of these two images (one expresses the passage of time and the other expresses being unexpectedly impressed) means understanding their ‘crude’ derivations in the hand-drawn comic. Negotiating the new means understanding the established ones.

However, understanding the use of these two artifacts doesn’t mean participants understand their origins or derivations. The intertextual flow can go even deeper, and investment in the subculture means appreciating more layers in the joke. For instance, the ‘Later That Same Evening’ image above is taken from the Nickelodeon cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Many such images are incorporated into Rage Comics to show the passage of time:



Understanding where these titles come from clue a reader into the texts esteemed by the subcultures reappropriating them.

Understanding the 'Pretty Bad' play on Not Bad Obama is key to the comic above, but the reference is more intricate if participants understand the face's origin is a press photo turned Rage Comic in late May 2011:



Connection to the subculture is rounded with each intertextual reference. For instance, participants on Reddit and 4chan used Pretty Bad Obama and Not Bad Obama to make an Obama 2012 poster (the left image is the comic that inspired the three remixes on the right):



The Not Bad Obama Campaign poster itself then spread. It was eventually watermarked and turned into a commodity, sold as a sticker by December 2011 on the meme site 9gag (which draws ire from many participants on Reddit and 4chan for such behavior):



Of course, beyond the world of comics and macros, understanding of any of these campaign images is premised on understanding they're a visual parody of Obama's iconic 2008 Presidential Campaign poster:



In the case of the hand drawn Pretty Bad Obama panel, one panel in one comic requires layers upon layers of cultural and subcultural fluency to fully understand the joke. Further, the Pretty Bad Obama Face itself became circulated and remixed within meme subculture. A simple hand drawn comic – likely taking mere moments to produce – is a richly intertextual artifact that is premised on and itself furthers a long history of circulation and remix. Voice in this subculture requires aesthetic, technological, and subcultural proficiency.

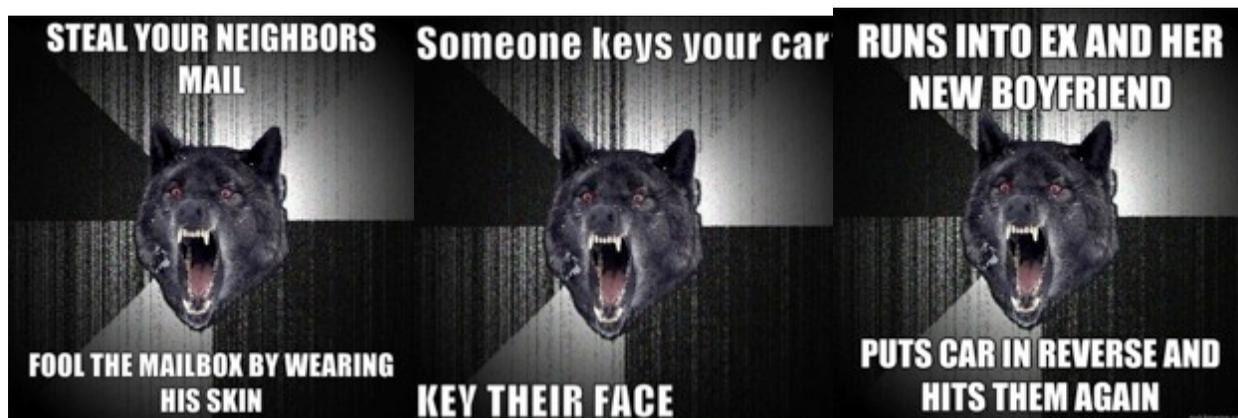
On the networks of mediated cultural participation that produce memes, subcultural literacy is required for entry into the discussion, and literacy is required to create and innovate from familiar forms. However, once met, the participatory potential opens up extensively. Though participants can and do hail from diverse locations, they can cluster around subcultural practices during their mediated interaction. Formally, the balance between imitation and transformation in memes does the subcultural work of gatekeeping. You have to be insider enough to both know how to creatively imitate accepted styles and contribute transformative

content based upon them.

Subcultural negotiations. However, what constitutes proper transformation is not always entirely accepted, and therefore literacy means the ability to enter into subcultural negotiations on how to use and expand on memes. In this sense form is never divorced from social process. In fact, literacy and subcultural competency are intricately intertwined in meme collectives. In a subcultural setting built predominantly by communication, by the disembodied interactions of participants separated by geographical distance, knowing how to talk about things is tantamount to knowing how to navigate the subculture. From the earliest conceptions, symbolic dimensions have been seen as integral to construction of insider and outside in subcultures. Hebdige (1979) and Thornton (1996) both point to the symbolic dimensions of aesthetics. Knowing how to reappropriate a paper clip is important to a punk, just like knowing how to reappropriate a picture of a wolf is important to participants in meme subcultures. And how to ‘do it right’ is always in flux, as practices emerge and fade through subcultural negotiation.

What counts as proper reappropriation is not wholly agreed upon in meme subcultures, and debates over accepted practices often occur within the artifacts themselves. Participants in meme subcultures extensively debate the proper use of memes and critique alleged outsiders for ‘not doing it right’. While these are certainly questions of subcultural process (how to engage in the proper cultural practices, how to balance uniqueness and imitation), they are also inherently questions of literacy (how to ‘read’ and ‘write’, how to ‘speak’ fluently, how to properly use the symbolic artifacts). Negotiating subcultural standards in meme collectives means negotiating how to command the communicative resources at hand in an innovative way. This takes agency tempered by literacy.

Conflicted advice. A popular Courage Wolf derivative called ‘Insanity Wolf’ is often a contested figure. Insanity Wolf’s advice is masculine like Courage Wolf’s, but is also violently antisocial. The humor of Insanity Wolf often elicits a cringe:



This kind of joking was particularly popular on 4chan and Reddit. There are Insanity Wolf macros that are less brutal, which were more frequent on the Cheezburger Network and Tumblr (but had a presence on Reddit as well):



These ‘tamed’ Insanity Wolf macros were almost invariably met with protest by those who didn’t like the character adjusted beyond its roots. One highly upvoted Reddit thread compiled examples of the ‘old’ Insanity Wolf (like the top images) and compared it examples of the ‘new’ Insanity Wolf (like the bottom images). The argument by comparison was that Insanity Wolf needed his ‘balls back’. The rationale for the argument was the claim that for macros to work,

the humor must be within established bounds. In the case of *Insanity Wolf*, grotesquely offensive and ‘authentic’ (according the OP) was preferable to a watered-down but palatable macro. In fact, grotesquely offensive was part of the joke. Losing it meant losing the stable essence of the macro. This argument appealed to ‘true’ subcultural standards, arguing it was uninitiated outsiders who would reappropriate *Insanity Wolf* more tamely.

These negotiations over who did it ‘first’ and who did it ‘right’ reveal the importance of status and position within meme subcultures. Not only do memes require formal proficiency to be accepted and spread in meme collectives, they also require a familiarity with subcultural standards. Social processes decide which memes spread in these contexts. Memes require a discursive competency. They require fluency demonstrated in knowing how to ‘speak’ the accepted language and literacy in knowing how to create new forms based on that fluency. But this competency is selectively decided. Ingroup negotiations determine implicitly the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in using the textual elements that constitute memes.

Quite a bit of subcultural boundary work comes by making sport of those who misuse memes. For instance, the subreddit *r/TerribleFacebookMemes* catalogues people misusing memes and sharing them on Facebook. Facebook is often seen as the domain of the bland, redundant, uncritical, and generally stupid dominant media culture meme collectives cast themselves against. In *r/TerribleFacebookMemes*, Redditors chronicle those uses that are most strikingly against the conventional norms understood by the subcultural insiders adept in memes:



When Business Cat is giving a directive that is not a business pun, when Scumbag Steve isn't doing anything particularly 'scumbaggy', and when Courage Wolf is only 'grrring', those literate in meme conventions might bristle. On Reddit, the response is mostly to come together and joke about the unintentional humor of an unintentional fail.

However, the process is always a negotiation. Believing that r/TerribleFacebookMemes represents objectively 'terrible' Facebook memes depends on accepting perspectives of a specific subcultural group. If a 'terrible' meme is accepted by a mediated collective elsewhere online (perhaps in a Facebook social circle), then its inadequacy is a matter of perspective. Further, some of these 'terrible' memes are ambiguous even by insider standards. For instance, an Advice Animal called Success Kid is one of the characters posted to r/TerribleFacebookMemes.

Accepted Success Kid memes feature a small child happily responding to successful situations:



These three were all posted to r/TerribleFacebookMemes:



Their form and content is not as egregious as the examples from the subreddit above, nor are they too out of step with the canonized usage of the macro. It's hard not to read the first image as a direct ironic reappropriation of the meme, maybe as a 'so close' almost success or as an intentional meta 'fail' at using the meme. The macro could be an example of very intentional reappropriation instead of an example of illiteracy in the discursive processes needed to make memes. The second message matches well with a feeling of success. The third came in a thread titled "Well technically there WAS success". The top-voted comment was "if you admit there was success, it obviously isn't terrible". Success or failure in the memepool is not a matter of merely imitating cultural practices with rote precision. Rather, it's about transformational negotiations. These negotiations require knowledge on how to engage the subculture, speaking the language while adjusting creatively.

Advocating rage. There are also negotiations about proper form in Rage Comics. In this comic, entitled 'Fuck you Facebook', a subcultural insider on Reddit responds with vitriol to a misattribution of the source of Rage Faces:



The beginning panels show the ‘proper’ use of Rage Faces, as applied to a class project. The problem comes when a class member (represented as a cultural outsider by even her expression) misattributes the sources of these faces. The bright red, lighting spiked, wide mouthed, full panel shout that meets the question demonstrates how much of an affront the question is. The top-voted comment to the post glibly stated “the real question is do *you* know that they are not from Reddit?” The next one said “no, they’re the 4chan.org faces. Check it out kids; it’s a lovely site”. Both the comic and these responses do the boundary work of arguing for a proper subcultural

appreciation of the origins of these images. In meme subcultures, 4chan critiqued Reddit for being derivative (nowhere was this more common than on the 4chan subreddit, r/4chan). Reddit critiqued 4chan for being needlessly offensive and unrefined. Neither were particularly fond of the Cheezburger Network or Tumblr.

Even within meme collectives, there were negotiations about Rage Comics. Some questioned the value of the comics themselves. This screenshot from 4chan (itself shared on Reddit) captures /b/'s lack of enthusiasm over Rage Comics:



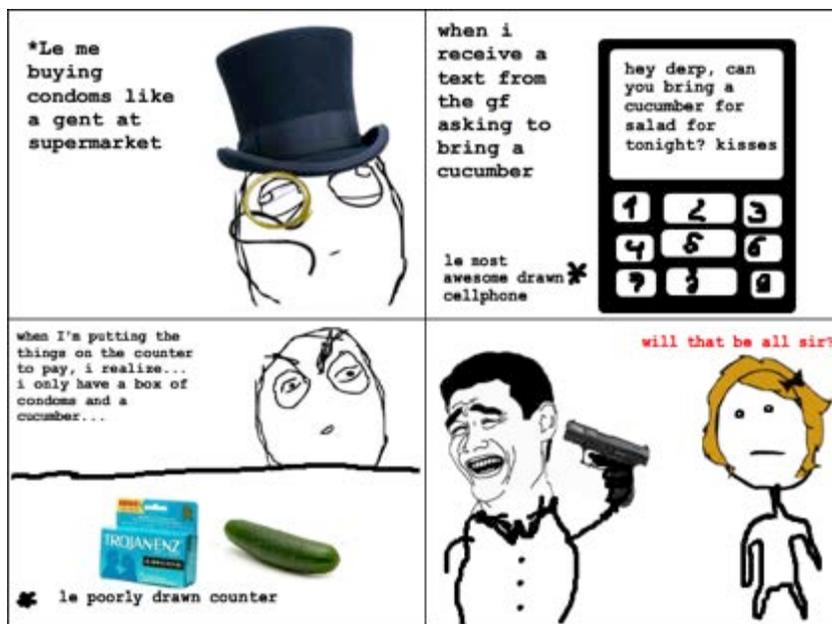
Rage Comics were less common on /b/, and were often brought up in lists of critiques about Reddit. Redditors themselves also commented disdainfully about Rage Comics (though Redditors who were not enthusiastic about memes did so about image macros as well). They were called immature, overly-convoluted, and of course, unhumorous.

Along with these critiques came ones from the inside, from participants arguing about what Rage Comics should be. These critiques often took meta form; Rage Comics made arguments about proper Rage Comics. For instance, this comic – an argument by one OP for the degradation of r/ffffffuuuuuuuuuuuuuu – critiques Rage Comic conventions in a way only accessible to those familiar with Rage Comic conventions:



From there, the use of 'le' became an increasingly popular norm in Rage Comics across sites, most often to communicate action or to label objects, as in these two comics:





The consistent use of 'le' in comics (and also the common use of 'herp and derp' to fill in for names and action verbs, like "herping to the store with derp") lead to multiple expressions of frustration in the form of Rage Comic:



Some of the most explicit discussions of norms occurred when an OP perceived a deviance or abuse. Similar to how Insanity Wolf's character became the explicit topic of discussion when participants argued for a violation of the character, 'le' and 'derp' came under attack when some perceived an over-use of the terms. These cases fit with Lindlof and Taylor's (2002) observation that norms and values are most explicit during moments of dispute over them. They also reveal that imitation is not the whole of cultural transmissions in memes. The social processes that guide the creation, circulation, and transformation of memes are consistently being negotiated, image-by-image and comment-by-comment.

The participants in the process.

This chapter set out to answer how structural processes guide memes. The goal was to better understand how the micro-level discursive negotiations between participants in meme collectives influenced subcultural participation. In the case of Advice Animal image macros and Rage Comics, a complex interplay exists between imitation and transformation. Structural norms do guide memes. There are technological dimensions to this (using Meme Generator, for instance, limits macros to a standard top-text/bottom-text format), but social evaluations are predominant gatekeepers. Innovation is possible, but it happens within a realm of established subcultural conventions. Each new innovation lives or dies by how it is received by the audiences determining its perpetuation.

In this way, internet memes fit with the contentions of Bloch (2000) and Hull (2000), who see cultural transmission as more about social process than the discrete movement of discernable units. Likewise, the transmission of internet memes support Conte's (2000) contention that 'limited social agents' are responsible for cultural change. Participants in meme subcultures are free to adapt and innovate, but are more successful doing so within established

boundaries. Moreover, since these subcultures exist largely as mediated collectives, negotiating social practices means communicating well. Mastery of the language accepted by other participants (a symbolic proficiency) is the key to innovation. An internet meme surviving in the memepool is not automatic or accidental. Rather, it's the result of countless micro-level negotiations. There are participants in the process. The next chapter will focus on how these participants negotiate their positions relative to dominant discourses on social identities in meme collectives.

CHAPTER FIVE

Identities: Dominant Discourses and Negotiated Representations

Dominant Discourses

Process to content. This chapter, building on the last, focuses on the application of memes to make sense of daily social realities. It shifts focus from the social processes guiding memes to the identity representations in their content. In order to understand how participants employ memes as a form of social commentary on social groups, I ask:

RQ2: How are social identities articulated through memes?

The last chapter demonstrated how memes structurally cluster around recurring conventions, and transform from those conventions. This chapter will demonstrate how conventions exist within the content of memes as well, in the form of dominant discursive themes. Memes not only share a common set of characters and textual rules, they also tend to gravitate around a core set of subjects. These dominant discourses are built largely around social identity distinctions, while allowing room for a negotiation between perceptions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, either subculturally, demographically, or both. This section will present evidence that memes are built around a few identifiable themes as they construct self and other in social interaction. Memes make their evaluations based on the following criteria: ‘fail’, ‘what the fuck? (WTF)’, and ‘win’. As ‘dominant discourses’, these framing devices cast winners and losers in social life, and do so with implications for cultural participation. The micro-level practices that determine these categories favor specific identities. The discourses that dominate memes influence how specific social groups are represented. They work to differentiate insider from outsider and to privilege

some representations over others. With this link in mind, the next section will demonstrate that within these dominant discourses there is room for negotiated representations of social identities such as class, race, and gender.

Fail, WTF, and win. Memes categorize social realities in a few ways. These ‘dominant discourses’ not only serve as a formal lingua franca on how to talk about social roles, they also demarcate insider from outsider. I label these dominant discursive criteria ‘fail’, ‘WTF’, and ‘win’ after common phrases in meme subcultures. ‘Fail’ is a term used to mark moments of social misfortune, tragedy, or incompetence on the part of the OP. ‘WTF’ moments come when the OP must deal with the failure of the other in a social interaction: their stupidity, ineptitude, or illiteracy. ‘Win’ is the inverse of ‘fail’: moments of social fortune, success, or competence on the part of the OP. These themes are dominant discourses in meme subcultures, and they do the ideological work of grouping social actors into insider/outsider categories.

To say memes are about fail, WTF, and win is to say memes are about social commentary. They’re about making evaluations of the social roles and realities an OP daily engages. For instance, as might be gathered from the name, many Rage Comics are about rage: dissatisfaction with an event or circumstance. When Rage Comics construct a narrative about this rage, they do so by producing a tale of either fail or WTF. Macros, as well, are used to express frustration with an implied self or an implied other. Much of the commentary that occurs through meme occurs within a discourse of critique: an evaluation of fail or WTF. But these critiques aren’t the whole story. Memes are also used to convey quite a few moments of win. They catalogue successes from the mundane to the unexpected. These dominant discourses are generic in Fairclough’s (2003) sense; they provide ground rules for the conversation. They’re the means by which perspectives can be articulated and ideologies subtly reproduced. They

they are often used as a means to communicate a failure on the part of the protagonist of the comic.

These fails are often social in nature, and often tell stories of ‘slice of life’ foibles and miscues:



The first comic above leaves the protagonist not only as ‘Forever Alone Guy’, but also crying upside down, as he is forced to ride a roller coaster by himself. In the second, the protagonist doesn’t look like the dashing Jon Hamm when he puts on a gray jacket, but rather the comic icon Pee-wee Herman. Both of the examples below are relational failures, a common theme in Rage Comics. Relationship fails were very often about the embarrassments that either come from or lead to being romantically unattached:



In both these comics, the male OP fails when he's not able to effectively communicate with a female romantic interest.

Forever Alone Guy's prominence in verticals, Rage Comics, and macros is a testament to how enduring the image of the young, romantically unsuccessful male is to the subcultural sites that produce memes:



Relational commentary on meme sites often focuses on geeky or awkward young males, who are denied romantic affection. The OP in these memes is often the cast as the ‘forever alone’ male. The outsider is the female who keeps the OP at arm’s length.

Other themes than interpersonal relationships are commonly covered in Rage Comics. Sometimes the failure is against faceless social forces, both large and small:

with the failures of life, and are often cast along identity lines. The social actor who is given authorial voice is cast against less complex and differentiated social forces. This discursively constructs an identity difference between the social insiders reading the comic and the social outsiders serving as foils.

While many macros focus on critique, a few focus on it sympathetically or endearingly. This discursive move marks it as the failure of a discursive ‘us’; the foibles are discussed as internal to members of meme subcultures. Socially Awkward Penguin is one ‘fail’ macro that is presented sympathetically:



Socially Awkward Penguin posts often focus on those ‘geeky’ tendencies stereotypically applied to (and sometimes adopted by) net subcultures. The first post above plays on physical lack, the second on romantic insecurity, and the third on social incompetence overriding the utility of technological prowess. Paratextually, Socially Awkward Penguin posts are often accompanied by commentary like ‘this happened to me today’ or ‘I know that feel, bro’. Socially Awkward Penguin becomes a way to share geeky failures in a collective where they resonate.

Another macro often read sympathetically is Foul Bachelor Frog. Like Socially Awkward Penguin, Foul Bachelor Frog is immensely popular. He resonates on meme sites as he reproduces stereotypes about young, single, males:



These three Foul Bachelor Frogs map well with the Socially Awkward Penguins above. Again, failure comes from masking an undesirable tendency, from being unable to negotiate romantic relationships successfully, from being technologically proficient but socially stunted. That Socially Awkward Penguin and Foul Bachelor Frog were both so often sympathetically situated during discourse surrounding memes indicates their resonance as expressions of OP fail. As with Rage Comics, in this fail subcultural identities are defined. The failures of stereotypical single males – the messiness, the laziness, and the relational frustrations – are reproduced with a tongue-in-cheek self-awareness.

OP WTFs. There's a fine but important line between 'fail' and 'WTF'. Especially in Rage Comics, a moment of fail occurs when the OP fails: when it is the self, the insider, the 'us' who is lacking. A WTF moment comes when the OP expresses confusion or anger with a set of unexpected or undeserved circumstances, when the other fails. WTFs are about the failure of the other: the outsider, the 'them'. When the other fails in Rage Comics, the author is often left asking WTF? The parking space comic above could portray a fail in the overexcitement of the OP; it could also portray a WTF at the deceptive (and Troll Faced) motorcycle. When subcultural outsiders are constructed through memes, they are given WTF treatment, as participants marvel at their inadequacy. Again, the sentiment is prevalent enough to have developed its own set of Rage Faces:

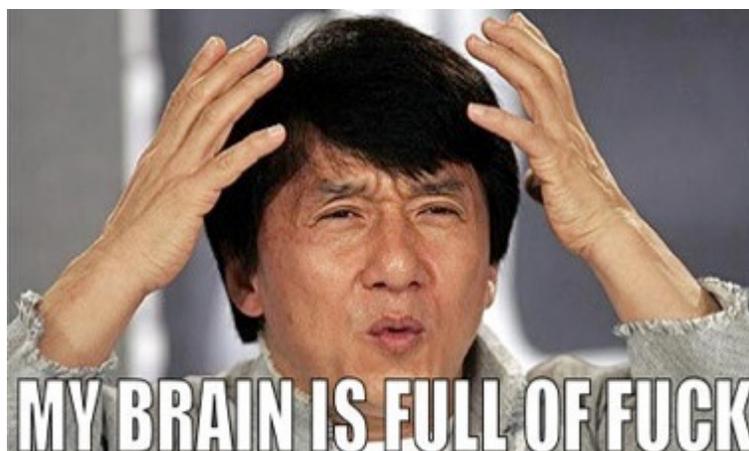


Quite a few of these faces are dead-eyed stares, astonished with or reprimanding of the stupidity of the other. Some are blank, wide mouthed (7, 9). Others are tight-lipped puzzlement (4, 10). Some speak with more authority, offering an ‘it’s not okay’ (2), an emphatic ‘NO’ (5), or staring stern with piercing eyes (1). Others might be bewildered pleas: an ‘are you fucking kidding me’ (3), a look of anger from the breakfast table (8), or the iconic stretched arms and tightened face of the Y U NO Guy (6).

Again, the situations surrounding WTF moments are most often the little inadequacies of daily life. And again, they tend to focus on interpersonal relationships and relations with the public at large:



The first image (which conveniently labels male and female perspectives with blue and pink text) is a WTF premised on a male insider being stupefied by female illogic. Rather than doing the logical thing (from the OP's perspective) and starting the Blu-ray, the female in the comic would rather keep watching an inferior version of the film. She even gets mad when he presses the issue, prompting the raised-eyebrow, narrow-eyed glare and the 'I don't understand you sometimes' in the final panel. In the second image, the OP witnesses a boy so sheltered he is scared by a black child, and a mom so out of touch she apologizes by calling his father 'a negro'. The father gives the 'are you fucking kidding me?' face (panel three), the OP gives the confused face modeled after a photo of actor Jackie Chan (panel four). This photo is shorthand for 'my brain is full of fuck':



The Jackie Chan Rage Face and its correlated macro are applied to the inadequacies of others that pepper social life for the members of meme subcultures.

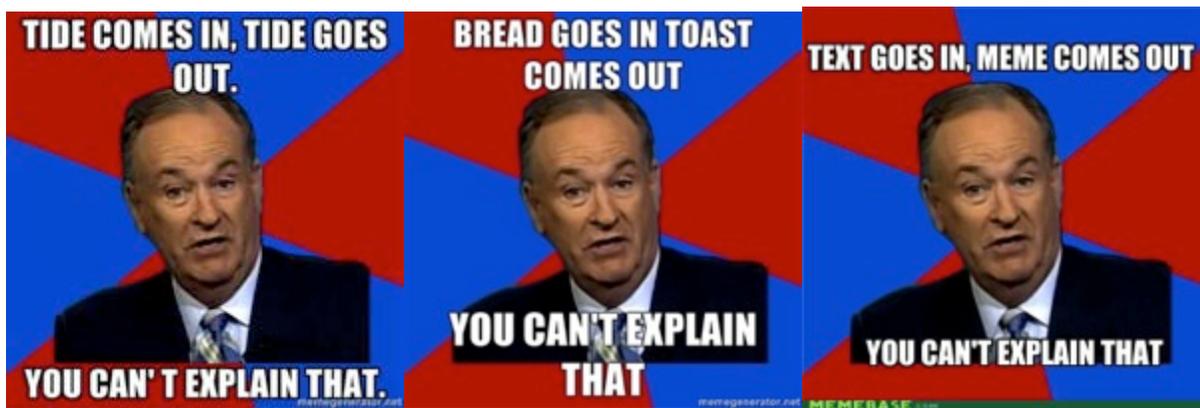
It is common in WTFs to portray the OP as smarter than the others who populate the panels, or at least as being astonished with their lack of understanding:



In the first comic, a romantic pursuit is spoiled by a female's musical illiteracy. In the second, a conversational partner is unaware of the different meanings of the word 'engineer'. Both comics end with a common Rage Face. It is a WTF face based on a screen capture of David Silverman, president of the American Atheists, reacting to conservative talk show host Bill O'Reilly:



It's telling this image would come to stand in for the ultimate in 'are you serious?' WTF moments. Reddit, where the image originated and was immensely popular, had a prominent atheist contingent (r/Atheism is currently one of its default and most active subreddits). Reddit was also seen as a haven for the young, liberal, and educated to comment on the broader world (often constructed as the domain of the out of touch, conservative, and uncritical). The image, likely not coincidentally, comes from the same episode where O'Reilly infamously claimed assurance in the existence of God because "tide goes in; tide goes out. Never a miscommunication. You can't explain that". This moment spawned a macro in its own right:



WTF moments often come at the expense of those – like O'Reilly in the macros above – whose opinions are uninformed or who demonstrate faulty reasoning in getting to those opinions. Outsiders are those lacking critical engagement with the world.

WTF Rage Comics are very often based upon an 'us vs. them' intergroup dynamic. The OP and the audience by extension are those intelligent enough to see the problem, to get the joke. The 'others' are the representatives of a hopeless group: the masses of people who are uninformed enough to necessitate such WTF:



Both the comics above resolve with the OP concluding society is so full of stupidity that it should probably be destroyed. The offense in the first comic is a store full of ‘derp faces’ staring zombielike at the author for taking too many napkins without proof of purchase. The second is a child who is clearly so culturally illiterate he does not appreciate videogame classics like *Super Mario Brothers* and *The Legend of Zelda*. Instead, he likes the fast-paced shooter, *Call of Duty*. The only option is the destruction of his generation.

When macros focus on a subcultural outsider, they have a WTF flavoring. Either in the discourse surrounding the image, or in the salient identity of character, many critical macros connote WTF. Similar to the critiques of the elderly that opened last chapter, quite a few macros are devoted to the inadequacies of middle-aged adults. A popular example is called Sheltering Suburban Mom:

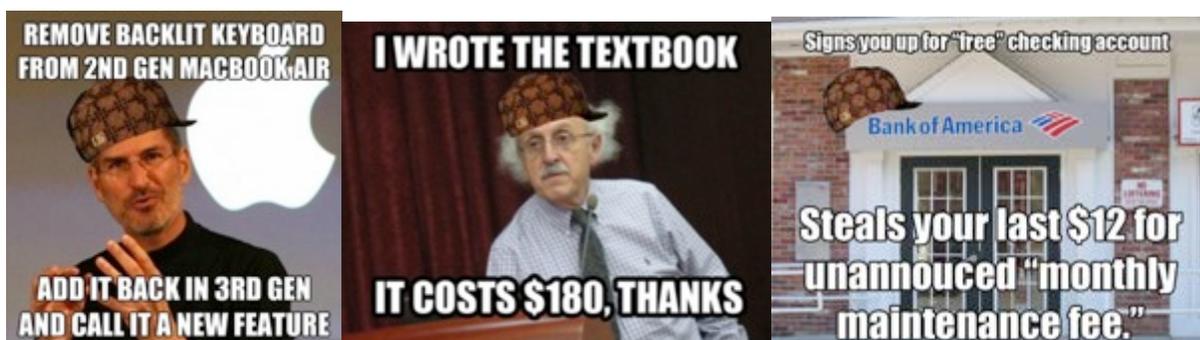


The hypocrisies and inadequacies of Sheltering Suburban Mom are often antithetical to the subcultural values of participants in meme collectives. She chides from the outside, messes up the terminology, and antagonizes accepted reason. As with many Rage Comics, the WTFs here result from those who lack discernment, literacy, and intelligence.

Scumbag Steve is also held up as an exemplar of WTF. He is often cast as the alpha male outsider, who foils the enjoyment or success of the OP:



Scumbag Steve is Foul Bachelor Frog with a victim. The scummy behavior often has a direct effect on the wellbeing of the implied reader. In the images above, peace of mind, personal property, and fiscal fairness are all wrecked for the reader at the hands of Scumbag Steve. Many Scumbag Steve posts come with statements like ‘this happened to me today’ or ‘my roommate did this’. The behavior of Scumbag Steve is almost never discussed with the sympathy afforded to ingroup critique. The Scumbag discussion is an othering discussion. This is evident in the application of the Scumbag hat to other objects in order to portray them as adversaries:



The marketing spin of Apple, the self-indulgence of professors, and the bait-and-switch of banking fees are all given the scumbag treatment. Each of these moments invokes a WTF in readers. Each marks the practices of the discursive ‘them’, which victimize the discursive ‘us’.

The naivety of youth is also othered in memes. Many macros critique teen girls for their subcultural illiteracy or unintelligence. The following three macros are called Idiot Nerd Girl, Musically Oblivious Eighth Grader, and Annoying Facebook Girl:



Each of these other a prototypical teen girl, leaving the OP and those commenting to shake their heads in wonder. Each of these macros is a different take on the same theme: that the social practices of the young female demographic are inscrutable.

Young males are not exempt from critique, but the critique takes a slightly different form. These three macros are called Annoying Childhood Friend, First Day on the Internet Kid, and Bad Luck Brian:



The othering of the young men here is more ambiguous, and less reliant on gender. The gender of two of the three ‘girls’ above is marked in their name; the gender of these three male examples is not. Annoying Childhood Friend is othered because he’s intentionally manipulative and self-serving (but that he’s a ‘childhood friend’ implies a same sex dyad). First Day on the Internet Kid and Bad Luck Brian are othered for their innocence (they might even be read as sympathetic fails depending on the context and specific joke). However, as with the girls above, the charges are hypocrisy, naivety, and social incompetence.

These ‘youth’ critiques are discursively similar to another popular take on the illiterate subcultural outsider, College Freshman:



The first image here applies the Scumbag hat to an entitled claim. The second plays with the macro format to give the sensation of a deluge of phrases marking College Freshman as a ‘bro’, a discursive outsider lacking critical engagement with the world. The third image may well have been a Socially Awkward Penguin, but when paired with College Freshman, the social shortcoming is placed on a subcultural outsider. The foulness and awkwardness in moments of fail above were met sympathetically, the illiteracy and irrationality in WTF images is laughed *at* more than *with*. WTF marks the failures of a ‘them’ more than the foibles of an ‘us’.

OP wins. Despite the emphasis on critique in memes, they catalogue moments of ‘win’ with similar frequency to moments of fail and WTF. But even OP wins are often premised around enduring against an ethereal other, a broader society bent on perpetuating the struggle

and fail of the OP. Beating a WTF is often a win. In Rage Comics, just as there is a corpus of faces devoted to expressing failure and anger, there is a corpus of images built around expressing joy, resolve, confidence, and success:



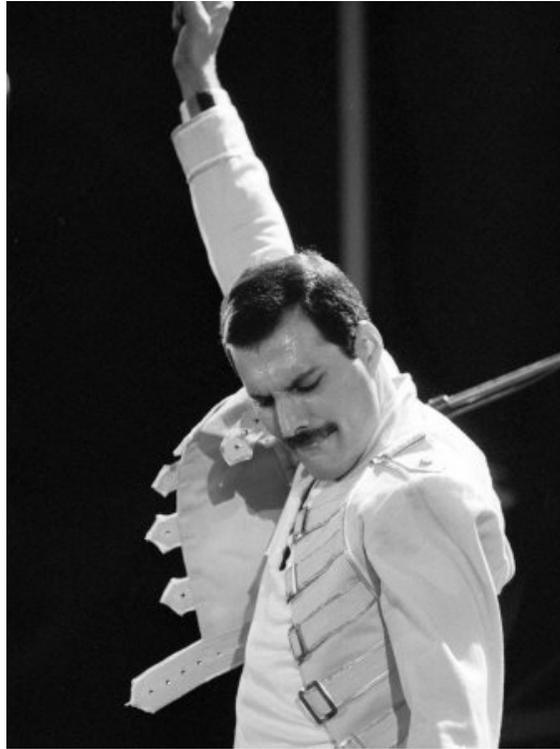
Moments of win might be expressed by dismissing or degrading enemies, in the form of a ‘haters gonna hate’ (10), a troll face (7), or a broad, confident ‘Bitch Please’ smile (5). Celebratory joy might come in the form of a Freddie Mercury fist-raised victory pose (8), a tearful smile (9), or an exuberant ‘aaaaaawwwww yyyeeaaaaaa’ (3). Victory after struggle might merit a ‘fuck yea’ (4), or a stern, focused, determined smile (2). Sometimes situations might even go better than expected (1). Particularly perverse or decadent pleasures might merit a ‘me gusta’ face, with its pursed lips, wide, dark, lizardlike eyes, and prominent wrinkles (6).

As with moments of fail and WTF, moments of win are mostly inspired by the minor victories of daily social interaction, whether against the impersonal social forces or in interpersonal relationships:



More than being tales of victory, both of the comics above chronicle moments of win that come out of moments of potential fail. After all, a good story is built on conflict. In the first comic, the bland, processed, and cheap ramen diet of a student is given a bit of excitement with a unique and ‘fancy’ flavor. In the second, a breakup is made more tolerable by the OP maintaining Netflix rights. In both these comics, fail faces appear early on and are converted to win as the conflict is resolved positively. The ramen girl is bored and leering before she notices the roast beef hidden among her chicken ramen. Then astonishment (panel four) turns into a close up of satisfaction (panel five) and eventually her entire persona is transformed into a genteel woman of means (panel six). The Netflix guy is giving a resigned ‘okay’ (panel one) is ‘forever alone’ (panel two), but his tense victory (punctuated by the spinning zoom effect on the bewildered face

of his ex before her eventual concession) is celebrated by a Freddie Mercury victory pose in the eighth panel. This Freddie Mercury image comes from a 1986 concert:



These reappropriational practices are a common practice in meme subcultures: taking a found media artifact, assigning it a subcultural meaning, and spinning that meaning out to any number of pertinent situations.

A win in Rage Comics often comes from avoiding a Forever Alone fate. The following comic is a lighthearted play on the friendship even a spare piece of gum can encourage:



The authorial Forever Alone Guy in panel one pulls out gum, and is met with excitement from his peers. By panel three, he is crowd surfing, and finishes with the realization that ‘gum = popularity’. Forever Alone no more.

Other examples are more nuanced and sentimental (perhaps an affordance of the complex potential of the vast catalogue of Rage Faces). The following is a Reddit post (divided into two columns) entitled ‘Taco Bell Run that Changed a Life’:



From the first panel, the OP is framed as the caretaker of a Forever Alone Guy (who is described as socially awkward, and hasn't made any friends for it). The OP accepts the challenge and sternly takes control of the situation (a supportive, 'tough love' use of the word 'bitch' punctuates the fifth panel). The evening goes well, as the two discover they have quite a bit in common, including male geek staples like Pokémon, Xbox, and Taco Bell (the top-voted

comment on the thread was ‘Nice try, Taco Bell corporate advertising person’). The comic turns from humorous to sentimental in panel 13 when a message comes over ‘le crudely drawn phone’. In panels 14 and 15, Forever Alone Derp reveals he has struggled with depression and suicidal thoughts. Panel 15 ends with the inspiration for the thread’s title: “you kind of saved my life last night”. The visual equivalent of a long pause in panel 16 gives way to a single tear in panel 17. Panel 18 presents the familiar Freddie Mercury victory pose (the toasting man down in the left corner ensures us it’s a ‘true story’). The story is a win that might resonate with its implied demographic: young, male, and geeky. The OP and the Forever Alone Guy shared these tendencies. The others here are the other residents who make fun of geeky idiosyncrasies.

Win comics are often about getting the best of haters. These comics draw specific sides between the author and other who is bested:



Each of these comics converts marginalization and scorn into win. In the first comic, the relatively powerless student shows up his gym teacher with his archery skills. By the last panel, he has changed from a student to Legolas, the combat-adept archer from *The Lord of the Rings*. In the second, the art student is dismissed as a ‘hobo’ by a businessperson for her interests. Her win is retribution in the form of glitter in his laundry. The ‘Bitch Please’ face is employed along with the rebellious act (charcoal marks are added under the eyes).

Sometimes comics like these lead to questions of authenticity, particularly on Reddit where pseudonyms were more established and karma is on the line. The top-voted comment on the ‘Taco Bell Run that changed a life’ questioned whether it was product placement, before adding “But seriously, cool story bro. Hope it's true”. The OP in the glitter comic was asked if the comic was a true story. Her reply was first “Yes, not me but a friend”. She then amended with this: “Edit: Just wanted to correct this here. I called my friend to ask if she actually did do this but it turns out that she did not but was tempted to. Sorry if there's any confusion.” Someone in the archery comic thread said the story sounded ‘suspiciously similar’ to a scene from the book series *The Hunger Games*. The OP replied with “Can't say I've read it, perhaps I should be filing a lawsuit. :P”. Someone also charged “fuck no did you nock three arrows and fire them before he had the chance to stop you from drawing again”. The top-voted comment under that trivialized the interrogation of accuracy, saying “the obvious conclusion is that he fired all three at once, turned around, stabbed the teacher with a fourth, and rode a shield down the stairs and out the door” (a tie back to Legolas). The OP was the top-voted reply under that comment, simply stating “This is accurate”.

In this regard Rage Comics are like any good joke or anecdote. A premise of truth is often an unstated part of their success. However, their factuality – like any good joke – is

secondary to the commentary that emerges from the events. The wins in the last three comics play on prototypes: the loner geek, the authoritarian teacher, and the smug businessman. They present social truths prescient to their audience, whether or not these truths are entirely factual. A more-likely assumption is that many of these comics are built upon a modicum of truth. They are likely enough of a combination of fact and value to resonate with their audience. They *could* be true, and they reflect a positioned set of perspectives and values. They're discursive truths for a situated audience. That they're produced pseudonymously or anonymously and distributed without much concern for authorship or citation only helps reinforce their value as discursive truths rather than factual retellings.

Win macros followed similar patterns. Heroes often levy victories against conspiring fates. One of the most explicit win macros is Success Kid:



The win in each of these images comes from shirking authority, whether it be teacher, boss, or parent. Broader social forces work to oppress the OP, who adapts and subverts. The construction is of an other to be bested.

Another popular win macro, Good Guy Greg demonstrates complete selflessness and restraint, no matter the nature of the situation:



When Good Guy Greg wins, others around him win. Much like Scumbag Steve, he was often used on meme sites to report what a roommate, brother, or stranger did. The OP only claimed to be reproducing the prosocial behavior. Good Guy Greg gave participants the opportunity to argue for the merit of particular values or behaviors. Through meme, a geographically dispersed subculture could articulate and negotiate the social values that tied them together.

And as with the Scumbag hat, the ‘Good Guy’ premise is expanded beyond Greg. While the Scumbag hat serves as a visual marker in Scumbag derivatives, with ‘Good Guy’ derivatives, the marker often occurs by adding the words ‘Good Guy’ in front of the name of a prosocial figure. A portrait of the figure accompanies what is so ‘Good Guy’ about them:



Good Guy Paul Newman is a philanthropist. Good Guy Jonas Salk also puts public welfare above personal profits. Good Guy Albert Goering values human life at great personal risk. That his image is aesthetically similar to the Good Guy Greg profile shot is only a bonus.

Deciding dominance. There are, of course, moments of ambiguity in these dominant discourses. For instance, Rage Comics often tell their story by turning moments of potential win to OP fails. Win and fail play off each other. This comic contrasts the Freddie Mercury victory pose (with a series of escalating wins in panels two through five after a night of blackout drinking) with its ‘so close’ fail counterpart in panel eight:



The comic below (divided into two columns here) tells the story of doomed determination, and oscillates between win and fail. It begins with the despair of failure, moves through a resolved commitment to win at the rest of life, and reverts back to failure in the final panels:



The criterion for failure is telling. It begins with a concern that the OP's life is being wasted, and ends on the ironic point that the OP continues wasting his life by making this very Rage Comic (the panel on the computer screen is a capture of the first six panels of the comic on Dan's Awesome Rage Maker). The shadowed face sitting at the screen is Forever Alone Guy. The implication is that memes are not a productive affair, that they are not 'taking advantage of the time I have left'. The joke reinforces the loner/loser geek stereotype that resonates in memes.

The criteria by which win becomes fail, by which winners and loser are decided, have identity implications. Specific roles are favored and specific social representations are advanced. The characters in the comics above are males, are young, and are dealing with ambiguities in

their life. Their win becomes fail when they do not negotiate those ambiguities successfully, offending a girl or wasting a life. As they straddle win and fail, they demonstrate both subcultural ideals of success and subcultural perceptions of failure.

These dominant discourses are not neutral. They are the result of subcultural social processes. The discourses that become dominant set insider from outsider. They define the ingroup as young, intelligent, prone to awkwardness, and mostly male. They set this ingroup against an outgroup consisting of the dregs of society, the hypocritical generation above, the naïve generation below, and the inscrutable female. When memes tell stories of fail, WTF, and win, they do so situated in subcultural ideals. The criteria are decided by a mediated collective, who establish the grounds by which participation occurs and the representations that get to be favored. The next section will apply these dominant discourses to explicit representations of social identities.

Negotiated Representations

Representing by the rules. In this study, discourses of fail, WTF, and win were the dominant ones in meme subcultures. They were the lingua franca for articulating social positions. However, just because these dominant discourses existed, just because they were often tied to dominant identities, does not mean negotiations did not occur. The dominant representations of insider and outsider on meme sites received frequent pushback. Even if these were the agreed upon values for the subculture, what specific texts represented what values was up for contestation. The contestation, however, occurred within discourses of fail, WTF, and win. As a lingua franca, arguing things were fail, WTF, or win meant a set of ground rules by which to negotiate social representations. One quizzically popular, diversely represented, and especially hard to categorize example is Insanity Wolf:



Three different readers could read this in three different ways. On a meta level, it could represent the ‘fail’ of the antisocial tendencies of the ingroup; it could represent a ‘win’ if those antisocial tendencies are endorsed (both positions would be fitting in 4chan’s discourse, for instance, which often housed participants admitting antisocial tendencies if not always embracing them). It could certainly induce a WTF from those less sympathetic to its humor (as would sometimes be the case in Reddit comments responding to vulgar Insanity Wolf images). Insanity Wolf demonstrates that while standards of how to interpret memes were fairly-well established on meme sites, the applications of those standards to actual texts left room for negotiation. These negotiations often occurred over prominent social identity categories, ones that have implications for how discursively participatory meme subcultures are. This section will focus on how that negotiation occurred surrounding prominent social identity categories: class, race, and gender.

We’ve already seen evidence memes often rely on social identity markers to build their jokes. This is not surprising, considering the long history of research in social identity on prototypical and stereotypical perceptions and behaviors when classifying outgroups (Hogg & Tindale, 2005; Hornsey, 2008; Wittenbrink, 1998). Even in a media environment of pseudonymous and anonymous interaction, old stereotypes are relied upon when making points and telling jokes. Fundamental identity elements like class, race, and gender, are prevalent

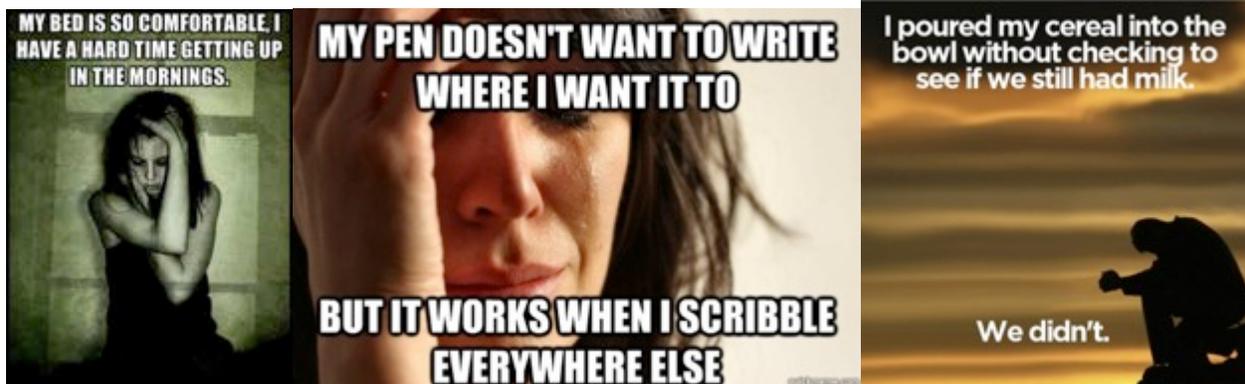
inspiration for macros. Further, there exists a dominant position on all of these issues, one fitting with the young, white, male, geeky, and financially stable attributions often assigned to net culture (see Kendall, 2002). However, there is room for debate on these issues, and debate did occur in memes and the comments surrounding them. Class, race, and gender were open questions on meme sites. Memes were a way to facilitate the discussion, even if the prevailing attitudes in the discussion were not as open and participatory as idealists might hope.

Class and race. As in many American discourses, class and race were discussed interdependently on meme sites. This fits with Kendall's (2002) observations about class and race on the BlueSky MUD. As a basic binary, economic prosperity was associated with 'white culture', whereas economic hardship was often associated with 'black culture' (blacks being the most prevalent domestic minority group represented, and often a synecdoche for minorities as a whole). However, this does not mean that the white middle class or upper class escaped scrutiny. Memes were more often employed to criticize than uplift, so criticism was launched at both the class comfortable and minorities. And while specific sites did so to specific degrees, all dabbled in class and race stereotypes for their humor.

Regarding class, the materialism of white Western culture received significant attention in meme subcultures. One of the most notable class-based memes takes the name 'First World Problems'. The phrase is a popular Twitter hashtag, the subject of an active subreddit (r/FirstWorldProblems), and the name for a series of image macros. Know Your Meme ('First World Problems', n.d.) featured a webisode devoted to First World Problems and described them as "frustrations and complaints that are only experienced by privileged individuals in wealth countries", going on to say the meme is used as "a tongue in cheek comedic device to make light of trivial inconveniences". Complaining about long runway taxis, poor cell phone reception, or

the wrong barista working at the coffee shop are all First World Problems. All are the concerns of those with the class privilege to have such concerns.

First World Problems macros add another layer to the class commentary. In these macros, First World Problems text is overlaid on stock photos of the emotionally distraught:



With these macros, the joke becomes twofold. Not only does the class commentary on privilege remain, but with each image the emotional reactions of the privileged are trivialized. These stock images were likely meant to communicate genuine angst; they seem like they would be at home in a pamphlet about depression or domestic abuse. However, here such emotion is negated by the triviality of the problems that accompany it. A life of class privilege is antithetical to the need to cry about anything.

In this sense, discursive strands of class and gender intertwine. Crying is here a marker of a feminine response, an irrational overreaction to a trivial problem. It's fitting then, that females are drawn upon more for First World Problem macros than men. The macro in the center above has become the most-used image for First World Problems macros. In competition between memes, this one appears to have won out:

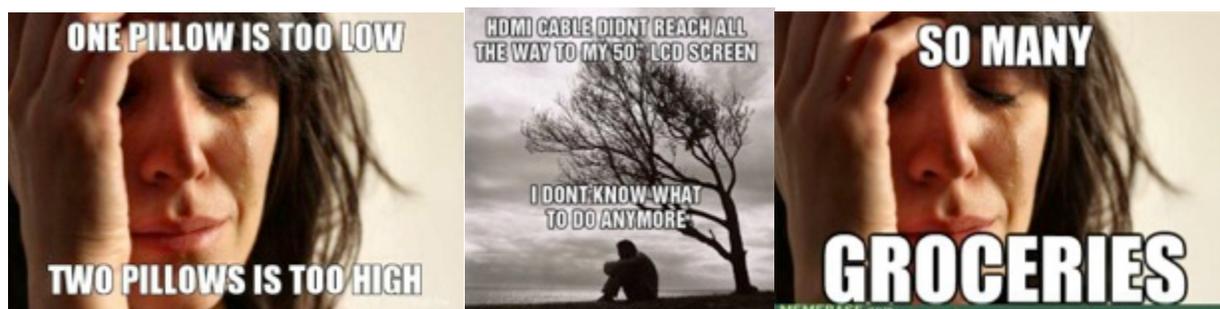


Other female images are common in First World Problem macros. When men are used, they are passive and tearful, antithetical to the active strength of the stereotypical male:



These macros skewered the problems of privileged Westerners by associating them with passive weakness.

A few macros poignantly contrasted emotional responses to problems of privilege, and in doing so served as a reminder of the comfort of the West:



These deal with having too many material comforts like food, shelter, and electronics. The use of these complaints provides the starkest contrast between the ‘problems’ of the privileged and more substantial problems. Having two pillows is a privilege to those who have none. Having a

50-inch LCD TV is more than most of the world, with or without an HDMI long enough to reach it. Having too many groceries to carry in can only happen when you have too much to eat. So even as they feminize privileged complaints and thereby trivialize such emotions, First World Problems humorously point to the fundamental comfort of the West in their comparisons. They also do so from an insider position, often framing posts with titles like ‘this just happened to me’ or adding comments to posts about being able to relate. The class critique is self referential, acknowledging privilege and critiquing entitlement through an ironic juxtaposition of comfortable statements and anxious figures.

This theme carries over to other implicit critiques of the class comfortable, however with less ingroup affiliation. Sheltering Suburban Mom is an example:



Sheltering Suburban Mom is the stereotypical cul-de-sac Christian, a socially-conservative, white, middle-class American who does not see the hypocrisies she posits, ones pointed out in the macro. She is against gay marriage, but divorced herself. She thinks illegal drugs are detrimental, but abuses medication. She’s pro-life until it could ruin her child’s future. Sheltering Suburban Mom – her class status revealed by her very name – is the macro manifestation of the stereotypical, detached suburbanite. Similar critiques are often expressed via College Freshman:



As if he is the progeny of Sheltering Suburban Mom, College Freshman has trouble engaging with ideas that counter his own, is unappreciative of his wealth, and is complacent with his privilege. The critiques leveled by Sheltering Suburban Mom and College Freshman are targeted at a political and social class who is sheltered from and naïve to the complex realities of a world outside of comfort.

WTF moments in Rage Comics are often at the expense of those who are undeserving of their success, or unaware of their privilege. Rage Comics WTF those with myopic views despite their material success (this comic is split into two):



The subcultural insider in WTF comics was often cast against those more privileged, even if less deserving. Through these WTF commentaries, OPs critiqued comfortable classes.

But both the privileged and lacking are critiqued, and critiquing lack often means explicitly marking race. For instance, this OP compiled a montage of First World Problems, and then juxtaposed them with a race and class marked macro called Third World Success Kid (divided into two columns here):



The series of images starkly contrasts ‘first world’ reactions to social realities and ‘third world’ reactions to the same situations. There’s also social commentary going on here. The image works as an especially resonant critique of Western class comfort, as several commenters on Reddit

pointed out. However, there's a negotiation in these images. On one level, they simultaneously critique class comfort and trivialize material lack. But in these critiques, they essentialize the 'first world' through WTF and other the 'third world' through win.

Just as memes typically to represent the upper class with a white person, they typically represent a socioeconomic minority with a racial minority (particularly a black person). One macro is a striking example of this conflation, but also simultaneously reinforces and challenges stereotypes of black poverty. Successful Black Man, in its most basic form, posits a 'black American' stereotype in the top clause and then negates it in the bottom. This happens through a turn of phrase that reverses the stereotype:



The turn of phrase at the bottom not only reverses connotations established by the top text, it does so by elevating the class of the Successful Black Man. The 'humorous clash' (Kuipers 2002, 2005) is born when stereotypes are established, then broken. A picture of a black man with the phrase 'up in the club' conjures images of hip-hop, dimmed lights, and dancing. Turning the phrase by adding 'have to perfect my golf swing' immediately shifts the discourse to one of polos, sunshine, and golf clubs. The young, urban, and economically accessible practice of going to the dance club becomes the older, suburban, and economically exclusive practice of going to a golf club. In the second image, the 9mm pistol of the poor, urban criminal is transformed into the

tool of suburban productivity. Even the stereotypical practice of the American slave, picking cotton, becomes the practice of an economically successful man, picking cotton suits.

The specific stereotypes used run the gamut of those associated with black men in American culture. They're criminals:



They're unambitious and unintelligent:



They're violent:



In all of the examples above, stereotypes about the social irresponsibility of blacks are turned on their head (black *men* in particular, as many of these jokes would not work with a female image). The second clause inverts the claims and connotations implied by the first.

The name of the macro itself – Successful Black Man – creates a racially-presumptuous association. It implies that to be ‘successful’ is worth mentioning for a ‘black man’. Just as a ‘naïve’ college freshman is differentiated from other freshmen, a ‘successful’ black man is differentiated from other black men. If a black man is successful, then he requires a modifier in front of his name to set him apart from a ‘normal’ black man. Reminiscent of how Jackson, Shin, and Wilson (2000) talk about the ‘invisibility’ of whiteness, the modifier of ‘successful’ in the title here makes apparent invisible assumptions of blackness and a lack of success. This supposition carries over into the text of the macro itself. Its humorous clash ‘works’ because dominant cultural assumptions do not lead readers to assume that the second half of the clause will be something representing a class-privileged or socially-responsible position. So while Kuipers (2005) finds that in the context she studies “humorous clash jokes are deliberately amoral. They do not contain any empathy, nor do they make any statement” (p. 77), the clash here is inherently a moral and political statement that empathizes with a specific reading of what it means to be a black man.

But there's ambiguity in this juxtaposition. And this ambiguity means Successful Black Man could be read in oppositional ways in regards to stereotypes. On the one hand, Successful Black Man derives its humor from reinforcing stereotypes. As the exception that proves the rule, Successful Black Man could further ingrain inegalitarian notions of what it means to be black in America. After all, a successful black man wouldn't be noteworthy enough to be funny if it didn't break cultural scripts. On the other hand, the form and content of the macro could also serve as a warning against stereotyping. The turn of phrase that comes with the second clause (from "I hit my kids" to "I hit my kids 25 groundballs during practice", or "I don't have a job" to "I don't have a job. I have a career") punishes readers for their stereotypes. From this reading, the joke 'works' because it draws the reader in with a stereotype, then challenges the invisible assumptions that made the stereotype sensible at face value. The joke comes from lampooning our tendency to unproblematically accept stereotypes. The second clause reminds us to not take stereotypes at face value. Since oppositional readings like this exist, the text's contribution to discourses on race and class are ambiguous. The text becomes a place for negotiation of these perceptions.

There are, however, less ambiguous examples of racism in memes, particularly ones that focus on black Americans. Racism was a defining feature on 4chan, more explicit and antagonistic than on other meme sites. And while many racial identities were othered, black people bore the brunt of the critique. The word 'nigger' was used so often on the site that it's automatically censored upon posting (changed to "roody poo" unless the poster had the technological prowess to bypass the word filter). But this censorship need not necessarily be taken as evidence of 4chan's prosocial progressivism. Know Your Meme argues that word filters on 4chan are more for ironic play (or 'for the lulz') than for any sense of moral obligation

(“4chan Word Filter”, n.d.). The only crime many auto-filtered words commit are being overused. Another example is ‘faggot’, changed to ‘candy ass’. Even the word ‘4chan’ itself was changed to ‘newt gingrich’ when entered.

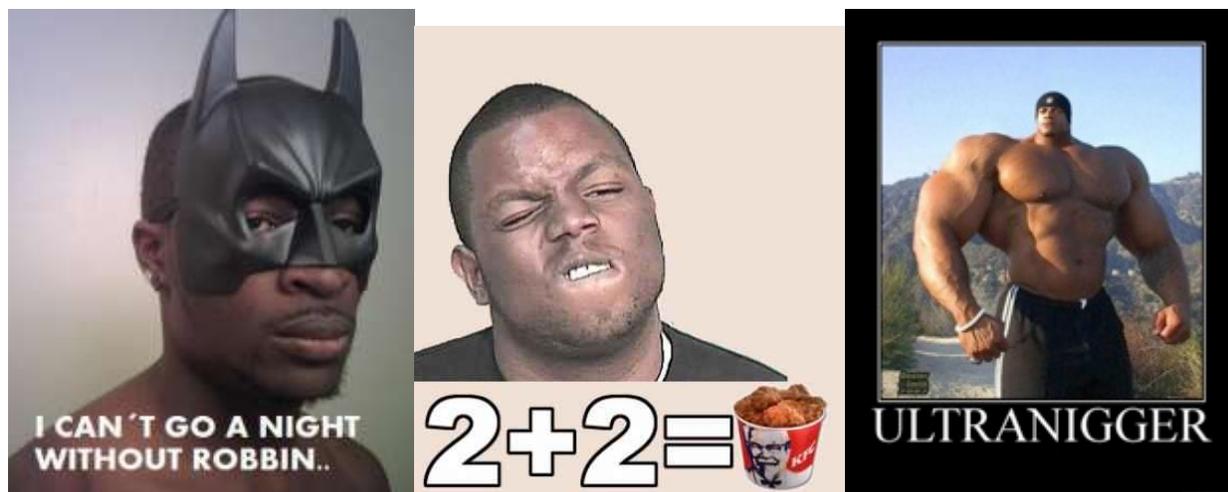
Word filter or no, the word ‘nigger’ can show up in 4chan images. It very often did:



Another derivation was common. The arguably less offensive derivative, ‘nigga’ – a reappropriation of ‘nigger’ by black culture to address a conversational partner – was often used on 4chan:

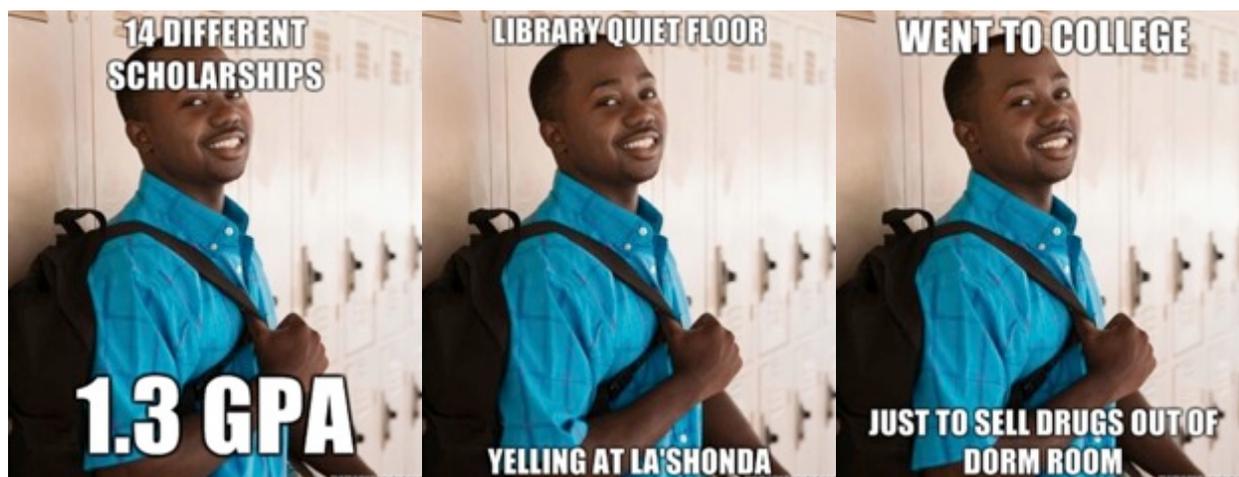


The use of ‘nigga’ might have been somewhat innocuous on 4chan, maybe even a respectful nod to the ‘coolness’ of black terminology (along with phrases like ‘haters gonna hate’). Hip-hop vernacular was often used on meme sites, and on 4chan in particular. However, there’s no denying the more overtly racist macros that made their way to 4chan:



These macros lack the ambiguity that possibly redeems Successful Black Man, or at least opens up negotiations. In these images, negative stereotypes are the force of the joke: criminality, stupidity, and raw, savage, masculinity.

Another telling example of this explicit racism comes from a macro series that only appeared in a single thread that I only observed in a single thread during my time collecting data. It was a 4chan thread entitled Community College Negro:



In many ways, the macro (which spawned dozens of transformations in its single thread) operates on the inverse of Successful Black Man. The image here, another stock photo of a smiling black man, is contrasted not by success but by failure. The same juxtaposition between

top text and bottom text exists as in Successful Black Man and other macros, but here it's used to paint a picture of underachievement and deviance. The top line in each of the images above is positive or at least neutral. The inversion that constitutes the punch line comes back to stereotypes, not away from them like in Successful Black Man. A poor GPA counters a scholarship; quiet library study is interrupted by inappropriate behavior; a higher education is an excuse to engage in criminal activity.

These stereotypes fit with a prevailing resentment on 4chan to the perceived entitlement of 'protected' minorities. Often, remixed images were used to frame intense discussions of the plight of the 'white man' in a world where he was becoming the political minority thanks to the tide of increasingly invasive class and race minorities:

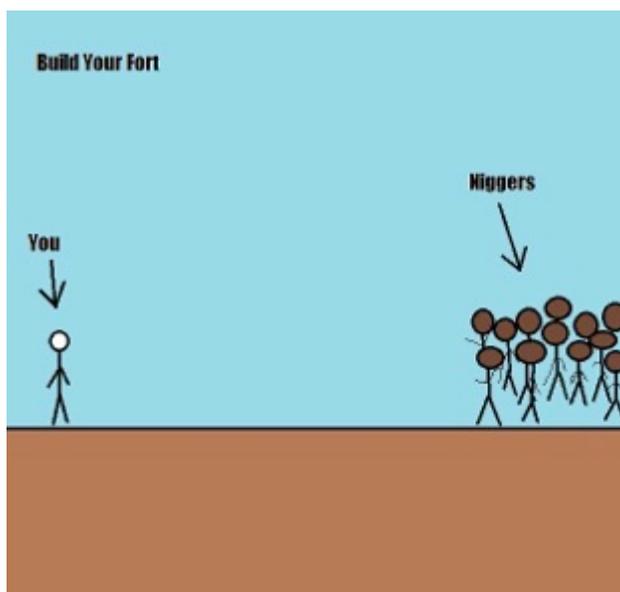


Such discussions were multisided, and stereotypes were leveled against majority populations too, like white Americans:

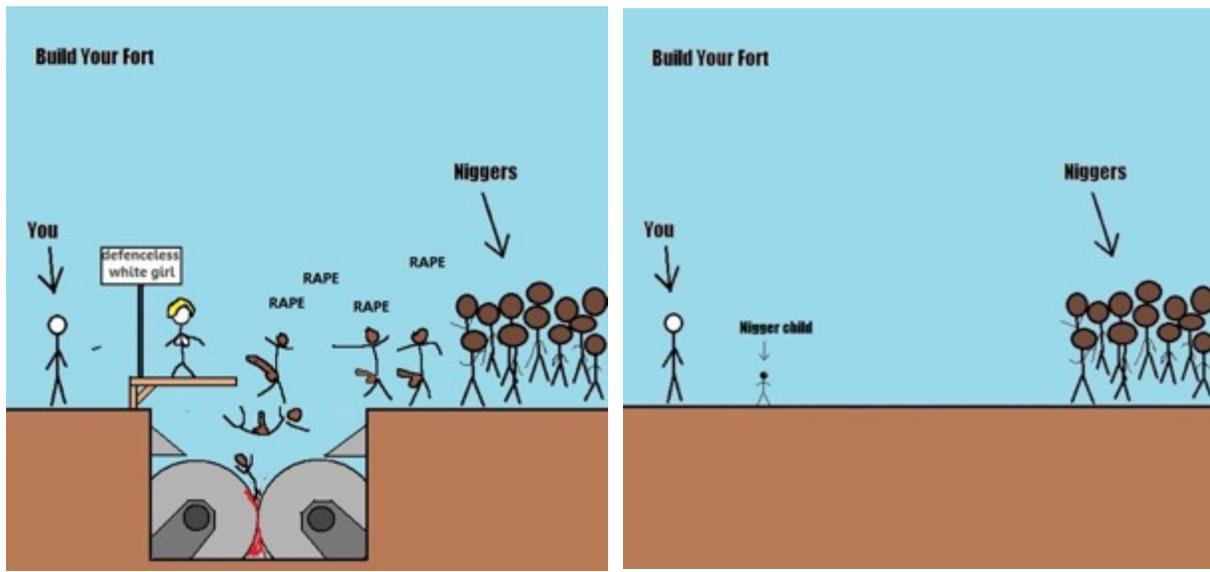


These arguments often occurred in 4chan threads that posited differences between Europe and America (lines drawn along the two dominant population centers on the site). They were critiques leveled at *national* differences, rather than racial differences. They were not an argument about minorities within a population, but about different regions of the world (the regions most dominantly white and traditionally class prosperous). By and large, discourses of race on 4chan were premised on exclusion.

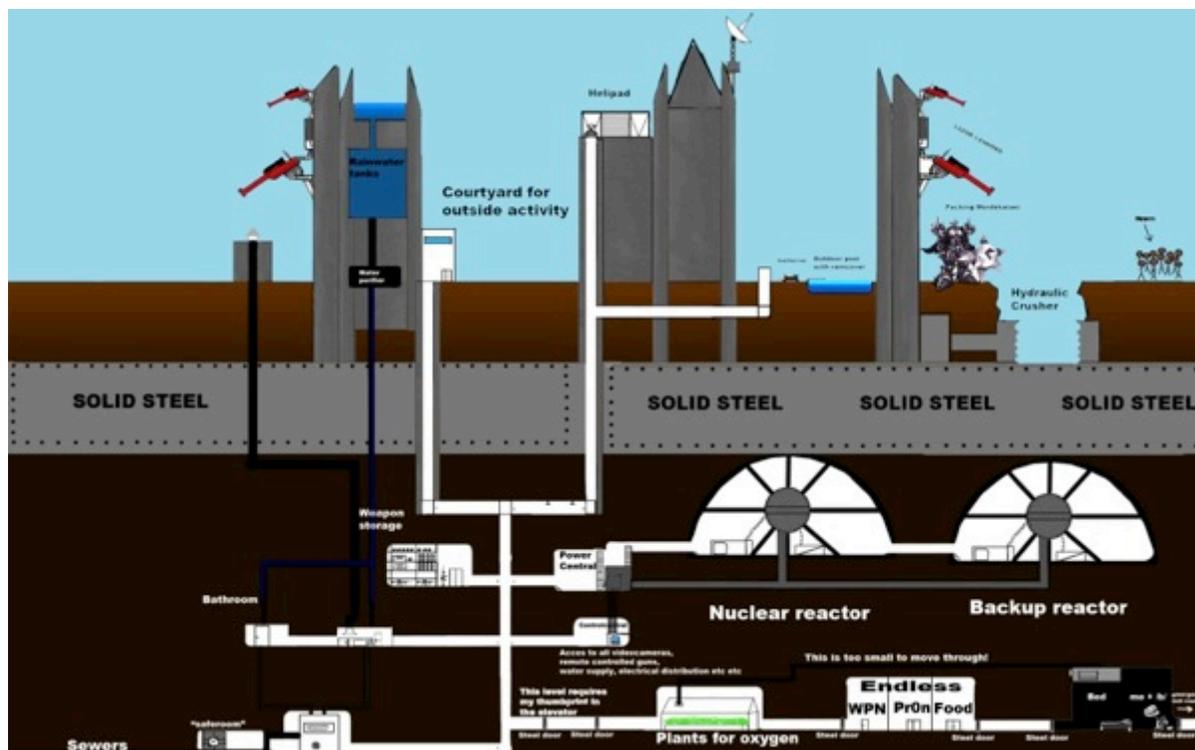
On 4chan, this racism was sometimes memetic itself. It was the stable core by which participants creatively remixed, displaying technological and subcultural literacy. For instance, one 4chan thread proposed readers ‘build their fort’ based on the following image:



The premise assumes that participants are white, and that interaction with the ‘nigger’ masses is undesirable. The OP’s challenge was for participants to use proficiency in editing and illustrating to fill in the space between participants and the threatening minorities. Racism became the premise for a memetic game. Some solutions played on prevalent stereotypes:

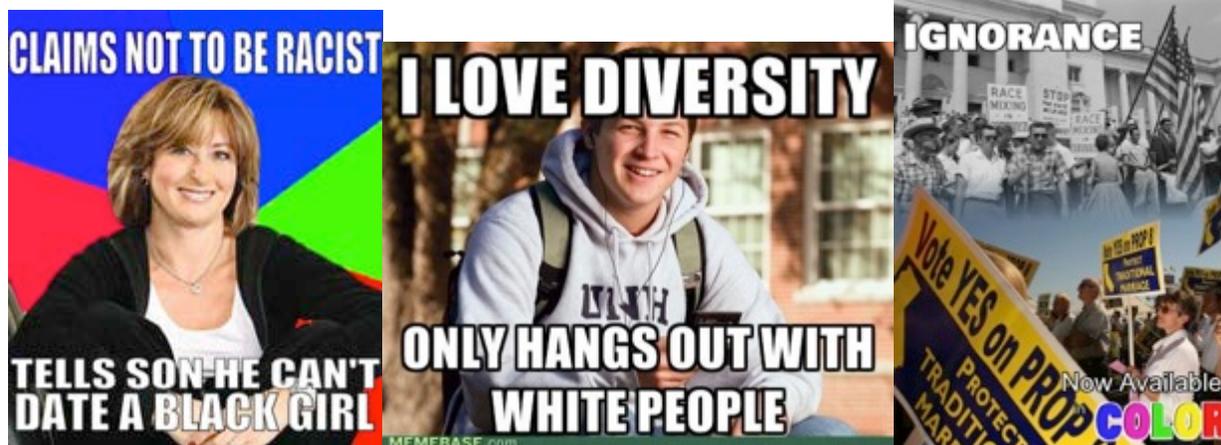


The ideas that black people cannot resist raping ‘defenseless white girls’ and will not bear responsibility for their children ‘build the fort’ here. However, the consensus ‘winner’ of the thread did not worry about stereotyping as much as providing the most complex fort from any invading threat:



For this poster, the threat was sufficient enough to merit multiple towers, lasers, underground bunkers, and solid steel reinforcement. A racist premise was used to encourage humorous contribution. Much like the KKK jokes Billig (2001) studies, 4chan posters operated in an environment where racial stereotypes were an understood and often unchallenged assumption. Whether they were just ‘trolling’ or not, whether racism was just a premise for play or not, it was still a prevalent and daunting piece of the discourse on the site.

Of course, 4chan was the notable anomaly in its explicit and often unapologetic disdain for racial minorities. There are examples of anti-racists macros. Even excluding a positive reading of Successful Black Man, racism is often skewered through macro:



Since memes are used primarily to critique and satirize, it's fitting these examples take aim at the racism of the dominant majority to speak against it. In the first post above, Sheltering Suburban Mom presents a familiar double standard. In the second, College Freshman, who could have just left Suburban Mom's house for the fall semester, behaves in a similar fashion. In the third image, discursive strands of race, sexual orientation, and social justice intertwine in a visual comparison of the dominant classes who protested racial integration and those who are protested rights in California. In these macros, much like the racist grandmother that opened this discussion, the antiquated views of the detached comfortable class are critiqued. Perhaps 4chan's more explicit racism was at least in part due to its anonymity. But it is difficult to parse out what percentage of this was due to the anonymous interaction of an unarchived site, the cultural norms of a board that has come to stand for shock and bad taste, or some combination of the two. In any case, there were a range of opinions on expressed on race and class through and around memes.

Further, even if these sites did not always live up to the ideals of a civil, civic agora, the mere fact that race and class were discussed – and often so frankly – on meme sites means they have some value as tools for engaging with difficult issues. Echoing Zuckerman (2008, March 8), maybe the offensive content means the system is working; people are contributing. Maybe the next thing to ask is how to get it to work *well*.

Gender. Much like race and class, gender discourses were predominantly created from the perspective of the dominant social group. The conventions tended to favor men and speak down to women. Much like the word ‘nigger’, the word ‘bitch’ was a favorite referential term on meme sites. In particular, the phrase ‘bitches love...’ (which may be traced back to an episode of the animated series *The Boondocks* in which a character is chatting online and claims “I sent that bitch a smiley face; bitches love smiley faces”) was remixed across several images:



While the use of ‘bitch’ here may seem innocent enough, each of these macros gives male characters the authorial voice. Shakespeare, George Washington, and Spider-Man all somewhat dismissively go about their standard business in order to impress some vague ‘bitch’. There are other examples of its use that are more antagonistic, sexual, or violent:



In the first example, the dismissiveness is more antagonistic as the hovering female in the image is distracting the male from his rational pursuit. In the second, Spider-Man has gone from spinning a web to something more direct. The third image reads “Slap a bitch: Because you too can own this look of satisfaction”. While it might be read as a satire on the misogynistic standards of another era, the context of the discourse on meme sites might counter such a reading.

For instance, one two-layered Demotivational from 4chan offers a pair of strikingly misogynistic statements (it is a fairly common practice to layer Demotivationals on top of each other, so that the original Demotivational is ‘wrapped’ in another layer of text, thus creating a pair of conversational turns commenting on the same image). In this Demotivational, a statement against domestic violence is met with two layers of dismissive derision:



The effect is jarring. The original image, and the statement it makes against domestic violence, is muted twice over. One voice quickly retorts that “30 percent of women: Should have shut the fuck up”. A second voice comes in, not to counter the first comment, but to chime in with dismissal: “More importantly: Why is this bitch out of the kitchen?”. Exemplary in its cruelty, the sentiment here is shared in other images dealing with women on other meme sites.

As evidenced in the second clause above, a common discourse when discussing females on meme sites was the “back to the kitchen” discourse. Many memes built their humor on the premise that women belonged in subjugated, domestic roles:



The first image here adds to a text-based joke, making explicit what ‘learning her place’ entails for a woman. The second shows us that a woman ‘sees the world’ when looking at a kitchen. The third image juxtaposes an intensely emotional image of a woman cowering under a man’s clenched fist with the phrase “Dishes: Do them now”. The anguish on the female’s face (it could very well find a home in an *anti* abuse pamphlet) is countered by the trivial request. The violent overreaction is an extreme example of the ‘humor’ directed at women in some memes.

The antagonism becomes most explicitly violent in *Insanity Wolf*, which often jokes about some kind of sexual assault on a female:



Insanity Wolf, as usual, operates well past the boundaries of taste or social responsibility. Rape is a taboo that fits well with the understood behavior of the character. Moreover, it fits within the accepted premises of the discourse in many macros: that women are objects rather than subjects. This means a discursive distance that is patronizing at best and violent at worst.

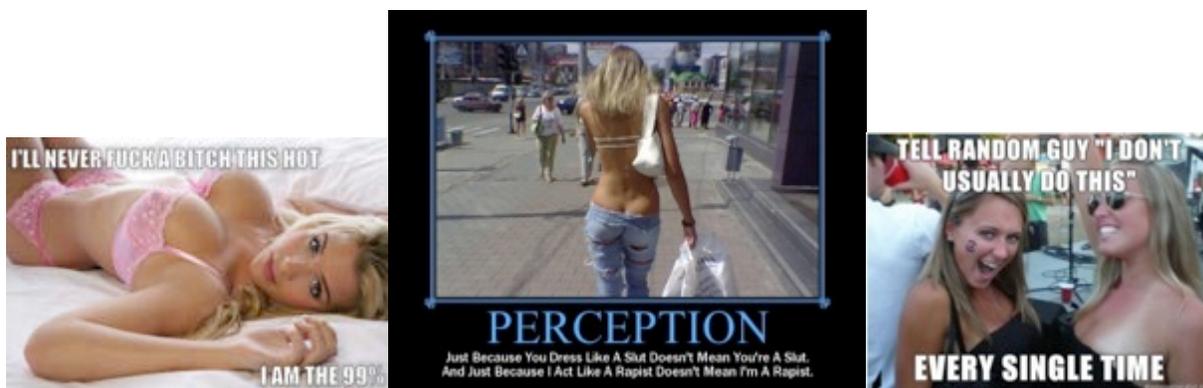
The premise also feeds into the old idea that women are stupid, irrational, and inconsistent. We've already seen this representation in *Sheltering Suburban Mom*, *First World Problems*, *Annoying Facebook Girl*, and *Idiot Nerd Girl*. Yet another macro series, called *Women Logic*, plays on perceptions of hypocrisy in how women think:



In each of the images a young, blonde, white girl stares off and lifts her hand up as if to say “what’s the big deal?”. The first post here skewers the implied double standard of women dressing provocatively but being offended when men stare. The second connects the bold statement “I’m so fat” (bold represented in this case by its brevity and large font) and the act of fishing for compliments. The third implies that spending time on Facebook is feminine, that

playing *WoW* (the online game *World of Warcraft*) is not, and that ‘woman logic’ cannot tell the hypocrisy in judging one while doing the other. The implication that all these activities are ‘woman logic’ implies a male authorial voice. The macro series is situated in contrast between how ‘women’ reason and the understood norm of sound logic. And, to note, I saw no macro during my analysis about ‘man logic’.

Of course, there exists the old sexual double standard in macros as well. Women are objects of sexual desire, but the ones who will fulfill that desire are sluts:



The ‘male gaze’ is in full effect here. The females in these images are both sexualized and othered for that sexuality. The second image, in particular, is jarring in its condemnation of female sexuality and simultaneous sympathy of rape: “Perception: Just because you dress like a slut doesn’t mean you’re a slut. And just because I act like a rapist doesn’t mean I’m a rapist”. Shock aside, macros like this are not much different than many media artifacts that give subjectivity to heterosexual males, and point that subjectivity at female objects.

Counter-intuitively, another discourse was prevalent on meme sites alongside these discourses of subjugation, violence, and stupidity. The discourse of the ‘friend zone’ existed right beside these others. The top-rated definition for ‘friend zone’ on Urban Dictionary says the friend zone comes when “you fail to impress a woman you're attracted to. Usually initiated by the woman saying, ‘You're such a good friend’”. Usually associated with long days of suffering

and watching your love interest hop from one bad relationship to another” (Urban Dictionary: Friend Zone, n.d.). Alongside discourses that disparaged women for being unworthy objects, there was a discourse that women were abusive, manipulative, and romantically neglectful of the ‘nice guys’ who were trying to be their friends. One example is a macro named Friend Zone Fiona:



As with the Woman Logic macro, the image is a prototypical ‘pretty girl’: young, thin, white, and blonde. These macros juxtapose the first clause premise and the second clause punch line to elevate hopes, and then crush them. All of them are second person. In the first image, you’re told “she loves you”, then you see her wide smile and happy face, then you learn the love is “like a brother”. Elevated hopes for romance are dashed in the turn of a phrase. It’s the same for the second and third. She thinks you’re perfect...for anyone else. She invites you over...to fix her computer. In each of these macros, the nice guy friend (the implied reader and addressee) is left with the scraps of the relationship. Friendship is seen as inferior.

The friend zone discussion was prevalent in macros, comics, and posts on Reddit, where ‘nice guys’ would often lament their limbo status in the friend zone, others would express

sympathy, and others still would push back against the concept itself. The dominant discourse, however, argued for a sort of heroism in the friend zone. It was a fail discursively attributed to subcultural insiders. Those in the friend zone were sympathized with. In one Reddit thread (which failed to garner much attention after), an OP reportedly sympathized with his friend's ill luck and birthed Friend Zone Phil:



The image – a male, dark-haired, minority, visual opposite of Friend Zone Fiona – inverts the Friend Zone Fiona joke to apply to Phil. As the picture shifts to a male image, so does the authorial voice. The ‘me’ becomes the slighted man; the ‘other’ becomes the slighting female.

Those who did their best to push beyond the friend zone were lauded, even if ironically. Similar to Friend Zone Phil, but more notable, is the case of Friend Zone Johnny. The image below is taken from a picture a Redditor found on Facebook. It rose to the top of the Reddit front page when it was posted on January 08, 2012 and received a tongue-in-cheek mixture of sympathy and derision:



With this image, ‘Friend Zone Johnny’ was born. He received memetic remix for his romantic efforts:



The examples above are notable because they take the situation to a meta level. They are all jokes about how Johnny became a meme. And become a meme he did. According to Know Your Meme, over 580 Friend Zone Johnny macros appeared on the site Quick Meme in the two days

following the initial Reddit post (“Friendzone Johnny”, n.d.). The macro quickly spread to Tumblr as well.

On January 9, the young man behind Friend Zone Johnny even did an ‘Ask Me Anything’ (called an ‘AMA’) thread on Reddit where he confirmed his identity, confirmed he did show up to his friend’s house to wish her a happy birthday, but denied he was in the friend zone. He said instead that Redditors “have it all wrong”. According to the AMA thread, he did not mind the newfound attention that came from his private social network colliding with public meme sites. He described himself, instead, as “happy I’m sorta infamous”. On his Facebook, the girl propositioned in the original photo posted her own macro in reply to the attention:



Johnny’s time in the sun was short and meme collectives lost attention shortly after. However, that Johnny rose while Phil stalled is intriguing. It could be Johnny’s compellingly specific story. It could be his quick response to the attention. It could be his acceptance of his few minutes of internet fame. It could be the meta jokes about Johnny as a meme. It could be that he’s white,

and therefore closer to the prototypical insider in meme subcultures. Whatever the case, the narrative of the friend-zoned nice guy was prevalent on meme sites as more blatantly misogynistic content. In this way, gender roles and relationships were consistently negotiated.

It's fitting then that there was a pushback against the notion of the friend-zoned nice guy. This was most pronounced on Reddit, which had a strong and vocal female contingent. This included the popular subreddit, r/TwoXChromosomes, which – to quote its own description – houses “thoughtful content – serious or silly – related to gender, and intended for girls’ perspective”. Many in and beyond r/TwoXChromosomes challenged the premises of the friend zone. They contended that cross-sex friendship is itself a fulfilling state, that ‘nice guys’ aren’t always so ‘nice’, and that niceness alone is not what lands a guy in the friend zone:



In the first post above, Futurama Fry is not sure – like always – because he doesn’t know if his friend is using him. While Fry is obviously a male character, the OP identified as female (an example of reappropriating a male figure by a female voice). In the second post, a female Redditor remixed a friend zone macro similar to Friend Zone Fiona. However, here the macro shifts the authorial voice to a female one. It was explicitly posited as a counter to all the friend zone talk happening on Reddit, and its thread inspired critiques of the ‘pseudo chivalry’ that inspires guys to be friends but get mad when that friendship doesn’t turn physical. In the third

image, Good Guy Greg – always a bastion of justice and decency – is happy to put friendship over romance.

Another push against friend zone discourse was critical of the ‘guys on the internet’ at a more fundamental level. In many macros, the prototypical contributor to internet discourse is not only male, but a geek, nerd, or loser as well:



All three of the men in these images are overweight. All three have broken with reality, leading to a WTF critique. The first is wrapped into the computer screen, and has enough soda and snack provisions to remain at his post for quite some time. The second has made a fantasy costume out of Nintendo controllers and an old bed sheet. The third has shopped a game avatar next to him, who he is casually ‘hovering’ his hand around. These behaviors are correlated with romantic failure. The first post, from Reddit, even came with a discussion about what the average Redditor complaining about women must look like. The second image combines the lingo of Role Playing Games (reaching, in this case, level 14) with a lack of sexual success. The third explicitly outlines how lonely the creator of this photo must be (so ‘nerd’ that he has to ‘hover hand’ his ‘imaginary’ girlfriend instead of actually putting his hand on her shoulder). Such attributions fit “one of the central archetypes of computing subculture, which continues to this day” (Gere, 2002, p. 132). ‘The net’ as a subculture has long been seen as the domain of “the intellectually

advanced by socially and sexually awkward male, who is prepared to devote most of his time to an engagement with the possibilities of digital technology, to the exclusion of almost anything else” (p. 132).

Many Advice Animals also deal with a lack of romantic success from a male perspective.

This is more common than those cataloguing romantic triumph:



Foul Bachelor Frog responds to his romantic failures by tunneling deeper into internet subculture (another proposed break from reality). College Freshman is not as romantically successful as he would like to imply. Socially Awkward Penguin is clearly over his head when trying to communicate with females. These images blur fail and WTF lines, simultaneously sympathizing with romantic failure and critiquing the geek tendencies that spawn the failure. The preponderance of evidence from these macros suggests that the type of male resonating on meme sites was less stereotypically masculine and less romantically sure. On 4chan they often used the language of ‘alphas’ and ‘betas’ to describe those that succeed with women and those too scared to. Many on 4chan boards identified with ‘betas’.

However, even in macros like the ones above, male is the invisible norm. Critiques of hypocritical women are critiques of *women*, arguing for a shortcoming inherent to the entirety of the gender. Critiques of out-of-touch men are often critiques of *geeks*, only a specific subset of men. Even Scumbag Steve – hardly a geek – isn’t a representative of *men*, but of scumbags. The

male identity is not the salient one in these critiques the way female identity is in ‘woman logic’ memes. In meme collectives, the male perspective was the default perspective, the individualized position compared to the othered group. Even ten years later, the ghost of Kendall’s (2002) BlueSky MUD lingers.

But there was also room for broader negotiations on gender identities in meme collectives. As these friend zone discussions show, gender was open for debate and contestation on meme sites, even if patriarchal standards were the norm. There are several memes that oppose stereotypes on female behavior and male/female relationships:



In the first post above, an Advice Animal called Sir Courage Wolf, Esquire turns the ‘bitches love’ meme on its head. This is fitting for an Advice Animal that is itself a stereotypically British derivative of the standard Courage Wolf character. Sir Courage Wolf, Esquire does not give ‘bitches’ anything. He gives ‘dignified ladies’ tea, since dignified ladies love tea. The second macro is an homage to Eowyn, the strong female character from *The Lord of the Rings*. While the original dialogue from the film has the villainous wraith (top) saying “I fear no man”, and Eowyn (bottom) removing her masked helmet to say “I am no man” before besting the beast, this remix nods to net culture. ‘Come at me bro’ is another favorite net saying, used to express challenge or antagonism. Here, it expresses the same sentiment as “I fear no man”, and allows

Eowyn the same trump. This is a prescient contrast in a subculture that coined the phrase ‘there are no girls on the internet’.

The third images is another intertextual claim, this time a critique. The alien in the image is Reddit’s logo, called The Reddit Alien. The hat, of course, is Scumbag Steve’s. The two images combine to become Scumbag Redditor, which offers a critique to the antisocial behaviors of Redditors. This image argues against a double standard. It critiques the assumption that a man’s behavior is individual while a woman’s is indicative of an inherent gender trait. This macro fits with social identity research about ingroup bias and assuming uniformity in the outgroup (Fiedler & Schmid, 2001; Harwood & Giles, 2005; Rothbart, 2001).

There are also Rage Comics from a female perspective. There is a prominent catalogue of female Rage Faces on sites like Rage Maker, and even gendered hair templates to place over non-specifically female characters (though the default faces are often male; ‘female’ faces are the same face just with feminine hair placed over them). [r/TrollXChromosomes](#) (a play on [r/TwoXChromosomes](#)) is, according to their page, “a subreddit for Rage Comics and other memes with a girl slant”. As of April 2012, their subscriber count read ‘12,118 girls on the internet’, countering the claim that ‘there’s no girls on the internet’. Females have their own WTF moments in Rage Comics. For instance, boyfriends are often charged with relational inadequacy as much as girlfriends:



The first comic features a drunken boyfriend who is so incoherent he cannot even properly exit the party with his girlfriend. This prompts skeptical eyes (panel one) and eventually a face palm (panel three). The second comic tells the story of a juvenile boyfriend who can't resist punctuating meal preparation with a bacon assault. The top comment on the thread was "that's how male Redditors propose".

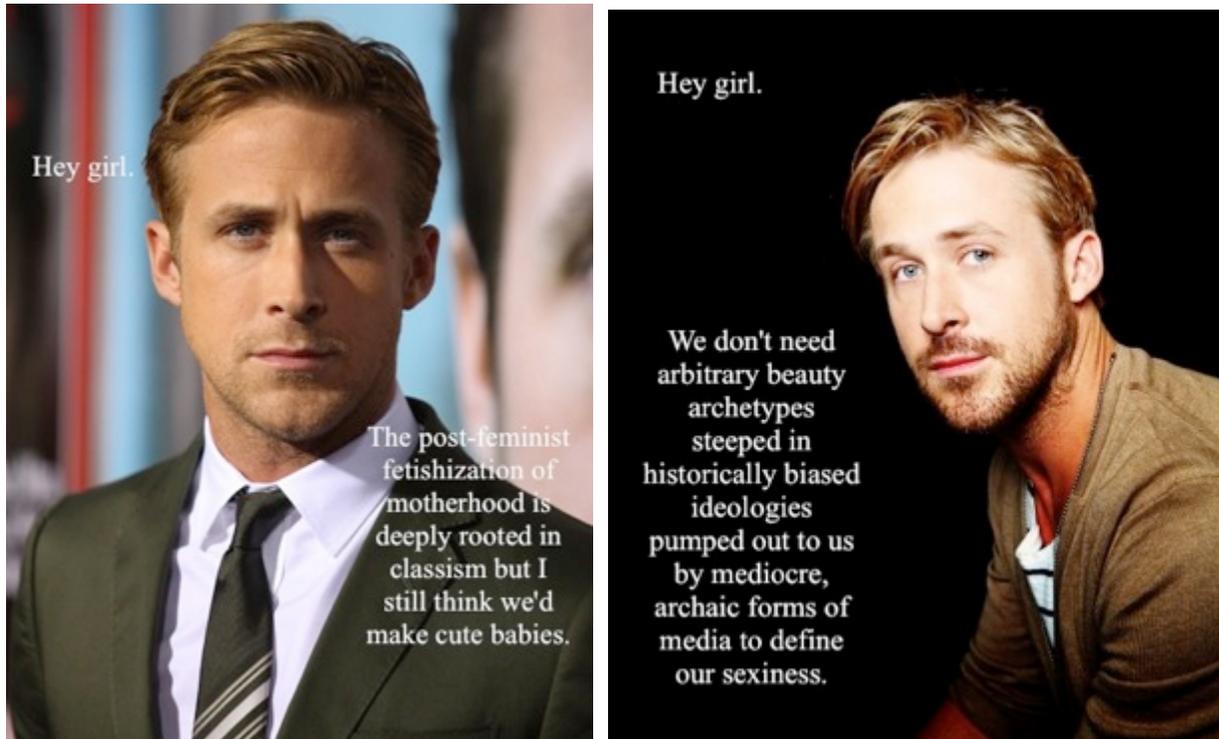
However, there are also Rage Comics told from a female perspective that cast the other as a female, then judge her based on criteria you might assume was reserved for a male misogynist:



In each of these comics a female OP critiques another female in terms that essentialize gender. They both end with an astonished female gasping at the irrationality of another female. In the first, the WTF is an argument for a double-standard between expressing distaste for ‘sluts’ and then dressing provocatively. The second features a friend the OP has apparently been too honest with about her looks, rating her a 6.5 out of 10. The OP’s final reaction to her friend’s anger is an intentional juxtaposition. That a female would comment on the stupefying thought processes of ‘bitches’ makes the joke. It also plays into a discursive norm about women right in line with the geek masculinity articulated by Kendall (2002). It’s a woman astonished at ‘woman logic’.

On another site (and perhaps not coincidentally so), there were more examples of memes that actively challenged misogynistic accounts of male/female relationships, and even offered a counter example to the claim that net culture is a male subculture. On Tumblr, many memes

were shared that seemed to offer an authorial voice to females. One notable example is a tumblr called ‘Feminist Ryan Gosling’, which adds romantic text over pictures of the heartthrob movie star, Ryan Gosling:



These text-heavy macros are a play on yet another Gosling themed tumblr called ‘Fuck Yeah Ryan Gosling’, which couples the same ‘hey girl’ premise and attractive photo of Gosling with more traditionally romantic phrases (‘I still get nervous when I hold your hand’, or ‘I can’t wait to get home and give you a foot massage’). However, Feminist Ryan Gosling is notable in that it takes the same premise to simultaneously express romanticism and critique predominant notions of it. It uses meme conventions and applies them to less misogynistic ends.

Still, even Fuck Yeah Ryan Gosling could be written to satirize stereotypical females:



This image lacks some of the emancipatory potential of the accounts above. It implies negative female stereotypes about gossip and cattiness. This image might have been written by a male OP or a female one. No matter the case, it demonstrates that even negotiated formats can be reappropriated to fit dominant stereotypes.

But this multi-sided use could be a sign of vibrancy. Regardless of the content of the image, macros often spawned debate in the comments that followed them. A post on Reddit that proposed a female inconsistency was hotly contested:



The title of the thread was “it’s shit like this, women...”. It’s another term common on meme sites, particularly Reddit. The ellipses could be filled in with “that makes me mad” or “that makes me not like you”. Here, the OP was expressing a contradiction between how a woman looks and how good she is in bed. The corresponding thread to the image featured multiple angles of commentary and discussion. Many critiqued the premise on different grounds. Some dismissed the objectification of the premise. Some did not mention the sexism, but only argued the OP’s claim was not true. Others accepted the premise and tried to determine why it held true. Others went about debating if the girl on the left was ugly, or just had a bad picture taken. So even though it’s easy to see the image as socially irresponsible, it did spawn an explicit argument about gender norms and standards.

This contestation was common on Reddit, and race and gender were of prevalent focus in these debates. For instance, a subreddit called ‘Shit Reddit Says’ ([r/ShitRedditSays](https://www.reddit.com/r/ShitRedditSays)) catalogues offensive Redditor’s comments and their comment karma:



SHITREDDITSAYS

hot new controversial top saved links saved

fArtistry contest!!! MOD PORTRAITS ends 4/19

- 1 -82
 ↓
 Redditor on Eugenics, "let's be realistic; there's nothing wrong with eugenics. It's just one of the many things that the Nazis screwed up for everyone." [+6] (reddit.com)
(138|60) submitted 11 hours ago by SuddenlyRacism ()
 44 comments share save hide report spam [I+c]
- 2 -12
 ↓
 "Men of Reddit: What's the most unmanly thing you own?" "My wife" [+45] (self:ShitRedditSays)
(27|16) submitted 3 hours ago by AlyoshaV ~Silver Medal of Thoughtcrime~ () far left gynecologist/gynarchist
 1 comment share save hide report spam [I=c]
- 3 -56
 ↓
 "guys aren't going to fight over a fat girl." [+43/-7] (reddit.com)
(93|40) submitted 11 hours ago by claudevanspam ()
 9 comments share save hide report spam [I+c]
- 4 -25
 ↓
 "We're pretending to care because she's hot. Go ahead downvote me." [+236] (reddit.com)
(46|22) submitted 7 hours ago by Able_Seacat_Simon () Balla Ass Goon
 10 comments share save hide report spam [I+c]
- 5 -34
 ↓
 r/NBA tries to follow r/NFL's lead and ban racist and homophobic slurs. Commenters cry "free speech!" Top comment: "I post here all day. Your rules are just gay." [+142] (reddit.com)
(64|27) submitted 10 hours ago by The_MadStork () You can't censor me!
 69 comments share save hide report spam [I+c]
- 6 -73
 ↓
 "What is it when you're sexually attracted to every race but your own?" "Being black." [+94] (reddit.com)
(135|64) submitted 14 hours ago by BobHardyTheBassist ()
 61 comments share save hide report spam [I+c]
- 7 -5
 ↓
 Girls having goofy fun? "All of those pornos were real!" [+132], "If he didn't get at least 1 of their phone numbers I hereby revoke his man card for life" [+122] (reddit.com)
(15|9) submitted 2 hours ago by eatingIcecream ()
 4 comments share save hide report spam [I+c]
- 8 -8
 ↓
 Great thread by the LoL community : that's not racism if you hate brazilians & koreans just because they don't speak your language ! (or call them retards). (reddit.com)

The submissions to the subreddit were mostly racist or sexist posts with jarringly high karma.

When jokes about rape or violent black guys were upvoted, Shit Reddit Says catalogued the remarks and offered commentary on the social irresponsibility of the discriminatory discourse.

This may be the ultimate summation to social representations in memes. Just like race and class discourses, discourses on gender were problematic, but open for subtle negotiations. A dominant white masculinity is hard to deny, but there was space to challenge that norm, and to use the discursive norms of the subculture to turn those norms on their head.

Who Wins and Why

This chapter asked how memes represented social identities. The first answer is that meme subcultures have established implicit ground rules for evaluating a social situation, for telling a story, or for categorizing a group. Discourses of fail, WTF, and win are evaluations of

self and other with identity implications. They are the criteria for arguing specific social identities filled specific social roles. Some identities are represented with the eye of a sympathetic insider; some identities are cast as outsider foils. However, these positions are not written in stone. There is room for negotiation within these representations. Even if participants in meme subcultures were speaking the same language, even if that language favored some perspectives over others, there was room to say new things. Perspectives that spoke the language were more likely to win, to get attention and become part of the discourse.

From within that language though, multiple voices engaged. There were quite a few examples of antagonism based on oppositional social identity. Mouffe (2005) cites the use of the ‘moral register’ by extreme right wing discourse as a sign of unhealthy ‘friend/enemy’ engagement. The sexism and racism on 4chan in particular demonstrates this. It certainly was not ‘civil’, even by Papacharissi’s (2004) forgiving standards. On other sites, it existed as well, even if in less extreme measures. However, in some regards this antagonism is endemic of broader discourses. To van Zoonen (2005), “sexism and racism, therefore, are not sufficient allegations to exclude popular culture from the political field, for one would have to exclude much run-of-the-mill ‘serious’ journalism and policy documents as well” (p. 151). The same could be said here. The worst examples of sexism and racism in 4chan’s discourse were certainly evidence we don’t quite live in the utopian post-discrimination world we’d like. However, that these representations were so often challenged on other sites is a sign of the importance of participation in public discourse. Reddit, in particular, housed quite a bit of diverse engagement with these hot-button issues. Mediated cultural participation does afford the ability to express the worst of us, but it also affords a place to push back against those expressions. In both cases, public discussion of these issues tells us more than censorship or silence, so participation is

worth more than quiet disengagement. Participation is essential to agonistic engagement between conflicting social identities. The memes cited here demonstrate the potential for agonism, even if that agonism often dipped into antagonism.

Maybe it's best to remember that 'internet culture' is not a monolith, even if meme collectives do demonstrate dominant ideologies. Multiple nuanced perspectives are advanced through meme. Successful Black Man demonstrates this in a single macro. And Reddit housed both r/TwoXChromosomes subreddit and a less popular subreddit devoted to 'Beating Women' (r/BeatingWomen). The ultimate answer to how memes represent social identities is that they do so through dominant discourses, through representations of fail, WTF, and win. Within those dominant discourses, there is room for negotiations over prominent social issues like class, race, and gender. Meme collectives were no participatory utopia, but they did open up a place for critique and discussion. This critique and discussion will be the focus of the next chapter, on political commentary through memes.

CHAPTER SIX

Politics: Polyvocal Participation and Pop Savvy Commentary

Polyvocal Participation

Memes mobilized. Expanding on the everyday representations that are amply represented in meme subcultures, this chapter focuses on political participation. If amateur media are going to foster democratic participation, then it's vital this participation has political dimensions. Therefore, this chapter asks:

RQ3: How are political perspectives articulated through memes?

The last two chapters focused on memes and the social politics of everyday life, so there's ample evidence memes are used to make broadly political points. Memes can be sharp forms of satire. Whether or not we agree with the points made through them, there's evidence they function as commentary on social and cultural realities. This chapter focuses on how memes function as parts of political argument. Memes can be used to support complex back and forth debates over political issues.

In this chapter, I will address two dimensions of political participation through meme. First, I will examine the polyvocal participation found in memes. Even though memes exist in mediated subcultures dominated by specific social identities, there is room for political commentary and critique. Second, I will demonstrate that this commentary is exemplary for its pop savvy. As intertextual and interdiscursive combinations of popular culture and political commentary, memes allow for diverse participation in public dialogue.

This chapter will focus primarily on two political strands popular during the spring and fall of 2011. First are Western relations with the Middle East. The Arab Spring protests, the death of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, and the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center all became topics of international discussion and were prevalently discussed in meme collectives. Second was the Occupy Wall Street movement. As the protests against economic disparity and the corporate influence in politics spread from New York across the nation and globe, memes were at the forefront of the discussion. Both of the sections that follow – on polyvocal participation and pop savvy commentary – will feature discussions of Western relations with the Middle East and the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Discussing the news. First though, it's worth establishing that memes are prevalently mobilized to political ends. When it comes to politics, memes are used to represent multiple perspectives on multiple political issues. Much like with social identities, there are dominant discourses, which still make room for negotiated representations. For instance, we have seen that US President Barack Obama is a popular subject in memes. This is sometimes supportive (these were all shared in response to the death of bin Laden):



The first post shows Obama laughing, with a supposition that it will be difficult for the Republicans to win the 2012 presidential election. The second shows Obama leaving the red-carpeted room where he gave the announcement of bin Laden's death, with the hashtag 'swag'

imposed over it. In the third, the famous ‘fist bump’ between Obama and his wife, Michelle, is crosscut with supportive dialogue (even as it is marked for race, gender, and class).

But Obama macros are also at times critical. All three of the posts below criticize Obama for being too similar politically to his predecessor, George W. Bush:



The first image spells out this link explicitly. The second uses a mix of Photoshop and 4chan vernacular. The image is a hybrid of Obama’s face and Bush’s. It’s labeled ‘samefag’, a term used on 4chan to charge that multiple anonymous posts have the same author (‘fag’ was a common nominal suffix on 4chan: a ‘newfag’ is a new poster, an ‘oldfag’ is a long-time poster, a ‘summerfag’ is a high-school-age poster who disrupts 4chan’s norms with inexperience during summer break). If a post in a thread comes in and obviously echoes an earlier one, then another participant might declare both posts are from the ‘samefag’. The implication is that even if Obama claims to be a different type of politician, he’s essentially the same as Bush. Further, he’s trying to deceive us by saying he’s not. The last image points out that though Obama’s race is different than Bush’s (again, race is a marked trait), his policies are similar. This sort of back and forth over politics was common in memes subcultures. In each of these images, meme conventions are applied to explicitly political ends.

American politics are certainly not the only issues covered via meme. During my observations, memes tended to spike with current events. Events that captured American attention received disproportionate meme coverage, but participants from the UK and Australia in particular would participate as well (during the heyday of quarterback Tim Tebow coverage in the US, a European Redditor got to the front page with a macro asking “WTF is a Tebow?”). In general, if it made news in the US, it was covered on meme sites. For instance, the London Riots that occurred in August 2011 were a source of creative inspiration on meme sites. They were a sort of canvas, a backdrop used to make a playful or political point:



These three images all can be read as critical responses to the riots. The first is explicitly so. Its text makes an accusation of hypocrisy among rioters while featuring an image of what appears to be a young rioter casually browsing jeans being looted. The second is a play on the fact that the Olympics will be held in London in summer 2012. Here, a rioter is looting the iconic Olympic logo.

The third intertwines three pieces of information in order to craft a comment. First is the iconic cover of The Beatles’ *Abbey Road*. Second is the shopped juxtaposition of the cover with image of a burned out city street from the riots. The third comes from the text that floats above the image. The iconic Beatle’s lyric ‘all you need is love’ serves to offer another layer of

commentary. The connotations of those lyrics, and even the abstract notion of love is a contrast to the thick smoke rising behind the word. This commentary – from a Canvas thread – took multiple posts to create. Beatles cover, fiery background, and overlaying text were added in different layers as the image was annotated in a multi-participant back and forth. In this way, multiple participants furthered the discussion by annotating the same image. Formal literacy meant the potential to engage in the political discussion. In a single image, multiple conversational ‘turns’ are represented. Further than single-turn commentaries or representations, this chapter will demonstrate that memes were used to have conversations about political issues. Polyvocal participation occurred as meme literacy was applied to political events.

Osama, Obama, and partial perspectives on the Middle East. On the sites in this corpus, participants primarily engaged from Western perspectives. However, even from this limited perspective, international events were commented on and international comparisons were made. In this stacked still, a series of images is used to compare what prompts riots in the ‘third world’ vs. the ‘first world’ (this echoes the class commentary provided through First World Problems macros):

WHY PEOPLE RIOT?

3rd WORLD COUNTRIES



OVERTHROW DICTATOR



POVERTY



FREEDOM OF SPEECH

1st WORLD COUNTRIES



CHRISTMAS PRESENTS



HOCKEY



NEW PAIR OF JEANS

kill your time on 9GAG.COM

This image sets up an easy binary between the social justice struggles of those in the ‘third world’ rioting for political freedom, economic prosperity, and personal expression, and the ‘first world’ where riots occur for trivial reasons like Black Friday, hockey championships, and a ‘new pair of jeans’. If ‘first world problems’ are complaints over nothing, these first world riots are violence over nothing.

This image, produced on the heels of the Arab Spring and in the midst of the London Riots, demonstrates how prevalent the Middle Eastern World was as a focus in political memes.

It was, after all, an eventful year politically for the region. There were protests, military strikes, toppled dictators, and the ongoing American military action in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even with a whole world of events to comment on, participants on meme sites kept coming back to political actions in the Middle East. The Western perspectives on these sites means this commentary is prescient. It's a looking glass into the international evaluations of a socially limited subculture. Despite their Western leanings, meme sites were still a place for relatively diverse political perspectives to discuss varied opinions about the Middle East. As with issues of social identity, this diversity was more evident in some cases than others, and existed within generally dominant discourses.

The death of Osama bin Laden. Commentary on the death of bin Laden is evidence of this qualified polyvocality, of a political back and forth happening both in and around internet memes. Shortly after 1:00 am local time on May 2, 2011, terrorist leader Osama bin Laden was killed by US Special Forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Bin Laden had long been one of the FBI's most wanted. When Obama announced bin Laden's death, the world reacted strongly. In America, many gathered in public places to cheer and celebrate. Other Americans were not as comfortable with these celebrations. International reactions reflected this continuum. Meme collectives were a part of this international reaction, even if they were a limited and partisan in their reactions. As with questions of process in Chapter Four and questions of identity in Chapter Five, participation was open, but with caveats. Knowing how to participate in meme discourses was still a prerequisite, and there were still dominant discourses that had to be negotiated by minority opinions.

In regards to potential polyvocality, the Western dominance on these sites is a fundamental hurdle. The international event – which happened in Pakistan to a man born in

Saudi Arabia, who coordinated terror cells across nations, and who was a catalyst for military action in Afghanistan and Iraq – was coded discursively from an a Western lens and compared to other Western events. While the death of bin Laden was multinational, with multinational implications, its resulting commentary on meme sites is a reminder that the ‘global village’ is not so decidedly global. While internet penetration in the US is around 78 percent, penetration in Afghanistan and Pakistan hovers around 3 percent (“Internet World Stats”, 2011). When an American military action is carried out in Pakistan, the US will have a larger representation in the discourse occurring online. Even if this was not the case, people tend to cluster their internet use around their own nation, culture, or language (see Danet & Herring, 2007), so in America on American meme sites, the bin Laden death discourse was predominantly Americentric.

This discourse began even as soon as Obama was addressing the American population the night the news broke. It persisted for days after. 4chan and Reddit were particularly quick in their responses to the news.



Within minutes of the announcement, 4chan’s /b/ board had changed its boilerplate from ‘/b/ - Random’ to ‘AMERICA FUCK YEAH’. An all caps ‘MISSION ACCOMPLISHED’ image was pinned to the top of the page. When the site was accessed, the song ‘America (Fuck Yeah)’

(from the cult movie *Team America*) played on a loop. On Reddit, one Rage Comic commented on Reddit's traditional flurry of activity after breaking national or international news. Cereal Guy's mundane activity is interrupted and he switches to the wide-eyed Astonished Guy with his dropped jaw.

The memes produced around bin Laden's death displayed multiple perspectives. However, the majority took a celebratory position, often relying on the established textual and subcultural practice of captioning pictures of Obama himself. In this way, an established corpus of artifacts was mobilized quickly. Discursive practices already the norm on meme sites could be applied to more explicitly political ends. The interdiscursive timing of the event was not lost on meme creators. Memes contrasted Obama's success with his recent birth-certificate struggles. Donald Trump, a Republican Presidential contender at the time, had been pressuring Obama to produce his birth certificate and prove his US Citizenship. Trump leading the charge, the weeks before the death of bin Laden were wrought with major media coverage of the controversy. In the memes below, Obama responds to the charges:



The images above are each a flattering picture of Barack Obama, captioned with equally flattering text. In the texts, Obama is direct, confident, and prone to swear. He is remixed into a sort of cowboy action hero, direct in his language and his action, too busy saving the day to deal with petty political trifles. Obama contrasts the heroics of his military victory with the triviality

of quibbles about his birth certificate. This portrayal of Obama in the days and weeks following the death of bin Laden was particularly popular on Reddit and Canvas.

During the days following the death of bin Laden, considerable connection was made between Obama and the preceding American president, George W. Bush. These portrayals were markedly different than the ‘samefag’ charges above. Bush was the president in office when bin Laden masterminded the 9/11 attacks, and he was the president who began the military campaign in Afghanistan to eliminate the terrorist leader. Bush left office with that goal unfulfilled. This failure was emphasized multiple times through meme. The three below use Bush’s iconic ‘mission accomplished’ banner to make a discursive contrast. The banner was draped behind Bush when he gave a speech on an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf on the alleged end of major combat operations in Iraq:



The speech was given May 1, 2003, almost precisely eight years before the execution of bin Laden. The eight years of persistent military combat after the banner was unfurled made the image an icon for those arguing against prolonged military intervention in the Middle East, or those critical of Bush’s handling of the military engagements post 9/11. By May 2, 2011, Obama was tied to the banner through meme:



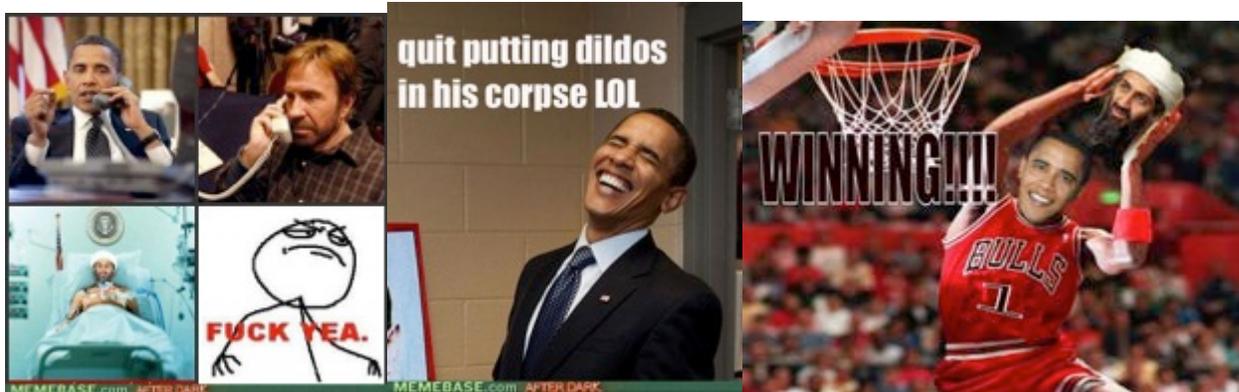
Obama is smiling widely in the first two images as he rewrites the story of the banner, asking ‘George’ where it is in one and standing proudly standing in front of it (instead of Bush) in the next. In the third image, his smiling face pops up in front of Bush’s own speech. His quote ‘FTFY’ is net subculture shorthand for ‘fixed that for you’. It’s a phrase used when modifying the quote of a previous poster for clarity, correctness, commentary, or humor. Obama is letting Bush know he fixed the ‘mission accomplished’ bungle for him. That this banner was originally unfurled in response to missions in Iraq, not in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or even specifically directed at bin Laden was less important than the fact it’s a synecdoche for the failure of Bush military policy. Across these memes, Obama represented American strength and success.

Inverting Obama’s heroism, bin Laden was portrayed as cowardly, passive, and out of control of his own fate:



In the first image, bin Laden's material comforts are ironically contrasted to his ideals. The top text posits the living situations of his followers; the bottom text emphasizes his. The 'Bitch Please' Rage Face is given a makeshift beard in the second image. The image, paired with text on bin Laden's 'hide and seek' prowess trivializes his leadership abilities. The crude beard stenciled in over an established Rage Face is suggestive. It implies a quick creation, given little special consideration. It's as if the 'Bitch Please' Rage Face captured sufficient sentiment to apply to bin Laden (the face is often used to either express a moment of win or a moment of fail that you're not letting phase you). In this way, an established face familiar to those subcultural insiders on meme creation sites flexed into specific political commentary with little trouble. The 'Bitch Please' face perhaps seemed an appropriate image to attach to a violent terrorist leader 'making his followers hide in caves' while he 'spends ten years in a mansion'. It also could be a dig at American inability to dispatch of the enemy, since it took ten years for Americans to engage with bin Laden and his 'Bitch Please' hubris. The third images shops bin Laden's head onto the poster of the comedy *Weekend at Bernie's*, where two men fool the community into thinking a dead man is still alive by dressing him up and walking him around like a puppet. The addition of bin Laden's decapitated Arab head into an American poster means two Americans now have control over bin Laden's destiny. He's been inserted as a comedic plaything in a Western comedy.

Osama's weakness, combined with Obama's strength led to memes that contrasted American power with the passivity of bin Laden:



Violence dominates the portrayals in these images. Internet hero Chuck Norris leaves bin Laden bruised; staffers violate his corpse; Obama himself slams bin Laden's head through a basketball rim as the (Charlie Sheen inspired) phrase 'winning!!!!' annotates the image. These images take the celebration of death and violence to its furthest end, explicitly and specifically focusing on the act of taking bin Laden's life.

But the sentiment on meme collectives was not universally pro-American, even if support did edge out other perspectives, and even if most of the people engaging in the discourse tended to center on the West. 4chan's bold 'AMERICA FUCK YEAH' boilerplate and its pinned 'Missioned Accomplished' image could be read seriously, as a sincere congratulation of American military victory. They also could be read ironically, as a tongue-in-cheek commentary on American hubris and ethnocentrism. 4chan was generally anti outgroup, but it is also generally anti government. It was also generally pro irony. And there was prevalent negative sentiment on 4chan about bin Laden's death. It was expressed with the typical 4chan mix of analysis and ad hominem, with images used like a cherry on top. The following are 4chan screenshots that critique the events of the night and American response to them:

File : [1304310736.jpg](#)-(41 KB, 560x375)



Anonymous 05/02/11(Mon)00:32:16 No.326270058 [\[Reply\]](#)

Am I honestly supposed to believe this bullshit Obama is feeding me?

Lets take a huge fucking step back and look at this.

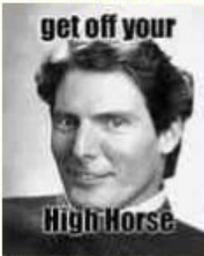
Supposedly, a national enemy, that has evaded capture from the most powerful nation on earth for ten years, was located, caught, and killed a year before a presidential election.

Either he's not actually dead (how the fuck would the public find out?) or

Obama has been waiting to release this information as his ace-in-the hole to be reelected.

The worst part about this is that 99% of the American population will eat this shit up and give Obama credit where it isn't deserved. If Osama is actually dead, Obama doesn't deserve any fucking credit. Where are the men who put their lives on the line to kill Osama? Those are the people that Americans should be thanking. Not Obama. But I digress.

File : [1304308689.jpg](#)-(2 KB, 130x162)



Anonymous 05/01/11(Sun)23:58:09 No.326263668 [\[Reply\]](#)

Hi America, Rest Of World here. I'm here to tell you, we don't give a flying fuck if you shitniggering wankstains killed Osama.

I mean, suuuuure. One of your soldiers shot some fucking 70 year old terrorist, real fucking achievement, bro.

Now you can add another murder to your talley of bullshit that you've done over the years.

Did someone say Japan? I heard someone say Japan.

In the end, you're not gonna be remembered for all the 'good things' you done, you'll be remembered as those fucking shits who bomb enemies who have pretty much surrendered,

AFTER a war has ended, shoot their own allies, **AND THEIR OWN TROOPS**, and who shoot old men, then gloat about it.

You are all faggots, I hope the Al-Qieda fucking bomb the shit out of your nigger country.

These two posts, one told from an American perspective and one from an international perspective, both critique American action. The method of argument in the second screen capture is raw, racist, and ad hoministic (4chan staples), but certainly a counter to pro-American sentiment. Both also employ images to round out the critique. In the first post, a characteristic Obama photo is juxtaposed with a text critiquing him. In the second text, an image macro – making fun of the horse-riding accident that made actor Christopher Reeves quadriplegic – is used to critique American celebration.

On 4chan, several images were used to critique the methods of Obama's execution, and the American celebration of it. Across meme sites American militarism and interventionism was a topic of debate and critique in the wake of the bin Laden death:



In the first image, the OP argues Good Guy Greg would have ‘set all blasters to stun’, applying sci-fi advice about taking prisoners alive. The macro corresponds to complaints – both domestic and abroad – that the US executed a prisoner who deserved a trial when they killed bin Laden, rather than killing an enemy combatant in battle. In this conception of Good Guy Greg, Greg

would have taken the prisoner. The second image is a specific type of stacked still where the image gradually zooms in as readers move down panels, before pulling back out to a humorous change in the initial image for the last panel. We begin by seeing a TSA agent addressing a crowd in the airport. We zoom in closer (we are zooming in on her badge). As we pull out for the last panel, all passengers have been replaced by little bin Ladens. The implication is that to the TSA we're all little bin Ladens. The third image features a silhouetted bomber, which violently promises "democracy will come to you".

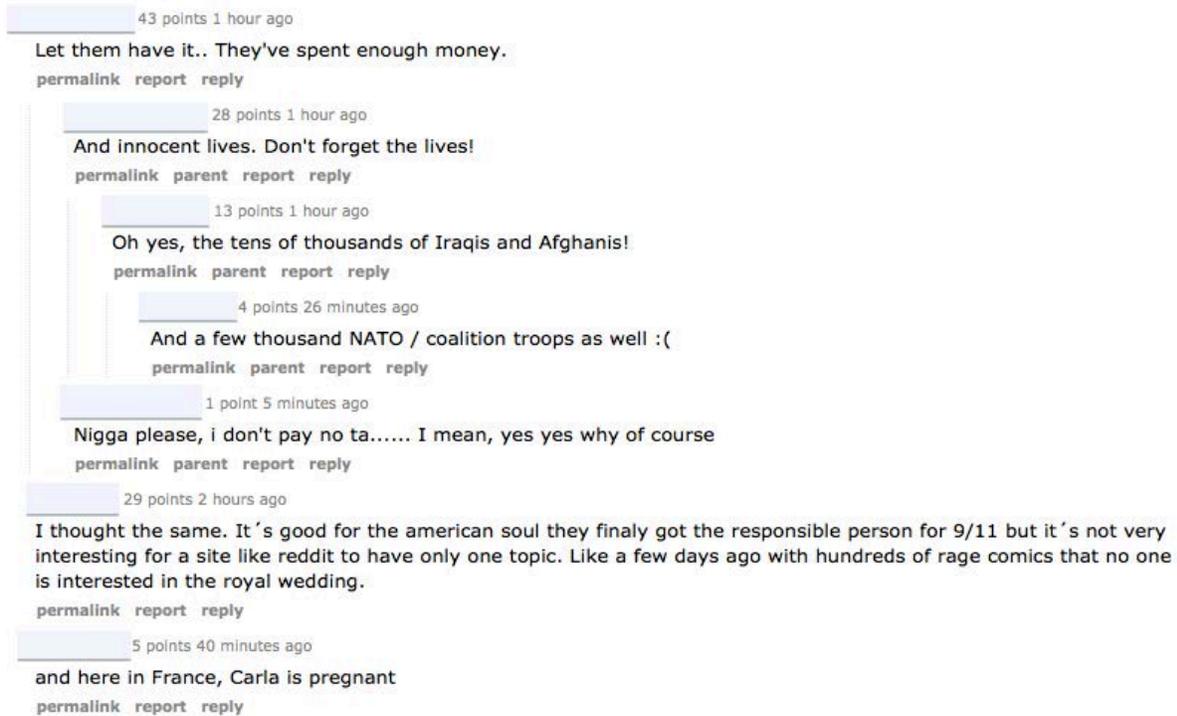
The fact that discourses opposed to American militarism and interventionism existed so prevalently on a site where people also post inflammatory content about racial and cultural minorities is telling. Even if the interaction is anonymous, even if the discursive norms were often centered on trolling, multiple perspectives can and did exist. Debate occurs within the lingua franca of grief, snark, ad hominem, and mischief. Much of the content on 4chan was well-past Papacharissi's (2004) claims that discourse can be impolite but still civil (especially if attacks based on factors like race are a characteristic of incivility). However, even on this site there still existed diverse and conflicting perspectives, often coming together for lengthy, intricate, and heated debate.

Reddit featured its share of debate over the role of the US in the death of bin Laden, as well. This is true even if the sentiment in the wake of the bin Laden death was generally pro-Obama. There were those who challenged the celebration of death and war:



In the Rage Comic above, established pro-American memes are intertextually linked to the perspective of a European outsider. The humorous contrast makes an argument about the strong language and imagery associated with American success. Four of the five images in the comic feature guns. Four of the five contain the phrase ‘fuck yeah’. The comic critiques an ethnocentric perspective on the death of bin Laden.

Like 4chan, Reddit also used images as a launching point more text-centered discourse on the event (though Reddit was less antagonistic and arguably more nuanced than 4chan). The critical Rage Comic above drew comment from other Western participants (screen names have been anonymized):



A strand of discussion is launched as a poster says “let them have it. They’ve spent enough money”. The resulting discussion is a few turns on the cost of the war in lives. The next two strands further comment on the Rage Comic. The first expresses agreement with the comic. The next comment gives us some news in France (likely using only a first name to emphasize the lack of familiarity Reddit might have with whoever ‘Carla’ is). The non-American perspectives in this thread still see through a Western lens.

In another thread, participants commented on the image of Obama smiling under text which read ‘Dear Republicans, Good luck in 2012’ (featured last section). This image launched a notably Americentric discussion of the role of bin Laden’s death in the possible reelection of Obama in 2012:

21 points 8 hours ago
 The election should not at all be the focus of Osama's death. This is one of the few events that people of both parties can view as positive, and, even if it is just for a brief time, the nation will be unified in something. Don't turn this rare moment of unity into more fuel for the "my side is better" fire.
[permalink](#) [report](#) [reply](#)

32 points 8 hours ago
 Yeah cuz thats how the us election system works.
[permalink](#) [parent](#) [report](#) [reply](#)

10 points 7 hours ago
 In reality, the election will come down to one thing: the economy. If its sucking (and especially if its getting worse) obama will likely lose. If its getting better, Obama's chances look better.
 Only caveat to that will be if republicans cant manage to put up a halfway decent candidate. So far none are doing all that much to impress.
 The election is about 18 months away. The Osama story will likely be old news and out of people's minds by then, especially if AQ does anything significant to show its still kicking. Hope they are not successful, but its almost certain that they will try.
[permalink](#) [parent](#) [report](#) [reply](#)

1 point 6 hours ago
 I came here to say exactly that. Good job.
[permalink](#) [parent](#) [report](#) [reply](#)

The first post argues 'both parties' can celebrate the event. It assumes the event is worth celebrating and emphasizes only the two dominant American political parties. Both of these statements make other perspectives that might exist invisible (like those not celebrating and those not covered by these 'both parties'). The protests to this statement are, on one level, evidence that back and forth political debate occurs through the discussion of memes. However, in this case, the responses do not question the 'celebration' or assuming the universality of dominant American political parties. Instead, the comments get even more domestic, tying into a discussion of the American economy. Bin Laden becomes secondary to a more long-lasting domestic issue.

Again, participation on these sites was ambivalent. Again, the perspectives were limited and situated, privileging some over others. Again, there were discursive and textual barriers to entry. Again, the nature of the debate was often impolite, even uncivil. However, it was polyvocal to a qualified extent. Perspectives were traded, and differences of opinion were argued both through and around memes. In this regard, participants with subcultural literacy could become a part of the international discussion.

Memetic commentary and Occupy Wall Street. A more marked back and forth occurred surrounding the Occupy Wall Street movement, another notable political event of fall 2011. Just as memes were used to comment on international events like the death of bin Laden, they were also used to engage social justice issues and political movements. 2011 was a busy time to be studying such usages. Not only was the term ‘meme’ rising in cultural currency in part thanks to the Occupy movement; its conventions were being used to comment on many social justice issues as well. Movements like lulzsec, the Arab Spring, and, of course, Occupy Wall Street all used amateur media as they captured national attention. *TIME*, after all, did name ‘the protestor’ their person of the year for 2011 (Andersen, 2011, Dec. 14). In meme subcultures, 2011’s person of the year met 2006’s. The universal, mediated you become part of the protests. But this universal you was in fact quite fractured in opinion. Memes were a vibrant way to express a multitude of polyvocal perspectives.

Beginning September 17, 2011 – after some months of initiation and planning by the Canadian ‘culturejamming headquarters’ Adbusters (adbusters.org) – around 1,000 protestors descended upon Zuccotti Park in Manhattan, New York at the mouth of the famous financial center, Wall Street. The goal of the ‘occupation’ was to stage a long-term protest of prevalent social and economic injustices in the US, including income inequality, the influence of corporations on politics, and unregulated business practices. A contingent of protestors would stay in Zuccotti Park full time, sleeping, eating, reading, and assembling in order to draw consistent attention to the financial practices protestors argued were detrimental to social welfare and individual prosperity. The protest initially garnered little traditional media attention, even though it had an active core of grassroots participants disseminating its message via social media outlets like Twitter and YouTube. In the days, weeks, and months that followed, however, media

coverage of the protests rose. This was concurrent with the growth of protestors, participating cities (domestic and international), arrests, and charges of police brutality.

Amateur media were central to the Occupy protests since their inception. In the months prior to the initial occupation date, and in the days before it received increased media attention, protestors were active across many outlets of amateur media. For instance, this flagship poster was posted to the Occupy tumblog and features a mark of mass participation, a Twitter hashtag:



The poster is also a sophisticated use of Photoshop to communicate a message. The Charging Bull statue that marks the financial district in New York is shopped to create a contrary aesthetic. A ballerina dances gracefully on his head. Masked masses fade into the smoke behind. The hashtag sits on top of the occupation date. Readers are given a direct command: bring tent. The message, in form and content, is one of mass participation rising against what might as well be a Golden Idol of capitalism.

It's fitting that a movement espousing an ethos of participation, egalitarian input, and leaderlessness would invite amateur participation so intentionally. During the protest, Twitter accounts sprang up, YouTube videos were shared, and marches and rallies were broadcast via sites like Livestream. An active Occupy subreddit (r/OccupyWallStreet) became a buzzing site of activity. Several tumblogs began sharing information and making arguments as well. The hacker network, Anonymous, began devoting many of its similar resources to the movement. In many ways, it was a movement catalyzed by much of the net culture that is responsible for memes. But as the two discursive strands interwove, participants vocalized multiple perspectives on the issue. Commentary and argument dominated meme collectives as participants weighed in supporting the movement, undermining it, and expressing multiple nuanced perspectives in between. In complex ways, the story of Occupy Wall Street is a story of polyvocal argument by meme.

Memes from all sides. Even though the Occupy movement was birthed through amateur media, not every piece of memetic discourse commenting on it was supportive. This makes sense. As Chapter Five demonstrated, net subculture is not a monolith of opinion, even if it does privilege certain identities, texts, and discourses. Instead, Occupy Wall Street was the site of vibrant – if at times fierce – agonistic debate on meme sites. It tended to receive more support on Reddit, Tumblr, and the Cheezburger Network. 4chan was intensely split, but seemed to tip toward critique (a piece of evidence that '4chan' and the 'Anonymous' hacker collective are not interchangeable). Canvas – a 4chan spin off – spoke of it with similar ambivalence.

Of course, there were several memes made supporting the Occupy protests. Some of the most notable early examples critiqued New York police officer Anthony Bologna. He pepper sprayed a young woman already 'kettled' in orange police mesh on September 24. The incident –

caught on amateur video and spread via YouTube and Twitter to traditional media outlets – prompted response via macro (in the third image, he wears Scumbag Steve’s hat):



Police response to protestors was of repeated focus in memes. The amateur cameras shooting so much of the Occupy movement insured that there were quite a few images to remix and circulate.

The following three use captured images of (what are ostensibly) Occupy arrests to critique police action against protestors:



The first takes a popular ironic quote and applies it to the image of a protester slammed to the ground with a strong knee in his back and combat boots resting on his head. The result is an Orwellian overtone of oppressive placidness. The second is a shot of a female protester being groped in the breast while being detained. No matter how intentional the grope was, or how long it lasted, the stable image behind the text communicates a static violation. The text adds a pun, overlaying the slogan for Chase Manhattan Bank. The third is another knee from another cop on

another pinned protestor. The protestor's firm glare at the camera and the flag draped over his hands make the image powerful on its own. The caption adds a curious irony. In one reading, clearly the text and image are oppositional. What awesome possibilities exist in a country that slams knees into the throats of protestors? But in another, the firm glare of the protestor communicates a resolution that indeed does come close to something like awesome. As if the struggle of the protest, the stakes of its goals, the resolution of its activists merits an amount of pride and hope.

Obama was another recurring focus in memes supporting Occupy Wall Street. However, he was portrayed less heroically than he was on the same sites just months prior. The heroic masculinity applied when he was given credit for executing bin Laden dissolved into portrayals of sneering, cynical, duplicitous cronyism in Occupy commentaries. When it came to his treatment of the Occupy movement, Obama was frequently criticized for his silence and his financial ties with the major banks:



The familiar Obama expressiveness is used against him in these images. His wide smile becomes a sign of bold hypocrisy in the first two images. He is criticized for holding expensive fundraisers while protestors fight for a political system free from such practices. He is called out

on his condemnation of police brutality when it happens in Middle Eastern nations, but not when it happens to the people protesting corporate influence in politics (he's wearing a Scumbag hat under the top text). He is a determined hero, but one fighting to 'save the banks'. A change in the overlaying text moves Obama from a war hero in May to a crony capitalist in October.

But the sentiment regarding Occupy Wall Street was certainly polyvocal. Memes also expressed quite a bit of ambivalence, dismissal, and outright disagreement with the goals and methods of the protests. In particular, 4chan and Canvas had vocal contributors who took an anti-Occupy position. This led to quite a bit of agonistic back and forth on the subject. Reddit generally supported the movement, even if a continuum of perspectives existed. Tumblr was home to diverse perspectives as well. The Cheezburger Network had scater discourse, but tended to produce content in favor of the movement.

Occupy memes were especially interdiscursive, combining multiple texts and commentaries into complex collages. Images themselves would speak to each other. These two images work as binary counters, one critiquing the political right, one critiquing the political left:





The top image features an annotated picture of an apparent Tea Party protest. Overlaying protest signs opposed to taxation are arrows pointing to all the things in the photo that come from tax dollars: sidewalks, roads, traffic lights, phone lines, etc. The implication, of course, is that the protestors are blind to their dependence on the fruit of taxation, and therefore that a ‘zero taxes’ policy would be detrimental to the lives of the people making the proposition. The bottom image makes a mirrored claim about the Occupy movement and corporations. The macro claims Occupy protestors want ‘evil corporations’ destroyed, while enjoying Panasonic cameras, J Crew hats, Clairol dye, Gap clothing, etc. The implication is that the protestors are blind to their own dependence upon corporations, and that a ‘down with corporations’ set of policies would be detrimental to the lives of the people making the proposition. This pair of images works as discursive counters, pointing out alleged inadequacies in the arguments of prevalent movements of the day.

Of course, the ‘zero taxes’ claim on the first image is one scrawled on an *actual* protest sign. The ‘down with evil corporations’ message is something superimposed *over* the image. This was a common rebuttal made by many Occupy sympathizers, who pointed out they were

not anti-corporation. They just opposed corporate practices subverting public welfare. The ‘down with corporations’ point, they argued, was a straw man.

Still, this accusation persisted as prevalently in memes as it did in traditional media more broadly. Occupiers were critiqued through macro for their entitlement and hypocrisy regarding wealth and privilege:



Young, hip urbanites tell us to ‘just put the revolution on my parents’ credit card’. A man with a Guy Fawkes mask (a Scumbag hat added to the iconic *V for Vendetta* mask adopted by Anonymous) ‘organizes capitalist protests...from his Macbook Pro’. ‘99 Percent’ cries come after protestors realize they’ve skipped their allotted songs on the streaming radio service Pandora. These images imply protestors are ‘anti-capitalist’ while taking advantage of it, are ‘revolutionary’ without any real consequence, and are complaining about the problems of an entitled leisure class.

Many memes argued protestors really did not have problems worth occupying anything, especially in comparison to other instances of inequality and human struggle:



Martin Luther King Jr. – American Civil Rights icon and a symbol for justice and perseverance in the face of adversity – thinks it’s ‘adorable’ the Occupiers are rallying. The term is not generally applied to serious sympathies. In the Middle East, the second image argues, protestors are facing explosions, fire, blood, and bullets. In America, they’re sitting with Guy Fawkes masks on while cops stand disinterestedly behind them. In the third image, a photo of starving children is a counter to the marchers in the panel above. Their ‘99 Percent’ claim is rebuffed by the magnitude of suffering occurring across the world. These familiar claims of entitlement and comfort were often used to dismiss protestors through meme.

Charges of entitlement bled into charges that the people being protested contributed more to society than the protestors. A protestor in a Guy Fawkes mask with a ‘Y U NO’ sign was a repeated object in arguments against the worth of protestors and their aims:



The first image uses macro conventions to refute the Y U NO sign, making a claim that the top one-percent of wage earners pay 40 percent of the nation's taxes (the refutation has no citation, but then again neither does the claim on the protest sign). The second image is annotated, whitening out 'Top 1%', replacing it with 'People on Government Assistance'. The annotation makes a counter claim from the same image. The third image labels the 'types' of protestors at Occupy Wall Street: seasoned activists, veterans, hipsters, and /b/. That /b/ sticks out as the only one in a mask with a cartoon sign makes a punch line out of the argumentative tactic.

Protestors didn't have to be from /b/ to be derided in counter-Occupy images. The social worth of protestors was challenged for other reasons. Life choices were prevalently critiqued:



1% 99%

Hey, my education is serious business. I better study a valuable topic and develop skills that will be needed more and more in the future.

Sorry, I'd really like to party this weekend, but I'm attending a lecture on asset allocation and risk management.

Hmm.. my car is old as shit, but it still works. Since it's paid off, I'll use the extra money to purchase a hard asset that will generate some passive income.

I'll borrow \$100,000 to go to an Ivy League school so I can study sociology or maybe Art History.

Oh wow! Look at that cool 42" plasma screen tv! I'll put it on my credit card.

Budget? Nah, I don't do nerdy shit like that. It's boring.

Hey, where can we score some weed? We need to smoke up this weekend.

I've had this car for 4 years. Time for a new one.

The images above, taking macro and text form, argue that protestors' woes are their own faults. The '99 Percent' aren't rich because they've chosen impractical degrees, want to do impractical work, and don't manage their money responsibly. The images argue that broad economic inequalities are not the issue, but rather individual decisions. In particular, the third image recasts the terms '1 Percent' and '99 Percent', applying them to different criteria than income disparity. Instead, the '1 Percent' are smart and frugal, and therefore financially sound. The 99 Percent are

only that way because they are lazy hippies. Even some who expressed sympathy with protestors lamented the movement based on similar grounds. Some suggested protestors shave and wear a tie, so that they might make their movement more palatable to the masses. These claims served as a means to discredit Occupy goals by discrediting protestors personally, an *ad hominem* intertwined with critiques of protestors' positions.

Another resounding critique of the Occupy movement was that they did not have specific 'goals', 'demands', or 'solutions', or that they were not able to clearly articulate with any precision what it was they were protesting. This argument was articulated in broader media discourses, and it came out in memes as well:



The Most Interesting Man tells us that when he starts a protest, he 'actually defines a clear set of objectives'. Protestors however know step one: occupying. They know step three: replacing the 'entire global economic system'. It's step two they're confused about. Commenting on an ambiguous 'step two' is a popular strategy for pointing out a logical inconsistency on meme sites. It's taken from an episode of the TV series *South Park* where gnomes 1. steal underpants, 2. ??????, and 3. profit. The third image annotates protest posters, browning out the messages scrawled on the signs and replacing them with an accusation of vagueness. Protestors only want to 'ban what they hate' and 'make stuff they want free'. These accusations intertwine with

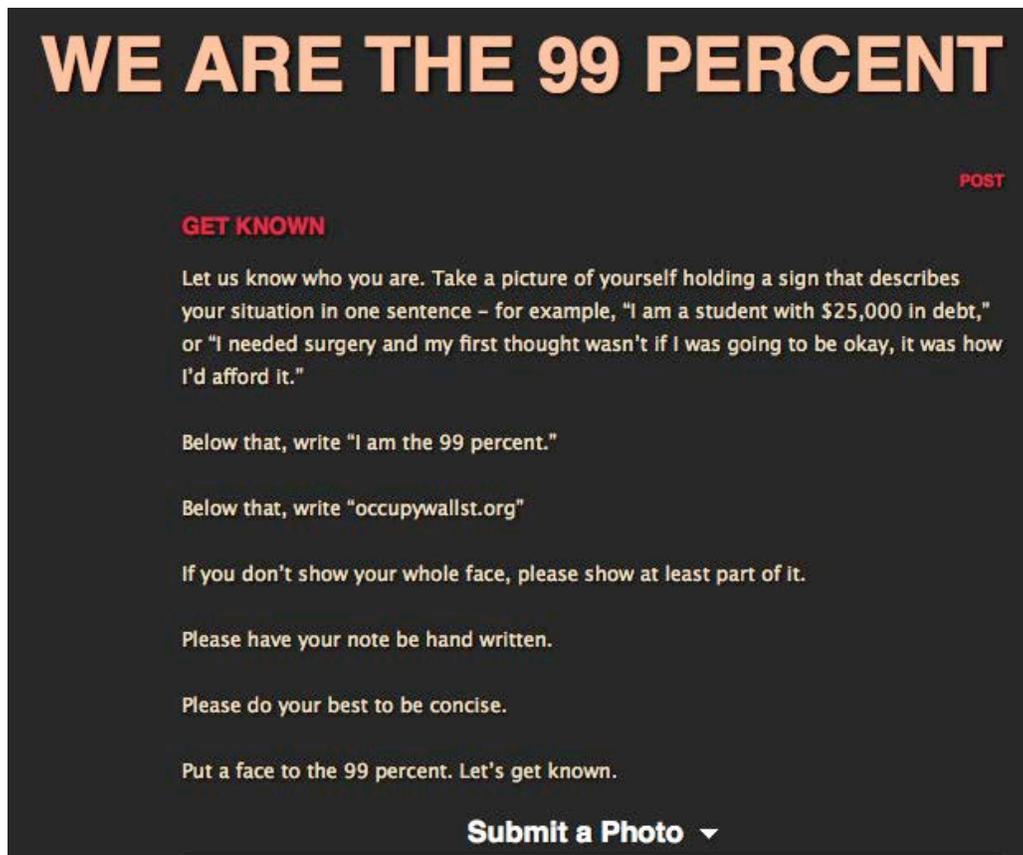
charges of entitlement. All of these critiques were in line with complaints posited across traditional media outlets, suggesting a deep interconnection between the arguments occurring on meme sites and the broader discourses occurring during the protests. As sites like Reddit and Tumblr were mobilized in support of the Occupy movement, these critiques cropped up in tandem. Their mere existence served as a polyvocal response on meme sites deeply tied to the protests. In the fall of 2011, visiting 4chan, Reddit, Tumblr, the Cheezburger Network, and Canvas meant being inundated with multiple memes from multiple perspectives about Occupy Wall Street. Networks of mediated cultural participation became networks of mediated political commentary as participants on meme sites began prevalently discussing the protests.

Political argument and the 99 Percent. The argumentative oscillation between support and derision was especially salient in one instance where memes contributed most forcefully to broader national discourse on the Occupy protests. The ‘99 Percent’ rallying cry, and the argument that it stood in for, was popularized by a tumblog. The ‘99 Percent’ message was that the top one-percent of income earners had too much voice in public welfare and governance. By aligning the Occupy movement with 99 percent of the population, the phrase (some would argue fallaciously) associated a near universal ingroup against a dominant elite outgroup. Memetic participation gave force to the argument as participants shared images like these:



All images feature a handwritten story of hardship, held up to the camera. They all end with a nominal reference to the ‘99 Percent’ and direct readers to occupywallst.org. The 99 Percent messages that spread around Occupy protests, moved across meme subcultural sites, and bled over into traditional media were remixes on an aesthetically stable core. Textually, they were stable images; they were photos that mostly spread without annotation. However, extratextually, they were evident of a memetic process of that intertwined imitation and transformation.

This similarity was not entirely organic. At least on the official Tumblr, the stable rules for remix were not simply gleaned by subcultural literacy. Instead, they were explicitly enforced by the editors gatekeeping submissions. The meme’s stable core was outlined in bullet points on the submission screen for the tumblog:



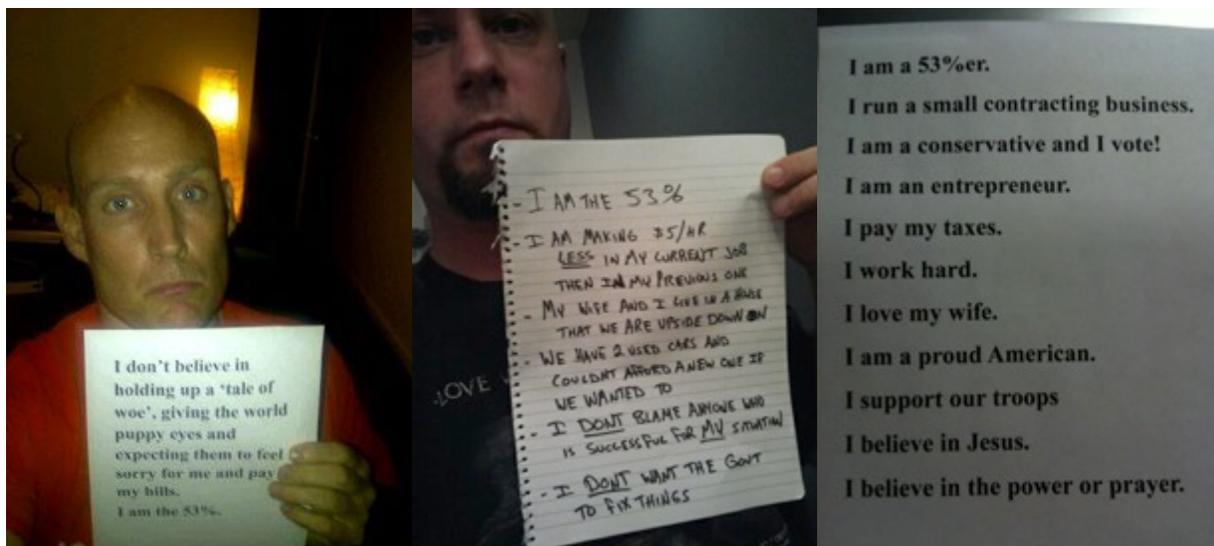
Some of these guidelines were more flexible than others. Many participants only showed part of their face (a *very small* part in the first two submissions above). A few posts were not hand written. More than a few were anything but concise. Instead, some handwritten pages contained words scrawled so tiny they were impossible to read without an accompanying caption. Still though, the instructions were followed with enough consistency so as to set a conventional 99 Percent aesthetic that became an immediately recognizable part of the protests.

Of course, an aesthetic that exists is one that can be reappropriated. 99 Percent submissions were heavily reappropriated for satire and critique:



The first image plays on the entitled hipster stereotype, as the crying face in the big glasses laments that he doesn't have the new cool kindle, and that everyone else now has his fashionable Warby Parker eyewear. The second charges protestors only have an impotent, vague critique of capitalism. Intermingled with nonsensical jabber is the phrase 'capitalism punched me in the eye'. The third reframes the 'story of struggle' convention by associating with an undesirable ally: Adolph Hitler. The connotation is that selective information can elicit sympathy for anyone's circumstances. A discursive link to Hitler is an argument for undermining the legitimacy of the medium.

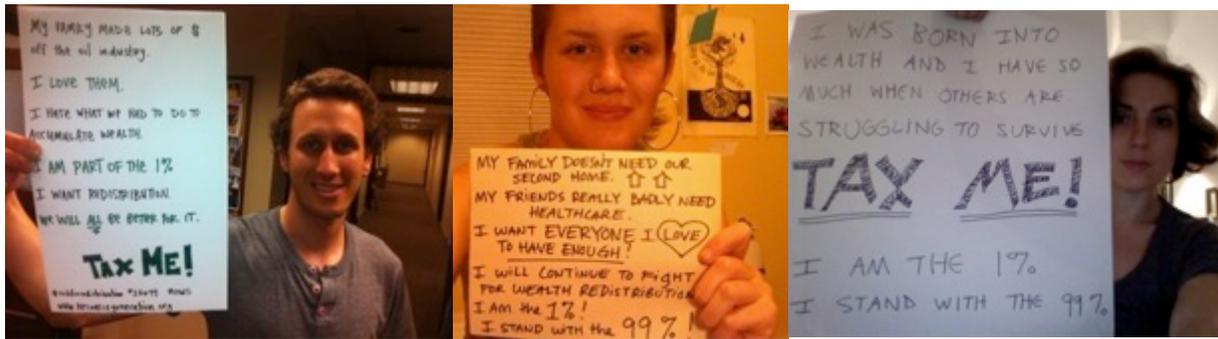
Another number came up in response to the 99 Percent meme. Based on the premise that only 53 percent of Americans pay any income tax, the ‘53 Percent’ response to the 99 Percent meme was born (even if the contested fact is accurate, it’s as fallacious to imply all those sympathetic to the Occupy movement do not make enough to pay income tax as it is to assume that ‘99 percent’ of the population are the Occupy ingroup). The 53 Percent set up its own tumblr, which reappropriated the 99 Percent aesthetic in order to make arguments against the Occupy movement:



These three images each take a different tactic in their response to the 99 Percent meme. The first image calls out the aesthetic norms of the images, positing a conventional tendency to give ‘the world puppy eyes’, and then accusing those producing 99 Percent signs of wanting people to pay their bills. The second image gives a story of hardship that might be found on a 99 Percent sign, but tacks on the point that ‘I DON’T blame anyone who is successful for MY situation’, and that ‘I DON’T want the government to fix things’. The last image blends social and financial conservatism. The OP claims to ‘work hard’, ‘love my wife’, ‘support our troops’, ‘believe in Jesus’. The OP is a ‘proud American’. Placing this list of associations underneath the 53 Percent banner implies an inverse corollary. If this is definitive of the 53 Percent, the outgroup sensitive

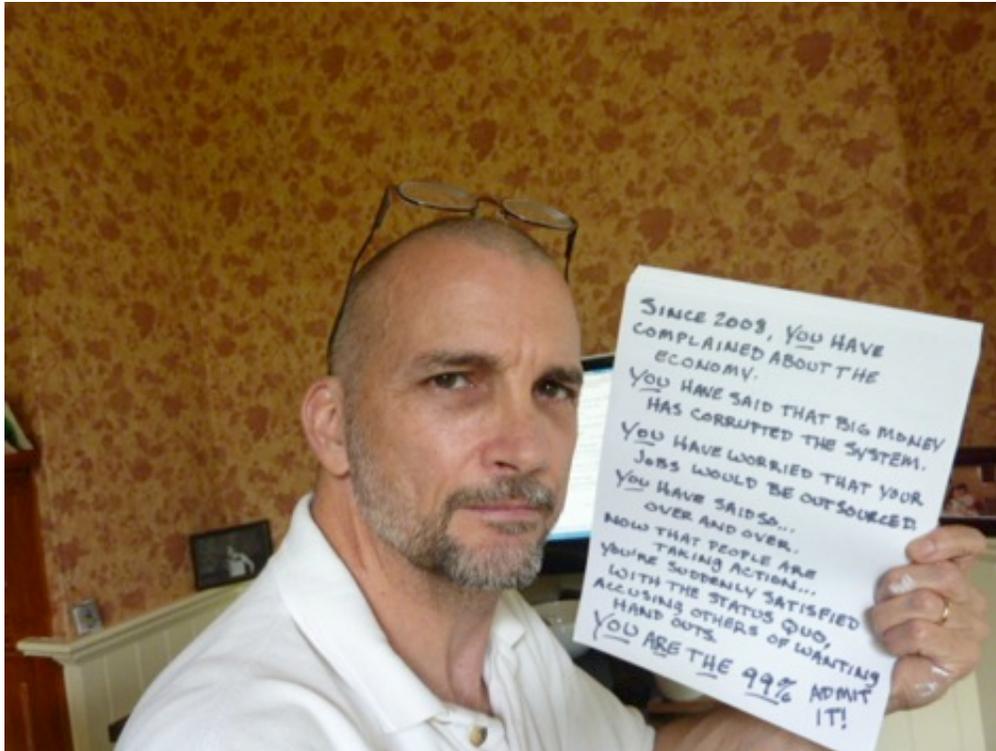
to the Occupy movement must be antithetical to these qualities. The binary is simple. You are either opposed to the Occupy movement or you are a lazy, adulterous, cowardly, atheist traitor.

The back and forth via handmade sign went even further. There was even a tumblog set up for members of the ‘1 Percent’ of income earners who ‘stand with’ the 99 Percent:



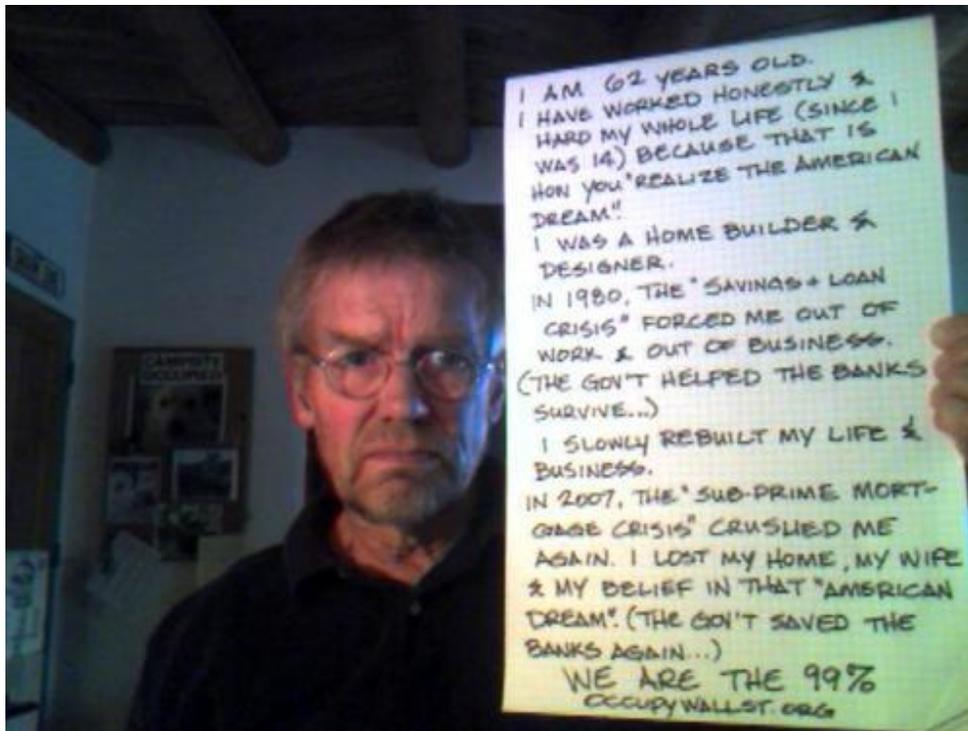
These took the same aesthetic as an opportunity to express their solidarity for those who had less financial opportunity than them. Repeated in the images above are phrases like ‘TAX ME’ and ‘redistribute’.

These discourses went beyond single-turn commentary. When it came to the Percenter images, political participation was distinctly multi-turn. As polyvocal perspectives engaged through meme, arguments happened between texts and even within texts. Exemplifying argument across artifacts, one OP wrote a 99 Percent note that itself responded to 53 Percent notes:

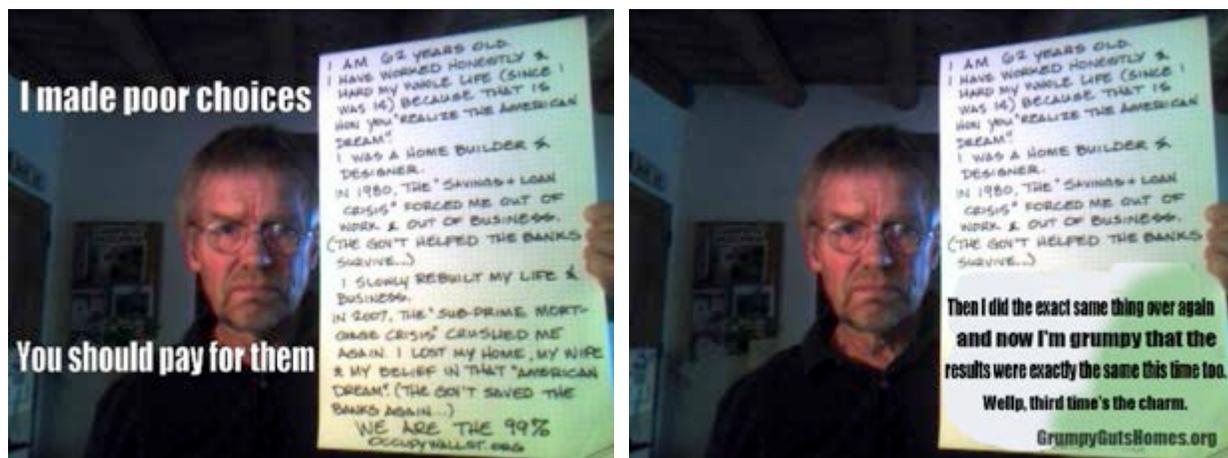


The message is a direct address; it's polyvocal debate taken to a level beyond single-turn commentary. 'YOU' is repeated five times with underlines (instead of the standard 'I' in 99 Percent posts). The content, through this second-person reference, calls out conservatives who have 'complained about the economy' for years, but are 'suddenly satisfied with the status quo' when another political group starts 'taking action'. The last line is another inverse: 'YOU ARE THE 99 PERCENT. Admit it!'. The post argues for hypocrisy in 53 Percent posts and does so via shared aesthetics.

Thanks to the technological affordances of participatory media, multi-turn argument could occur even within a single image. Polyvocal debate occurred within in Percenter images as participants annotated those images. Claims made by the stable images were answered through annotation. This occurred with some frequency on Canvas, where multiple posters would remix over a single image in rapid succession. For instance, the following 99 Percent image inspired a Canvas thread:

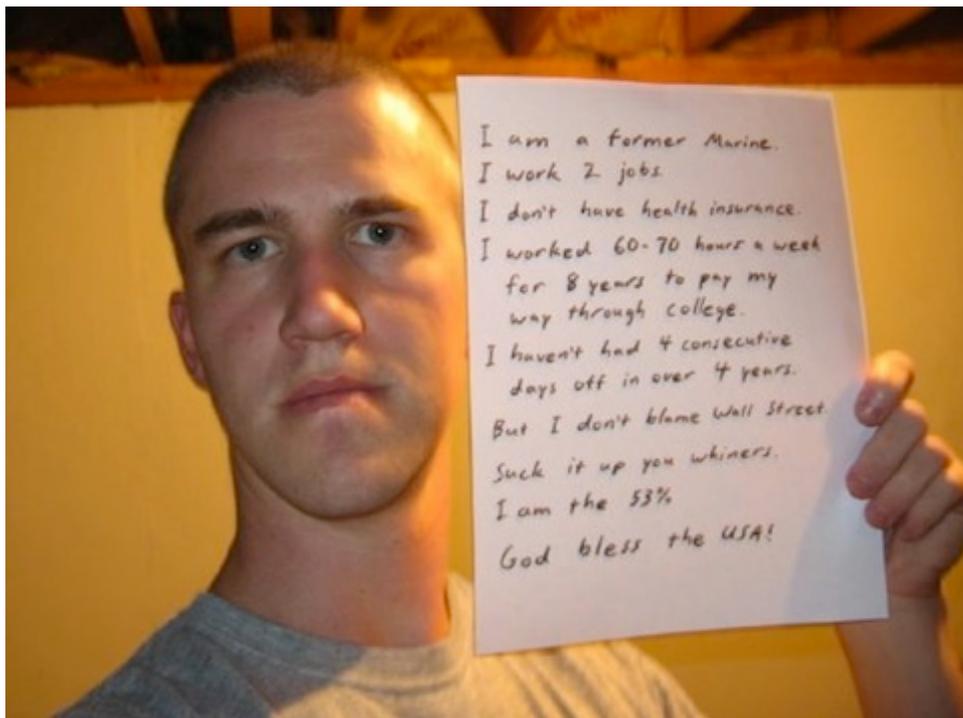


Posters came in after and used annotated remix to refute the handwritten message:

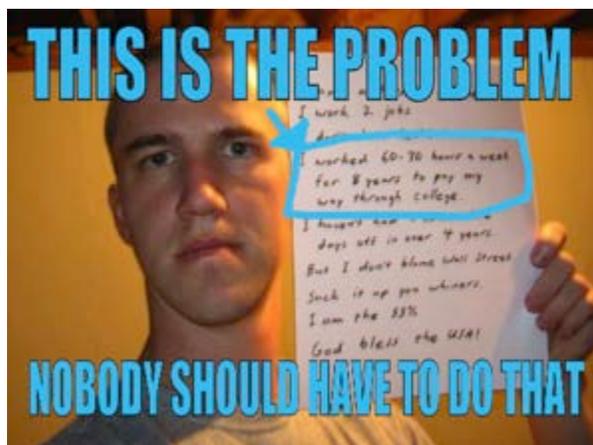
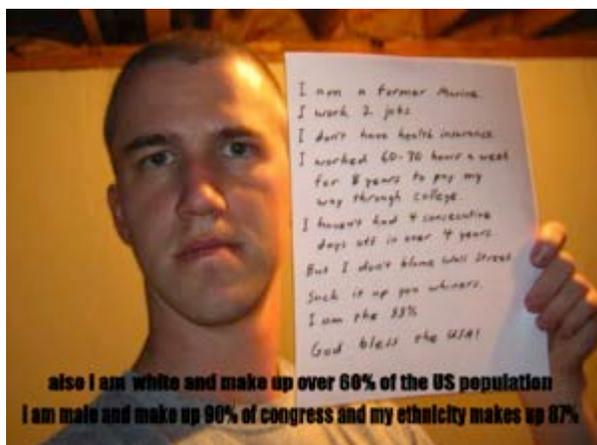


The first response sums up the 99 Percenters in two clauses: 'I made poor choices; you should pay for them'. It's shorthand for entitlement critiques leveled toward 99 Percent discourse. Protestors want of handouts, a redistribution to the incapable at the hands of the capable. The second remix whites out the bottom portion of the text to argue the situation was self-inflicted, redirecting blame from social, governmental, or economic forces to personal mistakes.

This also occurred with 53 Percent posts. This 53 Percenter was annotated via Canvas:



The annotations create a multi-turn response just as the 99 Percent post above:



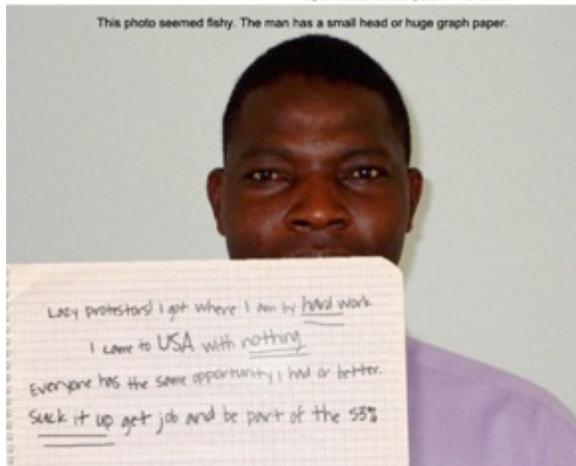
The first comment points to a privilege inherent in the 53 Percenter's social identity: that he is a white male, and therefore overrepresented by the powerful. It argues against the general successes of white males rather than addressing the specifics of the image. The second annotation, though, makes a specific counter to the 53 Percent post. The annotator circles the claim that the 53 Percenter 'worked 60-70 hours a week for eight years to pay my way through

college'. He refutes the claims, saying 'THIS IS THE PROBLEM. NOBODY SHOULD HAVE TO DO THAT'. It's an argument that does not contradict the evidence in the original point, but rather affirms it to a different conclusion. In the reframe, the fact that the 53 Percenter had to live like that is not evidence of the success of the system, but rather its failure. These images use the participatory processes that undergird memes to engage an argument directly, responding point for point. While memes can be used for shallow commentary or 'echo chamber' parroting of partisan perspectives, a motivated participant can utilize them more. Participatory media can be powerfully mobilized for polyvocal argument. The agonism demonstrated by 99 Percent discourse is evidence of this.

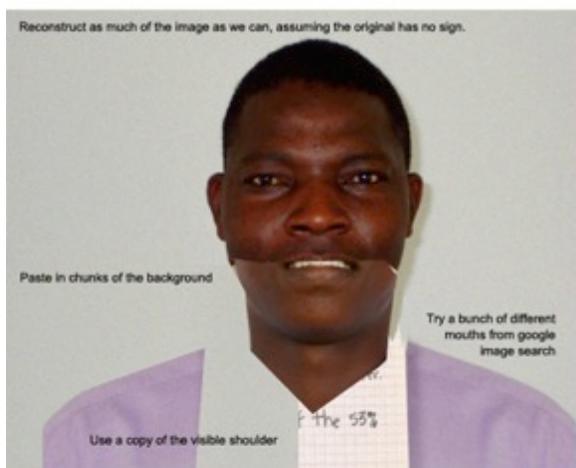
One OP went even beyond these simple annotations. Below is a stacked still (broken up into two columns here) that makes a visual argument for the fabrication of a 53 Percent post. It utilizes many of the same competencies needed to create macros, shops, and annotated images to make a political argument:

Seen on the53.tumblr.com:

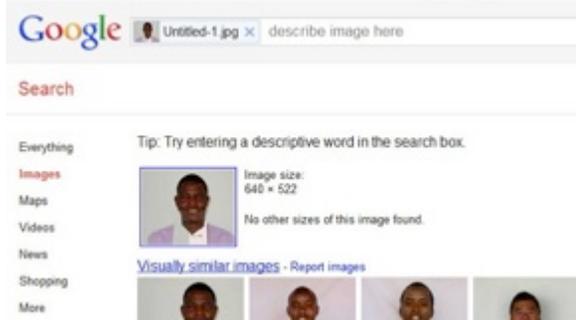
<http://the53.tumblr.com/post/11440649975>



Break out photoshop...



Paste the image with different mouth variations into Google image search



Context is an article...

City flavour International

- HOME
- ADVERT RATE
- FORUMS
- GOT A TIP?
- MAGAZINE
- OU

- Celeb
- Celeb gist
- Immigration News
- International News
- Raja news

THE SPANISH CRISIS FROM AN IMMIGRANT POINT OF VIEW



He lives in Spain...

Written by,
 Adewale T Akande (M.ed.Educ.Mgt),(M.sc.Political Sc.) University of Ibadan.
 Author, Educationist and Road Traffic Safety Consultant.
 Barcelona, Spain. E-mail: [redacted] Tel: [redacted]

...and also writes articles about government corruption in Nigeria

Given the altered nature of the original picture and his anti-corruption leanings, I'm assuming he didn't actually have anything to do with the original 53%'er message.

Someone just made it up.

Through fairly sophisticated work with Photoshop and a little knowledge of Google, the OP is able to make an argument for and provide evidence of the fabrication of a post by someone on the 53 Percent tumblog. The stacked still gives readers a prescient reminder that all images passed anonymously and without citation must be understood as potential fabrications. They are more valuable as representatives of discursive truths than facts (of course this might be said of images which receive authorship and citation as well, since fabrication is not limited exclusively to anonymous content). What's notable here is the use of memes for polyvocal argument, a direct answer – levied via literacy – to a political claim.

Political memes, political voice. The Percenter phenomenon is an example that political argument can occur via the same technical, textual, and subcultural literacy that gives us funny pictures of cats and racist, sexist comics. The 99 Percent, 53 Percent, and 1 Percent images followed memetic standards of remix upon a stable set of aesthetic conventions. They were shared via the same mediated networks that largely exist as means to share jokes and diversions. The annotative skills that lead to a proficiency in these diversions were also applied to intricately respond to oppositional claims. Further, the sites used to share these silly diversions became mobilized very quickly to serve very specific political and public ends for those interested. The Perceners were not just commenting on the activism of others marching in a major city, they were inserting a sliver of their voice in the discourse. Their claims were strands in the discursive thread.

The political discussion surrounding the death of bin Laden reminds us that dominant political positions exist in networks of mediated cultural participation, even if there's room for polyvocal response. However, those worried about echo chambers should be encouraged by the multi-turn back and forth that occurred surrounding Percenter images. They demonstrate that at

least some contexts exist where political debate is occurring through mediated contact between members of the public. If we're worried about shallow discourse, we can take some refuge in the intricate responses from both sides occurring through these memetic practices. The Occupy debate is an example of polyvocal discourse in meme subcultures, at least among those subculturally and culturally situated to participate in it. But these polyvocal debates also rely heavily on pop culture texts. If memes are to be a viable example of polyvocal political participation, then they must demonstrate depth in their discourse. The next section will address the implications of pop prevalence in these polyvocal commentaries.

Pop Savvy Commentary.

Popping the political. As should be evident by now, political commentary in meme subcultures is a diverse mix of pop media intertextuality and politically charged interdiscursivity. This adds another layer to the polyvocality, a quick symbolic accessibility for making points. Political events are connected to established pop culture conventions and texts. First, pop texts from traditional media are used to make political points. Further, memes themselves are in many ways pop culture artifacts. Shops, image macros, and Rage Comics are normally employed for the purposes of entertainment and diversion. However, when participants want them to be, these artifacts can be mobilized to political ends. Knowing the processes required to create, circulate, and transform memes means the ability to participate in the discourse. Knowing how to link to broader pop culture texts means the ability to make politically poignant connections. And this did not necessarily mean cheapened political discourse. If anything, polyvocality is enhanced thanks to the pop savviness exhibited by participants in meme subcultures. This section will explore the implications of pop culture on political discourse in meme collectives.

Of course, pop savvy appropriations of political discourses are not always poignant,

explicit commentary. Sometimes the effects of these hybrids are lighthearted and playful, like these two shops of Obama:



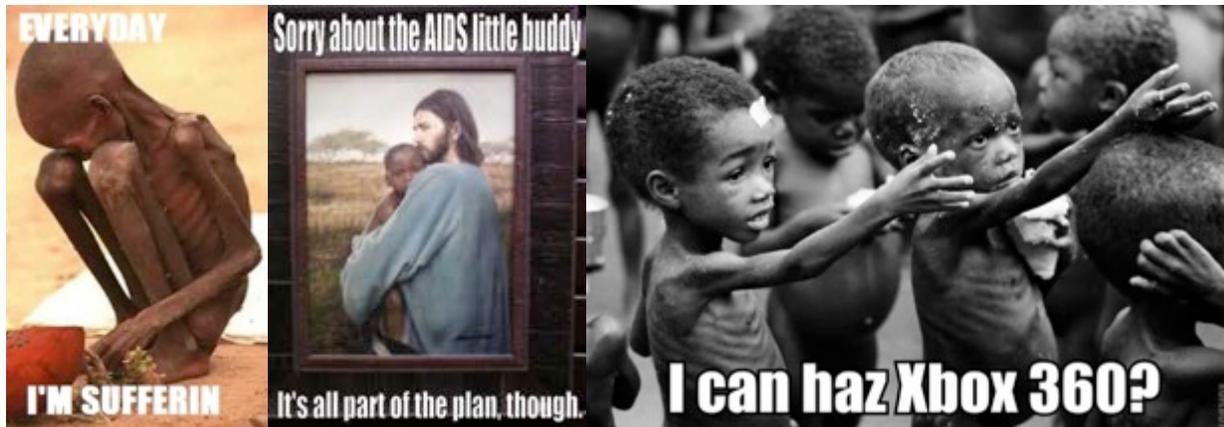
Depending upon the context in which they're employed, or the perspective of the reader, these images might be a show of support or tongue-in-cheek criticism. Like the reaction shots of Obama from Chapter Three, they might also be largely apolitical. OPs may only have been using Obama as a familiar canvas by which to showcase transformative literacy. Even if this is the case, they both show Obama in rather triumphant poses. In one, he's skateboarding in the air, carrying nunchucks and wearing sunglasses as a helicopter explodes behind him. In the second, he's riding a unicorn through a vibrant field as he shoots rainbows from his hands. As with most images, their ambiguity leaves room for multiple interpretations and applications. These images are not, at first glance, strong evidence for the use of pop savvy media for pointed political commentary. However, they are aesthetically expressive artifacts that remix from a prominent political figure. If they are not evidence of use, they are evidence of potential.

Other shopped images of Obama shared on meme sites are less ambiguous, and more overtly political because of their strong connotations. Below are two shops that could easily be read as critiques of Obama:



The first takes a painting of Soviet leader V.I. Lenin and shops Obama's head onto it. Much like remixes of Obama with Hitler or Stalin, the image makes a political comment in its association. The second – a play on the racist equation of black people and monkeys – combines a shot of the Obamas with monkeylike facial features. Perhaps these shops are 'just jokes', but taken as individual strands within long-lasting discursive threads that go back even before Obama, they are important. They tie to logically questionable strands that equate political opponents to violent dictators and tie to unacceptable associations of blacks with sub-human primates. Much like the 'just jokes' built from racist premises Billig (2001) analyzes, these jokes ask us to grant suppositions. These two images are as aesthetically playful as the two above, but their dark side comes from their connotations. These connotations – the interdiscursive connections contained within single artifacts – make them more powerful and scathing than the images above. They're also stronger evidence of the use of pop savviness to make a more explicit political commentary.

A pop savvy sensibility pervades political commentary on meme sites, the two intertwined in a discursive knot. These three images focus on the issue of global poverty, but do so by relying on pop sensibilities resonant to Western media audiences:



These macros share common traits. First, they all focus on the physical suffering of African children. Second, they do so by juxtaposing Western pop cultural standards with that suffering. This leads them all toward a sympathetic othering, mixing for Western readers the foreign and familiar. The first image contrasts a graphic picture of a pencil-thin child, who appears to be sobbing into his legs. The caption – ‘everyday I’m sufferin’ – is a play on the hip-hop phrase ‘everyday I’m hustlin’. Instead of working toward financial success (‘hustlin’), the child in this image is living in pain. Western pop culture is reappropriated here to present readers with a vivid reminder of how some live despite Western comfort. The second image critiques the impotency of a Western religion (or at least a very white Jesus from a piece of kitschy pop art) to fix the problem of AIDS in Africa. Jesus’ vernacular English works to further informalize the child’s suffering.

The third is an oft-captioned photo of thin, dirt-covered, black children reaching their hands out. The caption ‘I can haz Xbox 360’ contrasts the affect of the image with the pop materialism of the West. As with the first two images, the language further emphasizes this contrast. ‘I can haz’ is ‘lolspeak’; it’s nonstandard, childlike vernacular used particularly when captioning cute images of animals, like lolcats:



Only this time, the text is not made cute by the image, but made poignant. As a contrast, I used Meme Generator to place the same caption on a more traditional lolcat image. Here are the two side-by-side:



What's adorable in the one image becomes a commentary on Western excess in the second. This is what these macros remind us as we browse our leisure sites in the West. They are an onscreen reminder of an outgroup not living by comfortable standards. That they intertwine everyday Western pop culture only serves to further the contrast. The long-term impact of such reminders is, of course, questionable. A cute cat above and a cute cat below might help to keep the commentary fleeting. But these images demonstrate the potential for social justice commentary through memetic conventions. Depending upon the context of their use, they might be powerful forms of commentary. In fact, common memes like First World Problems and Third World

Success Kid are fundamentally commentary on injustice and entitlement (the mashup of the two cited last chapter is especially prescient in this regard).

Western pop, Middle Eastern politics. Pop savvy intertextuality and interdiscursivity can mean unlikely commentary through unexpected connections. For instance, the serious business of military conflict between America and the Middle East was given extensive pop treatment in meme collectives. In the same way participants used amateur media to produce ‘humorously incongruent’ collages in the immediate wake of 9/11 (Kuipers 2002, 2005), meme collectives joked about the death of bin Laden and the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks he coordinated. When bin Laden was killed, one particular pop connection became prevalent in the commentary. Photoshop was used to create a wordless discursive link between bin Laden and a notable hat worn by the UK’s Princess Beatrice:



She wore the hat to the marriage of Prince William and Kate Middleton on April 29, 2011, days before bin Laden’s death. The accessory made news for its remarkable extravagance. The infamous hat was inserted into several images as an ironic juxtaposition in the days following the British Royal Wedding:



The hat is connected above to Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-II in one image. In another, Queen Elizabeth (as portrayed by Helen Miram in the film *The Queen*) doesn't see a majestic deer standing strong on her hunting grounds (an important moment in the film); she sees the princess and her hat. In the last, the hat is not a hat at all, but some sort of interdimensional cat door.

When bin Laden died, the hat made its way onto his head:



Looking at the first image, it might be overwrought to read any explicit commentary into the application of the hat to bin Laden, other than to say the hat was used to mark something derisively. It might serve to feminize him, or it might just be one more funny thing to put a hat on. However, the next two remixes make a more explicit political point. In one case, bin Laden plus Beatrice hat is remixed into bin Laden plus Beatrice hat plus hunting target. Here a point is made more explicitly. The implication is that bin Laden had marked himself, sat, and waited passively (even effeminately) for American forces to strike. He adorned a target on his head. In the other case, bin Laden plus Beatrice hat plus Obama birth certificate ties the news of the week into a single visual strand. The hat-adorned bin Laden is transposed over the birth certificate. He is the visual focal point by which we read the other two events. This post is from a Reddit thread entitled “How I will remember this weekend”.

The Royal Wedding was interdiscursively linked to the death of bin Laden multiple times, even beyond the Princess Beatrice hat. The pomp and circumstance of a ceremonial cultural event was thereby connected intricately to a military action with international political implications. At one level this is curious, for they do not seem to share much besides their chronological correspondence. However, the two events were repeatedly used as a discursive contrast in memes. Here are two examples:



The first image is a collage that celebrates both events. Bin Laden is featured, then the famous kiss between Prince William and Kate Middleton. In the next panel, the American and British flags blur in equal proportion. The final panel is all text: **FUCK YEAH**. It discursively links the two events as grounds for celebration. The second image shops a strutting Obama behind the iconic Royal Kiss. The text creates a further juxtaposition: a wedding and a funeral. The implication is that Obama is outshining the Royal Wedding, one-upping their news and strutting away confidently as he does.

The commentary also occurred via Rage Comics. The following two comics also read the concurrent events through national lenses:



In the first comic, the British and American events are both presented as moments of win, just as in the stacked still above. The joyousness of the wedding is portrayed as victoriously as the strong-jawed determinism of the execution. The third panel – the fail – is the Canadian, who is Forever Alone, and can only provide some news about an election. The second comic, like the second image above, chooses to scorn Britain for their overshadowed event. Tears of joy come from the death of bin Laden. Everyone in America stands with the same stern ‘Fuck Yeah’ win pose. Meanwhile in England, the royal family all stands with the resigned ‘Okay’ face of fail.

In these examples, the political and the pop are inseparable as forms of commentary. To be able to participate in the discourse of the former, participants have to be literate in the latter. In some senses, this could mean the political is cheapened by the pop. And if the discussion stopped here, that case could be made. However, in another event connecting America to the Middle East – the tenth anniversary of 9/11 – pop savvy political engagement on meme sites

went beyond the ‘proto-political’ into expressions of polyvocal political opinion. Further, pop culture texts from traditional media were employed to make political arguments.

Pop commentary and the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Around four months after the death of bin Laden came the tenth anniversary of the event that spawned the hunt for him. The attacks on the World Trade Center towers in New York had a profound effect on American political discourse in the decade that followed them. Memes were part of that discourse. Therefore, it’s fitting that prototypical work on memes comes from a scholar looking at the ‘internet disaster jokes’ that circulated after 9/11 (Kuipers, 2002, 2005). When the nation reflected on the tenth anniversary of 9/11 – September 11, 2011 – memes were a part of that reflection. Their contribution was often crass, and could easily be labeled ‘bad taste’. However, it does reveal strands within American discourse regarding 9/11 that were less expressed via traditional media. Further, these strands made their points in large part by referencing pop culture texts from both traditional media and participatory media. In this regard, 9/11 on meme sites was an important counter-point to more traditional sentimental, austere reflections on the occasion. A pop culture space was a space for satirical commentary, irreverent response, and fringe expression.

There was a considerable amount of discourse that used Photoshop to remix iconic images of the two towers crumbling. Often these remixes added levity to the grave scenes by shopping in a pop culture cause to the fiery destruction:



The first image mashes up a photo of the towers burning with an iconic meme figure named Nyan Cat. Nyan Cat began as a YouTube video of an animated half cat, half Pop Tart flying through the stars with a rainbow trail behind him. Here, Nyan Cats sets a path right through the towers, and readers are asked to never forget ‘Nyan-Eleven’. The second is a comic that takes images from the attacks and gives them a new perpetrator: a giant-sized professional wrestler Hulk Hogan. Hogan’s signature flamboyant combat is applied to the towers. He is smashing them with folding chairs, putting an ear up to their collapse, flexing and strutting above the running masses. In the third image, a third assailant is identified: the spokesperson for Kool-Aid drinks, the Kool-Aid man. His trademark commercial move is to bust through walls with an exuberant ‘OH YEEEEAAHHH!!!’ before giving excited kids Kool-Aid. Only this time, he’s busting through the tower walls.

Even ten years later, these images are troubling pieces of discourse. They trivialize an event that cost thousands of lives initially and has resulted in thousands more dead in the military combat that has followed. It’s hard to get around the idea that there are people dying in the very images being remixed. In these images, the towers seem a mere canvas, like many of the other

core images used as a corpus for remix. It's impossible to guess at the motives for their creation by examining their form and content. However, their mere existence is a discursive fact. They are evidence of a strand of commentary that does not exist as prevalently outside of meme collectives. Whether the reasons are technological (anonymity, ephemerality), cultural (irreverence, cynicism), or some combination of both, these images are evidence of a volume of commentary that jokes and trivializes rather than reflecting somberly. In this way, the images reject the dominant mediated discourses about 9/11. Kuipers (2005) says 9/11 disaster jokes are “a rebellion against the official discourse about humor: that humor is inappropriate in times of disaster and that some topics are too serious to be joked about. Any such attempts to forbid humor tend to evoke it” (p. 83). Memes represented alternative engagement with 9/11 through humor.

This alternative engagement with the legacy of 9/11 is evident in more explicit commentary, which again used a pop lingua franca to varying degrees. There were several images posted around the tenth anniversary of 9/11 that critiqued the idea that 9/11 should be remembered with unflinching austerity. Many expressed weariness with its remembrance. The following macros express resentment at prevailing discourses on 9/11 in the US:



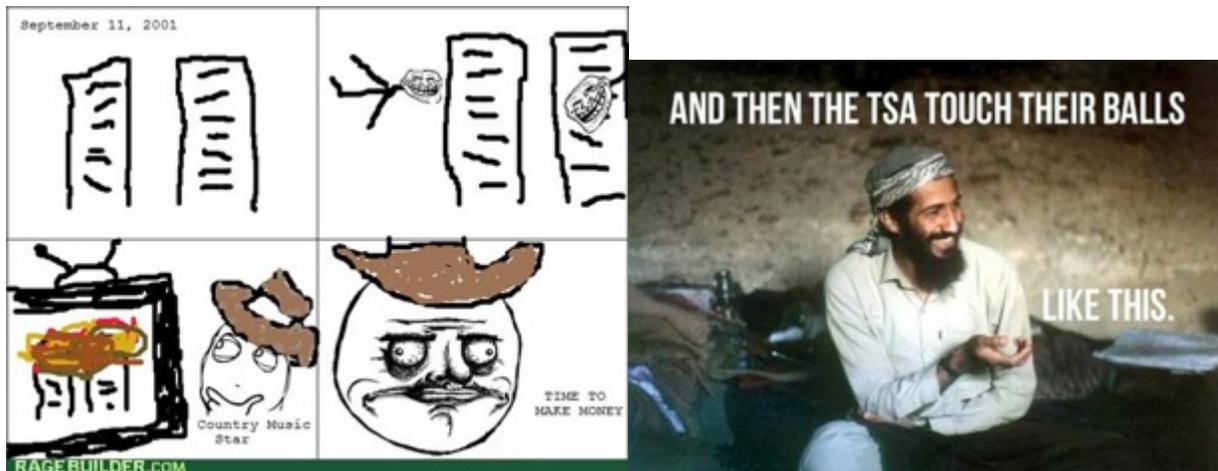
The first image applies the popular 9/11 ‘Never Forget’ slogan to a scene from *A Clockwork Orange* where the lead character is being force-fed videos of social responsibility, submission,

and complacency as a part of a mandatory rehabilitation program. The juxtaposition is powerful. When remixed with the scene, the phrase shifts from a sentimental rallying cry to a forceful command. ‘YOU WILL NOT FORGET’, the image implies. ‘WE WILL NOT LET YOU.’ On a day when ‘never forget’ rang out in commercials, status updates, and news reports, such an image might have resonated with those who did not feel as compelled to reflect on the occasion. The second image gives us more advice through Good Guy Greg. Greg remembers it’s 9/11, but doesn’t bother us about it on Facebook. In the OP’s conception, a good guy thing to do is to reflect without adding to the Facebook discourse.

The third image makes the strongest stance against remembrance. Instead of commenting on prevailing treatment of 9/11, it takes a contrary position regarding the event itself. There’s not much ambiguity in the white text overlays the black smoke billowing from the burning towers: ‘Fuck you America. You got what you deserved’. Exemplary in its explicit dismissal of Americentric narratives around 9/11, it matches the others as a rejection of the gravity of the event. This fits well with Kuipers’ (2002, 2005) point about the 9/11 ‘internet disaster jokes’ that emerged in the days and weeks following the event, they were often “a reaction to, as well as comment on, mass media and media culture” (2002, p. 451). They were a response to media commentaries that “attempt to prescribe the audience’s reactions, forcing feelings of grief and mourning upon them” (p. 452). This irreverence used an alternative medium to make an alternative statement about the event. A decade after Kuipers’ observations, these jokes still serve as a commentary on the commentary, “a way for jokesters, for a variety of reasons, to separate themselves from the obligatory response” (2005, p. 70).

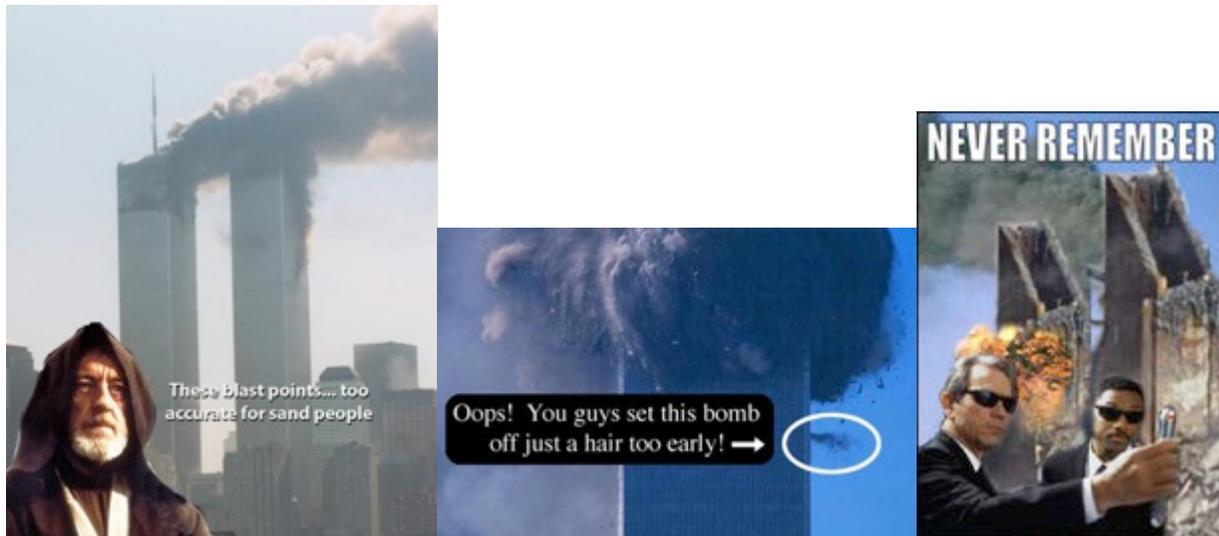
Another counter-narrative on meme sites was to critique how the US responded to 9/11 in the ten years since the attack. Much like the posts that questioned US military interventionism

more broadly, these posts satirized the social and political aftermath of 9/11 in US national policy:



The comic above tells the story of American opportunism in the emotional aftermath of 9/11. The towers are destroyed (by planes with troll faces). A country music star sees the destruction, puts on his ‘me gusta’ face, and claims it’s time to make money. The comic is a commentary on the exploitation of pain and fear for the sake of selling songs. The second presents an image of a man – read as a Middle Eastern terrorist – holding out his hand and laughing at how the TSA handles airline security post 9/11. The terrorist’s wide smile implies a gloat, like he won because the US changed its policies in favor of security over personal freedom. The image’s slick aesthetic and common tongue vernacular serve its point. These images critique US political or social practices post 9/11 through pop savvy commentary.

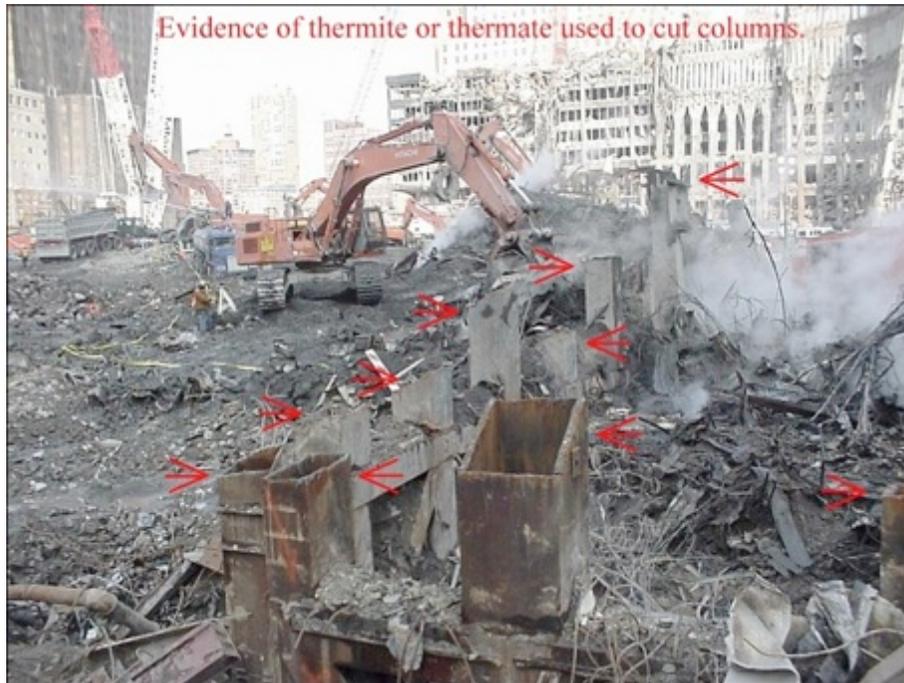
On 4chan and Canvas in particular, another aspect of 9/11 was debated through image, often by reappropriating pop culture texts. There was a prevalent argument on these sites as to whether the 9/11 was an ‘inside job’, perpetrated by the American government, or at least the result of something more than a terrorist attack from an Islamist sect. The three images below extend the argument through image over text, applying memetic tactics to make their points:



The first image is of *Star Wars*' Obi-Wan Kenobi, shopped against a picture of the towers burning. His quote – a direct one from the film – is a play on words. In the film, when Obi-Wan says “These blast points...too accurate for Sand People”, it is about how the evil Galactic Empire disguised an oppressive political attack as the senseless work of local savages called Sand People. Of course, ‘Sand People’ here becomes a derogatory stand in for al-Qaeda in specific, and Middle Easterners in general. The metaphor does two things. First, it implies Arab terrorists, like the Sand People from *Star Wars*, are too savage and disorganized to pull off such an orchestrated and precise attack. Second, it draws a discursive link between the US and the evil Galactic Empire by an intertextual combination. Those familiar with the film would be immediately familiar with the connotations. The second image makes a vernacular and visual argument for one of these ‘blast points’, suggesting an errant explosion is evidence of an internal bomb misfiring.

The third image plays on ‘Never Forget’ by changing it to ‘Never Remember’ and giving us a ‘memory wipe’ from the secret government agents in the film *Men in Black*. It’s a comment on conspiracy and misdirection on the part of the American government. The image behind the text and characters is telling. It’s a shot of columns cut across precisely, supposedly at the base

of the towers. The annotated image argues for the importance of these precise cuts. Below, the same literacy that produces humor and diversions is applied beyond joking here:



The argument is that instead of a plane hit taking the towers down from the top, a precise process was used to take the towers down from the bottom. The four images above each make this argument. Two do so by drawing explicitly on pop culture texts. Two do so by applying the transformative literacy needed to annotate images in less obviously humorous ways. The same literacies make the same argument in different ways using different degrees of pop intertextuality.

The factual truth of these claims is less important than their discursive truth. They demonstrate the use of memes to engage a minority political perspective through the reappropriation of broader texts and practices. Indeed, other posters contested these kinds of claims fiercely when they were proposed. Their existence and the refutations they encouraged demonstrate a few things. First, meme collectives opened up room for counter-mainstream discourses. Second, this was often done by incorporating either pop culture texts or pop culture

sensibilities. Third, literacy in meme conventions – inserting images, overlaying text, building from a subculturally specific corpus of pop culture texts – were applied to arguments more intricate than jokes. Subcultural literacy is needed to launch these debates, but its application is more diverse than the occasional tongue-in-cheek commentary. Through these pop applications, the austerity of 9/11 was trivialized; its sacredness was dismissed; its aftermath was questioned; its authenticity was countered. Each of these pushed against the predominate discourses on the event.

Occupying meme subcultures. Much like with the death of bin Laden and 9/11, as soon as Occupy Wall Street became a piece of national discourse, it became a subject of discussion on meme sites. And far from being fringe, these commentaries influenced broader discourses on the movement. But not all of this discussion was overtly political or took an obvious side. In fact, a great deal of it seemed to be more about making jokes than coming out for or against. The exploding twin towers were sometimes a canvas for playful remix; so too were iconic notions from the Occupy movement. And as with 9/11 and bin Laden, Occupy discourses intertwined with pop culture texts. For instance, the term ‘Occupy’ was applied in many macros and shops in a way that was not an obvious show of support or derision:



These three images apply the term ‘Occupy’ to three pop culture texts highly esteemed and often referenced in meme subcultures: *Harry Potter* (the evil Lord Voldemort occupying the magical school from the film), *Star Wars* (the savage Sand People occupying their home planet), and *The Lord of the Rings* (the heroic fellowship occupying the kingdom of the dark force Sauron). The images seem indifferent to any specific political stance. They also didn’t spawn purposeful discussion of the movement when they were created. They might be a means to trivialize the movement, but the fact that they pull from such beloved texts and come from the perspectives of both heroes and villains in those texts is more evidence for indifference. Their usage is creative play that acknowledges the movement while focusing more steadfastly on possible fictional applications of that movement.

There were similar ambivalent uses of the iconic 99 Percent theme that recurred in the movement’s discourse. The cry that rallied the people against economic inequality was also used less politically:



None of these are overtly sympathetic to the movement. They seem ambivalent at best, and trivialize the protests at worst. The most straightforward reading is that they are remixes for the sake of creative play. They take a memetic convention (blurry shots of handwritten notes ending in an identification with a Percenter category) and find new ways to apply it for a humorous

effect. They use a familiar piece of national discourse to make a pun on milk fat percentage, to joke about cat entitlement, or to participate in the always-popular custom of making fun of a friend's mom. They reappropriate the 99 Percent discourse to humorous ends, but this does not mean these creative reappropriations are negative. It is precisely this kind of creative remix that allows for the broader participation with memes. It is precisely these kinds of skills that constitute the literacy needed for a more 'serious' political contribution. The ambivalence is important too; it reminds us political participation is not always a simple binary. There are degrees of engagement with political events and popular culture.

Memes join the protest. Of course, these examples are not surprising given how intertwined the Occupy movement was with pop culture and pop media. But other uses were more overtly political, combining pop texts and meme artifacts with more overt support or criticism. Early on in the movement, pop and protest strands physically converged, as memes were translated into physical artifacts at the protests themselves. Specifically, memes were worked into protest signs, which were in turn shared on the meme sites discussing the Occupation:



A lolcat sign reads 'Teh Banksters foreclosed on mah Cheezburger'. Another protestor uses an 'All the Things' Rage Face to argue we 'occupy ALL the streets'. And we've seen this protestor, who uses the Y U NO Rage Face to ask the top one percent of income earners 'Y U NO PAY

TAXES?!'. He is wearing the Guy Fawkes mask Anonymous has reappropriated from the film *V For Vendetta*. This was another common protest practice derived from net culture:



These images all demonstrate how pop heavy media collectives became mobilized into physical presence during the Occupy protests.

The inverse occurred as well. Established memes were employed to make commentary on the Occupy protests:



The first image is a lolcat gloating about the power of amateur media, posted along with a discussion of the use of Livestream and YouTube during the Occupy protests. The second uses Philosoraptor to ask about the frequent charges of ‘class warfare’ by right-wing pundits in response to the protests. In the third image, Business Cat uses his business prowess to ‘be a people’ by making a ‘corpuration’. By drawing on net subculture, protestors and OPs discursively tied the amateur ethos of the net and the amateur ethos of the Occupy movement.

The practices were not wholly endorsed, either from within or outside of the movement. For as many who thought they were a way to incorporate participatory practices into a participatory movement, there were those who thought it was a mark of immature public discourse. On 4chan and Reddit, the interplay of memes and protests was often the subject of debate. Any time an artifact was presented that interwove the discourses, there was sure to be critique. Some thought the use of memes undermined its aims and delegitimized its participants. This stacked still makes a critique of the interdiscursivity:



Even if Occupy protestors think they're partaking in an uprising as glorious as the French Revolution, the image argues, they're really just overweight losers quoting memes in netspeak, and banally parroting over-simple platitudes. In the bottom panel, the bemused green-faced man in the tie is the face of 'old Anonymous'. Before the Guy Fawkes mask became popular, Anonymous (or 4chan itself) was often portrayed as a man in a suit with a green face free of any

defining facial features. In this case, old Anonymous looks on, frustrated with the state of mediated engagement and activism. The argument is that the meme-heavy pop engagement of Occupy protestors undercuts the efficacy of the message.

Given that the ‘first rule of the internet’ according to 4chan is that ‘you don’t talk about /b/’, bleed over between memes and ‘real life’ is often critiqued. However, it’s also common practice to incorporate memes into ‘offline’ discourse, and to take pictures of those incorporations and share them on meme sites:



A Forever Alone cookie, a Y U No tattoo, and a Challenge Accepted ad board would likely be met with a mix of encouragement and derision when recirculated back onto the sites that inspired them. Even their mere existence demonstrates that some do not carry such concerns. The debate – prevalent enough under everyday circumstances – was compounded when memes were used to make political points. Regardless, when ‘the internet is leaking’ (to use a Cheezburger Network phrase) into broader political discourses, then it’s further evidence pop and politics are deeply intertwined to both those applying pop and those bristling at its application.

Combining texts, broadening discourses. There are other examples of pop savvy commentary in the Occupy movement that might have political implications closer to the kind

advocated by van Zoonen (2005) or Jenkins (2006). These examples use transformative literacy to tie pop culture texts to explicit commentary on the movement. For instance, a few weeks into the protest, Occupy Wall Street was remixed into Occupy Sesame Street. The series took iconic moments of protest and shopped characters from the *PBS* children's series *Sesame Street* into them:



When Sesame Street is occupied, police restrain Grover as he pulls away mouth agape. Cookie Monster sits in as an aristocrat, consuming 99 percent of the world's cookies. The count cries with eyes red from pepper spray. The image series used the realities of the movement to spawn creative remix. Here Big Bird's protest sign is a yellow-clawed version of the oft-used clinched fist in Occupy posters:



Bert is dragged off in handcuffs instead of this real-world protestor:



In these images factual moments of protest are transformed into humorous reappropriation.

These images are easy to dismiss as mere creative play. After all, they do the same thing as the ambivalent images above about Hogwarts, Tatooine, and Mordor. They use the movement to create a humorous juxtaposition between a current event and a fictional world. These pop culture remixes might contribute little to public discourse. They might be evidence of a cheapened public dialogue. However, they're an inverse of the *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *Lord of the Rings* reappropriations that opened this section. Instead of taking the Occupy premise and inserting it into a fictional universe, these images take a fictional universe – a treasured childhood one – and insert it right in the middle of the Occupy movement. The banal notion of using Occupy as a metaphor to describe the journey into Mordor becomes more powerful when *Sesame Street* characters are used as a metaphor for the young protestors being hauled away for nonviolent protest. Silly on one level, yes. On another level though, an argument on the affiliations of the protestors, and the resulting injustices of the authorities detaining them. After all, Lievrouw (2011) claims “alternative/activist media projects have an acute sense of *irony* and *humor*, especially in their appropriation of mainstream cultural images and ideas to advance alternative or oppositional meanings” (p. 66, original emphasis).

This point gets even more salient in the case of another iconic remix series: Pepper Spray Cop. The meme was inspired by an image of police Lieutenant John Pike walking in apparent nonchalance pepper spraying a group of sit-in Occupy protestors at the University of California, Davis. The significant presence of amateur media at the event ensured the disciplinary action was captured. Videos and images of the event drew enough attention to become discursive landmarks in the Occupy movement. One image in particular, posted to Reddit the day after the event, spawned memetic remix across sites (including, eventually its own popular tumblog):



In the days that followed, Lieutenant Pike was cut out of this photo and shopped into several historical situations, pepper spraying nonchalantly as he travelled through time. Below, he makes trips across cultural landmarks, applying his crowd control measures to unlikely targets:



He stops at Sesame Street to punish Grover yet again. He also makes an appearance at the Last Supper to pepper spray Jesus, and at the national Vietnam War memorial to spray a mourner as fallen heroes look on. Along with the iconic artifacts above, Pepper Spray Cop was remixed into a wide variety of images, from publicity shots to movie stills to historical photos to famous paintings.

Pepper Spray Cop was repeatedly portrayed applying his force to fictional innocents from popular media texts:



The first image victimizes the All-American little guy, George Bailey from the film *It's a Wonderful Life*. In an iconic scene between George and the rich town bully, Mr. Potter, Pepper Spray Cop is inserted to control the situation. His position behind Mr. Potter gives the impression he is a hired goon, dispelling a man who spoke up for equality of opportunity and transparent business practices. In the second, the good-natured troublemaker from the Peanuts comic series, Snoopy, is told to behave by the staunch authoritarian Lucy. He sticks his tongue out in defiance. He is pepper sprayed for his independence against oppression. In the third, a character from Dr. Seuss' *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is targeted. Little Cindy Loo Hoo, 'no more than two', is being pepper sprayed as her doey eyes look up with the hope that Christmas will be a time of prosperity and togetherness. Pop culture images to be sure, but ones that carry

an ethos hard to deny. That Pepper Spray Cop has chosen these characters to discipline is a discursive choice with political undertones.

Pepper Spray Cop also took on historical icons as well, adding another facet to the social commentary. The historical moments in the images below are arguably less ‘pop’, but they’re certainly no less powerful and no less important to public imagination. It’s no surprise Pepper Spray Cop turned his sights on some of the most iconic displays of protest in the last century:



The first image is of an unknown Chinese protestor, called Tank Man. In the original 1989 photo, he stands resolute in Tiananmen Square, even after Chinese authorities have forcibly removed protestors and sent their tanks through the Square. In this image, Pepper Spray Cop has come out to stop the tomfoolery. The second photo, a 1963 capture of Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức burning himself alive in protest of religious persecution at the hands of the South Vietnamese, is another powerful image of social protest. Pepper Spray Cop again interrupts it, taking the time to spray the eyes of a man burning himself alive anyway. The third image turns a social justice victory on its head. The photo is a 1956 shot of Rosa Parks – who famously refused to give her bus seat to a white passenger in 1955 – riding the newly integrated Montgomery Alabama bus system. Pepper Spray Cop is having none of that. Legal integration or no, he is there to make sure Parks gets her dose of pepper spray. Each of these moments stands in as symbols of the stern resolution of activists in the face of oppressive state forces. And each is degraded by a Lieutenant with a rogue spray can.

Even mainstream moments of American heroism were the subject of Pepper Spray Cop attention. In particular, a few images point to how Pepper Spray Cop is unraveling the fabric of American strength:



These images represent national fixtures. The first image modifies a painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware River as he prepares a surprise attack on enemy forces in Trenton, New Jersey. The moment is a defining part of the story of Washington's military prowess, resolute character, and unmatched patriotism. Pepper Spray Cop revises that history, so much so that George Washington no longer appears in the image. Where he once stood is Pepper Spray Cop. In the place of the national hero used to teach schoolchildren what's best about America is a uniformed officer assaulting his own men as they try to accomplish a dangerous and heroic act. The second image is a 1945 photo of American troops raising the flag over the island of Iwo Jima after a long and costly battle with Japan for control of the island. Pepper Spray Cop inserts himself here to spray them for their heroism. Again, he turns his nozzle on the very people struggling in his benefit. The third image is the most abstract, but maybe the most obvious in its commentary. Here the US Constitution itself – a synecdoche for American values – is being blotted out by Pepper Spray Cop. His weapon is disseminating ink over the document that represents the ideals considered the core of American prosperity. Each of these images argue from the premises of the American establishment that Pepper Spray Cop is an attack on American ideals. Taken together, the discursive and textual choices made in many Pepper Spray

Cop memes make a social point about the events. Innocents and heroes are oppressed or attacked by an instrument of soulless governmental control. In line with Atton (2004), mashup is used in these images to create prescient political commentary.

During the Occupy Wall Street movement, internet memes, pop culture texts, and political engagement interwove in complex ways. The mediated practices of participants in meme collectives bled out into broader discourses on the protests. When participants on Tumblr started sharing 99 Percent photos and Pepper Spray Cop shops along with funny pictures of cats, traditional media outlets carried the story. When participants on Reddit linked to Occupy posters and protest videos along with Rage Comics, they mobilized pop networks for polyvocal participation. If one of the outcomes of the Occupy movement was to shift the national discussion, by drawing attention to the event, then pop texts and meme networks were a crucial part of that outcome.

Broadening Political Participation

This chapter set out to answer how political perspectives were articulated through meme. Most fundamentally, as I researched, memes were used to engage in polyvocal discussions over political events. Worries about echo chambers were not confirmed in these political discussions. In fact, the daily social realities presented in Chapter Five demonstrate far more substantial hegemony of opinion. Even if perspectives on social identity are exclusionary on meme sites, discussions on political events are full of diverse perspectives. Arguments over social identity often meant antagonism, but arguments over political events often meant agonism. As participants discussed the Middle East and Occupy Wall Street, there were examples of othering in the moral register (like equating the 99 Percent with godless hippies and the 53 Percent with dutiful patriots). However, there were also examples of issue-oriented debate (like annotating 99

Percent and 53 Percent images with refutations to specific political points). Further, these diverse perspectives were expressed with depth through memes. Commentary turned to argument as annotative skills were applied to refute claims and provide evidence. The transformative literacy needed to make memes also enabled participants to more thoroughly engage in public discourse. There was more voice in the mediated agora for those actively engaging in meme processes.

Second, the political commentary on meme sites integrates pop perspectives into the discussion. More than being a shallow diversion, these understandings connect political events to popular texts, and therefore broaden modes of political participation. More arguments can happen in more ways because of the connection between pop, media, and politics. Appreciating the value of pop savvy mediated commentary means appreciating the role of participatory media in political engagement. Rather than viewing the discourse produced by meme collectives as an exemplar of some mythical 'online public sphere', it's more tempered to evaluate the discourses that occur on meme sites as interdependent and interdiscursive with broader narratives, perspectives, and texts. If we're to hope mediated cultural participation is democratizing, then we need to be open to alternative avenues of participation, and alternative means of argumentation. Even though memes have much to say on political topics, they do so existing within a political environment larger than their own. They combine the pop and the political in complex ways. If the memes that survive are the ones that the most of us can relate to, the most of us choose to share, and the most of us find engaging and rewarding, then it's fitting we pick the ones most pop. Further, the ones most pop need not be mutually exclusive from the ones most enriching. The concluding chapter of this project will connect process, identity, and politics in meme collectives and assess their worth to mediated cultural participation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lessons: The World Made Meme

Partial Participation in the Era of You

A 4chan OP, in a common 4chan practice, once described /b/ via meme. The comment was on the fierce and dirty process behind the memes that spread beyond the site:



Annotating a shopped image, the meme reappropriates a pop culture icon to tell a story about the participatory practices that birth memes. So the story goes, by the time ‘the internet’ gets a meme, /b/ has gone through hell to make it. The pretty flower is the result of the cultural work of the rawest core of mediated cultural participation. Before Reddit or Tumblr, before Facebook or Twitter, memes are violently forged deep within in the grit and grime of 4chan’s /b/.

Of course, that’s the narrative on 4chan. Some participants in other meme collectives accepted the ‘4chan as crucible’ argument, some countered it, and some could not have cared less. However, the image is representative of a broader truth: participation in meme collectives is partial. It requires an understanding of insider processes. It favors some perspectives over others. It draws on some discourses more prevalently than others. By the time many memes reach the

point of mass consumption on ‘the internet’, they have been extensively influenced by the partial population who actively participate on meme sites. This slice of the era of you belongs to a relative few.

Fundamentally, this project meant to provide a thorough examination of how this mediated cultural participation plays out. It was an evaluation of how processes, identities, and politics are opened and closed in meme collectives, and to what degree. The ultimate goal was to offer a grounded evaluation of how participatory media function in the era of you. With an eye for how internet memes – those prolific and versatile little artifacts – function as pieces of mediated public discourse, it asked the following three questions:

RQ1: How are memes guided by structural processes?

RQ2: How are social identities articulated through memes?

RQ3: How are political perspectives articulated through memes?

This chapter summarizes what memes have to offer in debates over agency and literacy in mediated cultural production, debates over the balance between exclusion and voice in mediated public discourse, debates on the nature of mediated commentary and argumentation in a pop heavy public sphere. It will do so by emphasizing how processes, identities, and politics intertwine in meme discourses. This discussion will end with an evaluation of the state and potential of mediated cultural participation in the era of you, of the world made meme.

Processes: The Transformative Literacy of Creative Social Agents.

Of memes and agents. In its discussion of the formal structures and social processes that guide participation in meme collectives, Chapter Two tapped into a debate long familiar to those

in the biological and cultural sciences (see Aunger, 2000c), and one creeping steadily into media studies. As the term ‘meme’ – both theoretical concept and media artifact – has become more visible in discussions of mediated cultural participation, so too has controversy over the term’s utility (see Jenkins, Ford & Green, in press; Shifman, 2011). Both in theoretical and empirical discussions, there have been multiple interpretations of the term. It might be used as a rigid genetic metaphor, boiling cultural transmission down to direct imitation (Dawkins, 1976; Blackmore, 1999). It might be used as a descriptor of the messiness of cultural transmission, emphasizing social processes rather than specific entities (Hull, 2000; Sperber, 2000). It might not even be worth using at all, because of its potential for misunderstanding and misapplication by those seeking to dissect cultural artifacts (Richerson & Boyd, 2005; Jenkins, Ford & Green, in press). The debate is ultimately over how free social actors are to resist, challenge, or transform memes in their engagement with social realities.

And ‘meme’ isn’t the only biological metaphor being debated in media studies. ‘Viral’ is another used to describe artifacts produced and spread in online contexts. Viral artifacts are supposedly distinct from memes in that they spread between participants, but aren’t remixed or mutated. The blog of the Cheezburger Network says viral content “is passed from person to person, but does not evolve or change during the transmission process” (Huh, 2011, March 28). Memes, of course, are subject to evolution and remix as they spread. Shifman (2011) makes the same distinction between memes and viral artifacts. However, she acknowledges that in practice the line between the two is blurry. For instance, in late 2010, the ‘Double Rainbow Guy’ – who recorded his reaction to a double rainbow above his home and put it on YouTube – became a viral sensation, in that his original content was spread across websites and traditional media outlets. But it was also remixed: inserted into webcomics, mentioned in other online discourses,

and AutoTuned and posted back to YouTube. The AutoTuned version became incredibly popular on its own, and spread around in the same manner as the original. This may be a story of a viral video that spawned memes. It may simply be story of a meme. The two are not as clear in practice as they are in definition. But both are critiqued as deterministic language.

It is for this debate, and for the lack of utility of the term ‘viral’, that the term ‘meme’ might be worth keeping. The critique Jenkins, Ford, and Green (in press) articulate is well taken. However, a thorough look into how ‘meme’ is operationalized in both scientific and cultural understandings reveals nuance in its use. How meme collectives used the term in this project echoes this nuance. Based on these uses, it’s an oversimplification to say ‘meme’ is solely used deterministically. As Blackmore (2000) argues:

Many people seem to think that imitation is a crude and blindly mechanistic process that is the antithesis of human creativity, which is conscious and purposive. Theirs is indeed a very different view from my own, and entirely misses the point that evolutionary processes are creative. (pp. 28-29)

While the term ‘viral’ is problematic (because of its stronger emphasis on the ‘meme as germ’ metaphor), ‘meme’ is a large and diverse enough idea to hold the autonomous decisions of social agents. Given the ambiguous differences between the two concepts anyway, ‘meme’ is a fitting replacement for the strong determinism connoted by ‘viral’ spread. Calling a piece of discourse spread by mediated cultural participants a ‘meme’ acknowledges the interplay of imitation and transformation in any cultural transmission, and leaves room for agency in that process.

Conte (2000) emphasizes the need for meme theory to further appreciate the role of ‘limited autonomous agents’ in cultural participation. As more theorists, journalists, and practitioners heed this call, the term should lose some of its deterministic sting. ‘Meme’ did not

come with many deterministic connotations on the sites in this project. It was used right alongside discussions of the merits or faults of subcultural texts, social agents, and political actions. An evaluation of a meme was never far from an evaluation of the decision-making processes important to its creation or interpretation. Participants on meme collectives (the very collectives which chose to apply the theoretical term to internet artifacts) consistently worked within a paradigm of choice. Those who wished to participate had to demonstrate they understood the subculturally negotiated ground rules for participation. Once they did, innovation was encouraged. Memes that transformed from a stable core were positively received. Participants acknowledged the agency in innovation. Jenkins, Ford, and Green (in press) discuss how participants on the site 4chan consistently reappropriate cultural texts as they create their discourse. Why rob them of their agency to reappropriate a term like meme? Media and cultural scholars should not dismiss the term because some operationalize it deterministically. Instead of implying passivity, understanding memes as the decisions of social agents means acknowledging that every meme is the results of a million individual decisions compounded by collective processes into a social practice.

Transformative literacy, subcultural evaluations. This usage of meme supports the view that literacy is crucial when participating in meme subcultures. To participate innovatively in meme collectives, an understanding of the processes guiding them is first required. Participants in this study, to engage the networks of mediated cultural participation that house memes, had to know how to ‘do it right’ by subcultural standards. This meant fluency in subcultural practices and literacy in how to create from within them. Once proficient in these processes, participants could engage transformatively. Knowing the rules and breaking them (like creatively reappropriating a Rage Face on r/ffffffuuuuuuuuuuuu) was viewed more



These comics are objectively quite *illiterate* by subcultural standards. In the first comic, the conventional Rage Faces are portrayed as detached heads on being cooked on a frying pan. In the second comic, the last panel takes what is generally a drunk face and reads it as a bad haircut.

However, many in the Reddit community lauded comics that might have been derided if placed in r/TerribleFacebookMemes. Redditors came to r/EFLComics and constructively critiqued both the linguistic and subcultural literacy of posters, intermingling comments about subject/verb agreement with the ‘proper’ use of certain faces. And they did so with a supportive tone rare when dealing with deviations attributed to illiteracy. The tone of critique was likely helped by the explicitly educational aims of the comics and the insider status of the instructor. But those comics that still fit within dominant discourses were particularly valued. Even these comics were evaluated within paradigms of win, fail, and WTF. For instance, one Redditor, in a statement that simultaneously exoticized a minority representation and respected subcultural literacy called the following narrative ‘the haiku of Rage Comics’:



All three EFL comics here fit within dominant discourses. The first comic above presents an unlikely win (being delicious). The second is a WTF at the stylist who messed up the haircut. The third is a fail that came from a false win. These proficiencies might be part of the reason why Redditors so enthusiastically engaged with EFL Comics (that it's a prosocial behavior could be another). Even without full mastery of the processes needed to create perfect Rage Comics, these comics demonstrate a competency with the dominant discourses governing them.

As Lange and Ito (2010) argue, the creation of participatory media artifacts is reliant on transformation. McGee (1990) tells us it's increasingly the job of social actors to build their own texts from the intertextual fragments they're presented. If this is the case, then transformative literacy will only become more important as students, citizens, and communities engage with the world around them. If memes are artifacts produced by transformative engagement with cultural texts and practices, then understanding the processes that undergird their creation, circulation, and transformation is of no little value. While they are situated within broader cultural determinants, memes are built from the innovative processes of transformatively literate social agents.

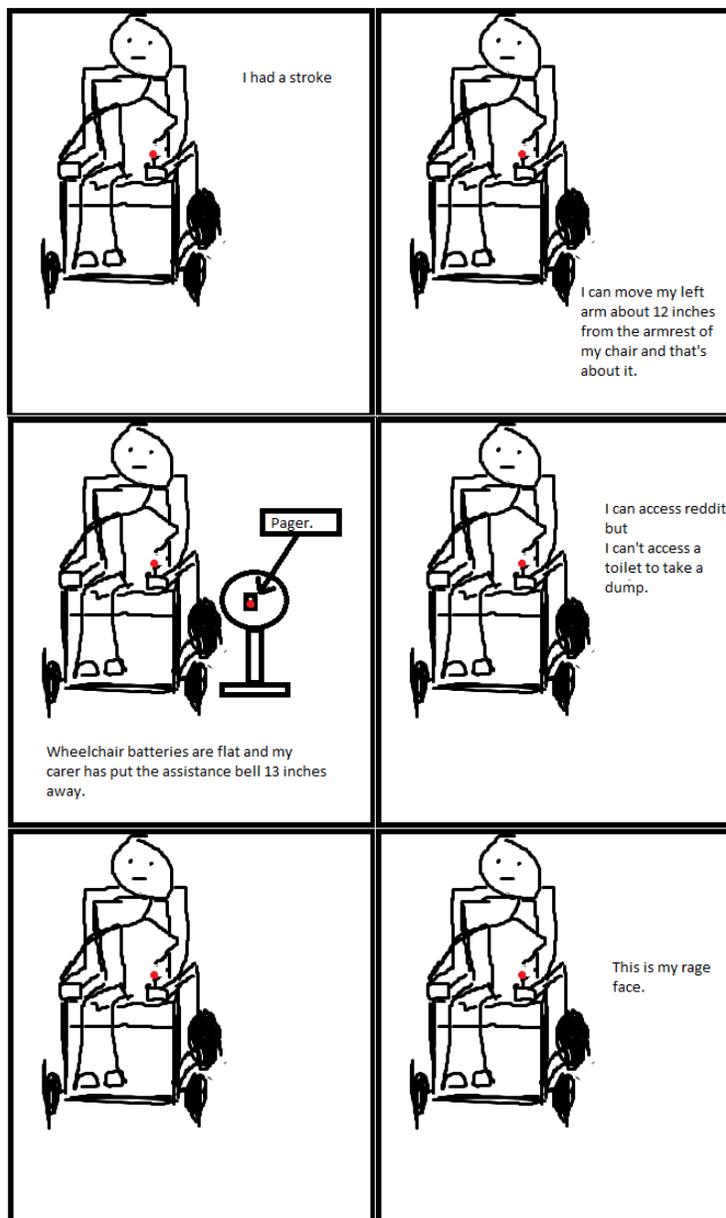
Identities: Representing Win, Fail, and WTF.

Deciding win, fail, and WTF. Potential for innovation aside, Chapters Four and Five found decidedly exclusionary content even in an ostensibly participatory form. With apologies to McLuhan (1964), there's more to the message than the medium. This study, in line with Castells' (2009) discussion of global media networks and cultural participation, demonstrated that economic, social, cultural, and individual elements gatekeep cultural participation. This is even true in the era of you, which we can now certainly confirm is partial and privileged. We've long known about the digital divide (Chadwick, 2006; Couldry, 2007; Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002), so this isn't the intriguing part of the debate on social identity and social roles in mediated cultural participation. The intriguing debate is how much room there is in networks of mediated cultural participation for negotiations against such cultural dominance.

There's evidence it's hard to overcome group discrimination in disembodied mediated interaction. Kendall (2002) demonstrates this in her analysis of masculinity in the BlueSky MUD. Kuipers (2002) calls discourses online 'blandly global'. Hughey (2008) even sees

hegemony and group distinctions being reproduced on minority-focused sites of mediated cultural participation. SIDE (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998) correlates disembodied media and deindividuation. However, even these studies make some room for negotiations. Others highlight it. Warnick (2002) finds a complex back and forth between dominant identities and cultural reappropriations in Cybergrrl subcultures. Danet and Herring (2007) compile a strong argument for the power of mediated linguistic reappropriation, even with cultural and financial hegemonies in place. Lévy (2001) doesn't think dominant discourses mean we should completely lose hope for participation in mediated interaction. We know that inequalities of access and skill influence mediated cultural participation. The intriguing question is whether there's room for negotiations in, with, and against these dominant discourses.

Judging by this project, there's room for negotiation. Transformative literacy is premised on just that. The dominant discourses found here – win, fail, and WTF – were the ground rules by which multiple perspectives could participate. They were the lingua franca for subcultural engagement. For instance, in this comic, the OP uses an aesthetically monotone style to tell a rage story with surprising depth:



Rage is birthed from a serious disability and a mistake by a caretaker. The self-aware humor that ends the comic expresses an emotion beyond any Rage Face. In fact, that the entire six-panel comic is the same image (one not in the standard catalogue of Rage Faces) only makes the point even stronger. While the OP's exterior expression cannot change, he can communicate a range of inward emotions. He does not need a Rage Face to tell you that this is his Rage Face. A

marginalized identity voices that marginalization by innovating on dominant discourses. His meta commentary demonstrates his insider status even as he breaks with insider norms.

Knowing how to participate in the discussion meant a proficiency in telling stories of fail, win, and WTF. These stories were premised on social categorizations. Certain characters were more likely to fail, others more likely to win, still others to elicit a WTF. This reveals two ways dominant discourses influenced discussions of social roles on meme sites. Formally, the dominance of the fail, win, and WTF genres gave participants conventions from which to transform. Content wise, specific groups were cast as ‘us’ and cast as ‘them’, with exclusionary implications. Properly creating a Sheltering Suburban Mom macro meant knowing that she should generically be a WTF, and that she should be placed there because of her social, political, and cultural entitlement and hypocrisy.

But the binaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ weren’t so simple or clearly defined. This is why they invited discursive negotiation. Sometimes the tone and purpose of a text – like *Insanity Wolf* – was up for multiple reinterpretations. Sometimes the text itself – like *Successful Black Man* – was a site for negotiation, depending on what antecedents a participant brought to the reading. Negotiations were also evident around those large categories of social identity: class, race, and gender. Different sites had different norms regarding each. Different participants interpreted each in different ways, and used memes as a means to negotiate interpretations with others. The dominant discourse on gender in meme subcultures was not too far from the perspectives Kendall (2002) reported. However, as 4chan critiqued ‘woman logic’, and Reddit lamented the ‘friend zone’, Tumblr gave us ‘Fuck Yeah Ryan Gosling’. There was a back and forth internal to each of these sites as well. 4chan’s ‘Femanons’ – though marked for gender by the very term they used to describe themselves on the site – often spoke up for gender equality in ‘woman

logic threads'. On Reddit, friend zone memes inspired as much critique as praise. And on Tumblr, Ryan Gosling memes oscillated between empowerment of female voice and essentialization of female identities.

Social and political negotiations. While there's extensive (and sometimes jarring) evidence that old discriminations are perpetuated through memes, there's reason to be optimistic, particularly considering the explicitly political dimensions of social representations in memes. Memes – due to the multiplicity of representations that can be elaborated from their core conventions – house the potential for polyvocal negotiations. The networks of mediated cultural participation that are employed to share memes have room for both dominant and oppositional representations. The political and the social intertwine in these engagements.

The social and the political intertwined in memes that offered commentary on social injustices. The images below make a point about 'first world' contribution to international suffering:



Each of these images is ostensibly prosocial in commenting on the political implications of American consumerist practices. The first image tells us this about diamonds: "nothing says 'I

love you' like a superficial and overvalued rock clawed from the guts of the earth by African slave labour'. The second is from a thread on Canvas where the middle panel was left blank and participants had to put in an image that would send the character from the first and third panel away crying. In this case, the interruption is an image of an apparent African girl mining old electronics for scraps to sell. The character in the third panel no longer needs to take out the trash after seeing what an African girl does with it. Instead, tears stream as she walks away saying 'never mind'. More tears fall in the third as the picture of a small Asian child is captioned with the phrase 'I MAKE iPHONES'. However, as these images comment on injustices, they walk a fine line toward essentializing social identities. A preponderance of decontextualized international images like this (like First World Problems and Third World Success Kid) can perpetuate easy stereotypes and shut down nuanced engagement with diverse perspectives. WTFs with the best intentions can mean a dominant discourse that sets up political and social binaries between 'us' and 'them'.

Social identities were the grounds for substantial nuance and negotiation in meme collectives, even if dominant perspectives were prevalent. The fact that participants could make commentaries that might be reprimanded or dismissed in embodied environments, and that these commentaries were the launching point to negotiations over social roles and political realities, means there's potential in memes for polyvocal engagement. Participation was intensely gate-kept on meme sites, but those willing to work around those gates, or to challenge them directly, were rewarded by having a space for their own commentary.

Politics: Commentary and Argument through Pop Polyvocality.

Transformative literacy and pop commentary. All this complex social work occurred on mediated networks of participation that are marked as pop culture. In some readings, memes

are jokes and diversions that might distract us from important public engagement. Their engagement might even be seen as antisocial, anti-intellectual, and antithetical to public discourse. Chapter Three asked these commentary questions around social identities; Chapter Four asked them around specific political events. The debate in either chapter wasn't whether pop culture has an influence on public discourse. This has been established going back to Bourdieu (1984) and Hebdige (1979). The question in this project was whether pop politics have a *positive* influence on public discourse. Some are wary of such pop savvy public discourse (Babcock & Whitehouse, 2005; Corner & Pels, 2003; Weiskel, 2005). The increased prevalence of mediated interaction only exacerbates these fears (Kirby, 2009). Maybe when we talk politics over networks of mediated cultural participation, we engage with diverse opinions antagonistically (see Ess, 2009). Maybe we don't engage with them at all (Sunstein, 2007). The concern in both these critiques is that our age of fragmentation, mediation, consumerism, and individualism (Dahlgren, 2007, 2009) is robbing us of the ability to effectively engage in participatory politics.

There are, as we know, champions of mediated, pop savvy participation. Dahlgren (2007, 2009) – even positing the premise that we're fragmented, mediated, consumerist, and individualistic – still stays popular mediated engagement can be of value to political participation. Van Zoonen (2005) vociferously argues that media, pop, and politics should be intertwined in order to provide citizens a compelling reason to engage and an accessible logic by which to do so. G. Baym (2005, 2007, G. Baym & Shah, 2011) argues entertaining, humorous, ironic, satirical takes on politics like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are of no little value political discourse.

This project is evidence there can be a positive relationship between pop savvy mediation and vibrant political commentary. Certainly, many memes were apolitical. And many that were political were also ad hoministic or exclusionary. But even if Occupy memes would often use the movement as an apolitical canvas, and even if Occupy memes would often reproduce simplified arguments and social categorizations, there were many counter examples. Mediated networks like 4chan, Reddit, Tumblr, the Cheezburger Network, and Canvas were mobilized during the Occupy movement, producing volumes of political commentary. Sometimes simple memes contained complex commentary, like the ‘Awesome Possibilities’ macro from Chapter Five. Sometimes simple memes *spawned* complex commentary in the discourse that surrounded them, like the extensive debates that occurred in and around images claiming protestors were entitled and privileged.

The pop participation that spawned political commentary demanded the transformative literacy discussed in Chapter Four. Dahlgren (2009) argues that the ability to engage with ‘new modalities of thought and expression’ and to reappropriate them in unforeseen ways means the ability to more wholly participate in public discourse. Hartley (2011) makes similar claims. As does Jenkins (2006) as he articulates how savvy participants can ‘Photoshop for democracy’, combining texts in unexpected ways to make fresh political commentary. Duncan-Andrade (2006) explores how urban youth in a summer program learned short film making as means for engagement with the social issues important to their community. By learning how to proficiently create, circulate, and transform multimodal texts, cultural participants can have more stake and say in the public sphere around them.

Transformative literacy can mean political voice. This was evidenced during the Occupy movement. At the height of the protests, pop culture networks were mobilized to critique power,

privilege, wealth, and inequality. These networks ended up churning out more than diversions, even as the serious points they produced were aesthetically reminiscent of those diversions. For instance, the meme practice of overlaying text and image was used to distribute prescient quotes from national figures during the movement:



The memetic tendency for contrast is employed in these quotes. A picture of American arrest is contrasted with Obama speaking out against police violence in Egypt. A World War II veteran

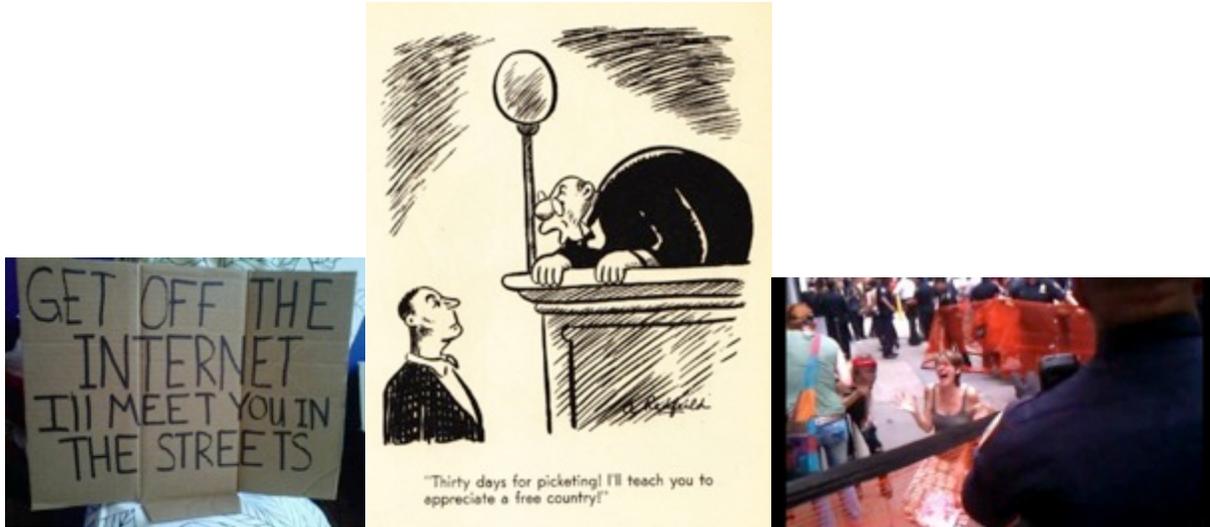
marches underneath a quote from conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh about ‘trust fund kids’ and ‘parasites’ participating in the protest. A disparaging quote from Representative Peter King is contrasted with an internal plea: ‘You Heard Him! Don’t Quit!’.

The Photoshop skills that were used to shoot rainbows out of Obama’s hands as he rode a unicorn were also applied to the leaflets and flyers posted by Occupy Wall Street activists for dissemination to supporters:



These images aren’t narrowly ‘memes’. However, they all use conventional transformation to make their argument: text overlaid on a close up of the Charging Bull, a censored face sitting over a hashtag, a play on a Jay-Z lyric paired with instructions to Google the movement. All build their argument by the same conventions necessary to create, circulate, and transform memes. All of these were posted to Tumblr and shared across multiple sites to make an argument for prosocial engagement.

And more than shops were shared. The same networks responsible for Hipster Kitty and Rage Comics were mobilized to share and debate pictures of protest signs, evidence of police altercations, links to news stories, information on representatives, and newspaper comics from the 1930s. All three of these stable images were passed along over meme sites:



The first is a snapshot of a protest sign at an Occupy rally. The second is from a depression-era comic series called 'The Ruling Clawss'. The third is footage of a kettled protestor after she was sprayed by New York police officer Antony Bologna. Meme sites were only part of this flow of information. For instance, during the height of the Occupy protests, Twitter accounts buzzed with information on upcoming events, the whereabouts of police paddy wagons, and the international support of Middle Eastern empathizers.

For those with the interest and intensity, net subculture was mobilized into a debate over social justice and American political equality. Many stable images were shared through the same sites that share memes. Charts cataloguing Wall Street contributions to the Obama campaign, photos of marches, and supportive editorial cartoons spread alongside remixed images of Pepper Spray Cop, Scumbag Bank of America, and Demotivational about Reaganomics. Engaged commentary in networks of mediated cultural participation came from the same proficiencies that facilitated the creation of macros and stacked stills. Pop texts and pop networks intertwined as those with the literacy to weave the discursive strands crafted commentary from unexpected sources.

Polyvocal argument. Further, memes were used for more than commentary. At times, they were used for multi-turn polyvocal deliberation. This would often occur in the discourse surrounding memes. However, it also occurred with surprising frequency through memes themselves. Some memes – like the dyad in Chapter Five that used the same aesthetics to critique the government dependence of Tea Party protestors and the corporate dependence of Occupy protestors – countered other memes directly. The 53 Percent memes were constructed as a direct point counter-point to 99 Percent memes (purposefully reminiscent in form, but contradictory in content). Further, some memes contained multi-turn argument in a single image. The use of annotation to counter 53 Percent and 99 Percent images demonstrates how transformative literacy can mean polyvocal political argument.

The polyvocal engagement on meme sites over political issues counters Sunstein's (2007) 'echo chamber' argument. Even on sites with a general tendency toward dominant and exclusionary social and subcultural identities, there was ample evidence of polyvocal participation in political debate. Even as dominant perspectives on Obama surfaced in the days after the execution of bin Laden, there was room for a nuanced pushback to these perspectives. Further, the same sites represented Obama very differently just a few months later during the Occupy protests. Commentary on meme sites wasn't the output of stagnant perspectives. It was vibrant engagement with political opposition. Even the Reddit 'hive mind', which was often implicitly and powerfully exclusionary (hence the critiques on r/ShitRedditSays), housed polyvocal political engagement.

Indeed, the more prescient worry might be that this disembodied argument was lacking in civility. Even by Papacharissi's (2004) forgiving standards, the back and forth on sites like 4chan was decidedly uncivil. Social categories were essentialized. Stereotypes, straw men, and ad

hominmen attacks thrived. Reddit had its fair share as well. However, incivility might only be seen as a symptom of too much polyvocality, not too little. Even if the outcome was at times more antagonism than agonsim, pop participation lead to the collision of many voices over political events.

And this polyvocality was certainly pop. While this might have Kirby (2009) worried, it meant quite a bit of value to the political discussion. Even the (admittedly disturbing) application of pop culture artifacts to scenes of the World Trade Center in Chapter Five might have counterdiscursive political purpose. This is especially true when we understand these artifacts as the sort of antisentimentalism found by Kuipers (2002, 2005). Occupy Sesame Street may have undermined the movement, but it may have also aligned protestors with cultural innocents, and authorities with oppression. Pepper Spray Cop may have been shallow pastiche. However, it may have been political commentary that served an important argumentative point, powerfully and visually making a statement about the nature of police action in the protests. If we wished to engage the University of California, Davis Pepper Spray incident, we could make a long-form textual argument about state control and civil liberties. We could post it to our blog or pass it around to friends and hope they read it thoroughly and engage it fairly. We could also use transformative literacy to show Pepper Spray Cop attacking George Bailey, negating Rosa Parks' moment of political triumph, or blotting out the constitution itself. Better yet, we could do both simultaneously. We could use the pop as a launching point to the political, in order to craft a more participatory argument. This diversity, as van Zoonen (2005) argues, values diverse perspectives, logics, and values.

The World Made Meme

The overarching question in this project has been who wins and why in mediated cultural participation. From the outset, more accessible, diverse, and polyvocal public discourse has been cast as a benefit to the public sphere. The answers presented in Chapters Four, Five, and Six are neither utopian nor dystopian. There are winners and losers in mediated cultural participation, and the categories by which the decisions are made are eerily similar to old hegemonies. However, the discussion is more open and vibrant, more polyvocal than it would be without amateur media networks. Amateur discourses, under the right circumstances, can have impressive voice and reach. Pepper Spray Cop is evidence of this. As is the fact that participants on 4chan cringed at the popularity of memes on Reddit, whose participants cringed at the popularity of memes on Facebook. A broader audience and the representational struggles that come with it mean there's polyvocality in the discourse. Birthed out of exclusionary enclaves, internet memes now spread to Facebook, *NPR*, *ABC*, and even the pub down the street. As memes become a more prevalent form of mediated discourses, there is increasing room for negotiations in, with, and against the dominant representations gatekeeping mediated cultural participation.

Further, this participation is increasingly vibrant in form, as transformative literacy can allow social actors to more thoroughly participate in public discourse. The participants who decide to use memes can ultimately use them how they want within a relatable lingua franca. This mix of the familiar and the new, the dominant and the negotiated, the pop and the political, gives memes a nimbleness and versatility as public discourse. The increased ability to create, circulate, and transform participatory media means we have room to be hopeful for mediated cultural participation.

These are the two senses in which the world may be made meme. In one sense, the world – the processes, identities, and politics we engage with during public discourse – is *made* meme as we use transformative literacy to add our own unique voice in the public perspectives we engage. Some do this more fluently than others. Some have more access to the necessary materials than others. Some choose to read, some to read and share, some to read, share, and create. In all cases, when participants make memes, they make their world meme. They stake out their role in the discourse, even if they're not quite as universally and diversely powerful as *TIME* thought they were in 2006 (Grossman, Dec. 25). In another sense, the *world* – the diverse individual and group perspectives that constitute the polyvocal cacophony that is the public – can increasingly make memes together. Multiple perspectives blend to collaboratively shade the discourse, even as frictions and fractions emerge. Textual and discursive strands can intertwine, even if not always smoothly or successfully. Again, some strands of the world are more represented than others. Some voices are more powerful and influential. But there exists potential for more diverse contributions.

We need to work on both senses if we want the world made meme. We need more ability to *make* memes: more transformative literacy. We also need more of the *world* making memes: more polyvocal participation. When we have more social agents working with more proficiency and vibrancy to engage the world – when more discourses engage more identities – then will we see the world made meme.

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