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The "Pepper-Spraying Cop" Icon and Its Internet Memes: Social Justice and Public Shaming Through Rhetorical Transformation in Digital Culture

Within hours of its publication online, the "pepper-spraying cop" image from the Occupy Wall Street movement at the University of California–Davis became an Internet meme. The outraged public manipulated key signifiers of the famous picture, creating hundreds of digital derivatives that offered new takes on what happened. With the use of iconographic tracking and visual rhetorical analysis, the study argues that Internet memes are more than silly jokes or social commentary. Through rhetorical transfigurations, they can deliver social justice and launch public shaming campaigns, serving as online instruments to respond to an off-line event.

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The "pepper-spraying cop" incident, as it was dubbed in the media, produced a single snapshot and a short video that went viral. Both capture a confrontation between a University of California–Davis police officer and several protestors boycotting tuition hikes during the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement. The image is striking: Lt. John Pike nonchalantly pepper sprays students sitting on a sidewalk, as if he were watering plants. With their arms locked, the students bow their heads to avoid the orange mist. The towering figure clad in riot gear aims directly for their eyes (Figure 1).

Days after the pepper-spraying photograph was posted on social media, some in the press lauded it as one of history's "iconic images of public protest" (Wasserstorm, 2011) and "the best-known icon of the OWS movement" (Wasserstorm, 2011). Its meteoric rise to stardom, some pundits claimed, happened thanks to the story that it captured: a clash between an overzealous representative of the establishment and peaceful protesters vying to changes the system. Such a blatant power struggle, the commentators said, triggered public outrage, condemnation, and heated debates about police brutality.

The backlash that the image unleashed was long-lasting and damaging—to the university, its chancellor, and the officer at the center of the controversy. The incident sparked several investigations alleging excessive use of force, eventually leading to Pike's termination. It also stoked furor online, mobilizing hundreds of Internet users to retaliate against Pike and the perceived militarization of police by transfiguring the famous snapshot into an Internet meme, a piece of cultural knowledge that replicates and mutates online through remixing (Shifman, 2014b; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). This highly trafficked artifact of digital culture inserted Pike in a variety of situations, targeting anything and anyone in his way, from kittens and children to the U.S. Constitution. Internet users deployed the meme to mock the officer and magnify the institutional abuse of power that the man came to represent.

The public scorn off- and online was, in fact, so damaging that UC–Davis spent more than $175,000 in the following years on an "online reputation management campaign" (Stanton & Lambert, 2016). The efforts to scrub the Internet of bad press came to light in April 2016—nearly five years after the pepper-spraying incident—

A photo of Lieutenant John Pike pepper spraying seated students at the UC Davis protest was taken by Louise Macabitas and posted to Reddit[1] on November 19th, 2011.

Photoshop Meme

Figure 1 The UC–Davis Police Officer John Pike pepper sprays students, November 18, 2011. Photo credit: Louise Macabitas via Reddit via knowyourmeme.com.

after *The Sacramento Bee* broke the story (Stanton & Lambert, 2016). The revelation fueled a new wave of online outrage, questioning and ridiculing the university's attempts to hide the past. Some even called for the chancellor's resignation. Internet users took to social media once again, this time circulating links to the coverage of the public relations campaigns, determined to undo them. Some resurrected the pepper-spraying cop meme to that end. One of the slogans that replicated on the popular social media platform Reddit declared, "guess it backfired on them."

The goal of this project is to trace and analyze such rhetorical ripple effects of the iconic snapshot that captured Pike's transgression as it circulated online through Internet memes following the infamous event. The study aims to understand the processes of meaning transformation and dissemination that happen when iconic photographs replicate, mutate, and spread through memes, creating "rhetorical circulation" (Gries, 2013, p. 333) of fresh coats of meaning open to societal scrutiny and negotiation (Ilan, 2014) in remix culture (Lessig, 2004a, 2004b, 2009). The overarching goal is to understand how such appropriations of famous images—those that are easily recognized thanks to their cultural resonance—diffuse through the Internet, what new meanings they produce, and what functions they serve for members of digital participatory culture. The focus, therefore, is not as much on the meme creators and their intended meanings of the pepper-spraying cop meme as it is on the artifacts themselves and their cultural signification during diffusion and circulation through cyberspace (Foss, 2005).

Memes are a "fundamental feature of socially and technologically propagated knowledge" (Spitzberg, 2014, p. 312) in contemporary digital culture, a "media lingua franca" (Milner, 2013a, p. 1). Although they have garnered some scholarly attention as a popular cultural practice (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2015; Huntington, 2013; Milner, 2013a, 2013b; Shifman, 2014b; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015), memetic iterations of iconic referents in particular and their "powers" of signification remain understudied. This project aims to, in part, remedy this oversight by building on the existing scholarship.

With the help of the pepper-spraying cop meme as an exemplar, the study engages a macrolevel analysis that recasts Internet memes as more than frivolous visual jokes or mere social chatter by illuminating their complex, sometimes contradictory, rhetorical work that transcends commentary. They can—and do on behalf of the outraged public—pack a rhetorical wallop. They dispense social justice off- and online at the hands of their authors, producing virtual shaming campaigns so severe as to resemble cyberbullying. Their producers weaponized them as tools of online stalking that hunt their targets relentlessly via the networked interwebs. The hundreds of damning pepper-spraying cop memes likely

contributed to the negative image of UC–Davis and were fodder for self-perpetuating anti-Pike vitriol online (Garofoli, 2013). Pike alleged psychiatric damage following the backlash; he received more than 17,000 threatening e-mails, 10,000 text messages, and hundreds of letters and was ultimately awarded $38,000 in a worker's compensation settlement with UC–Davis (Garofoli, 2013).

Further, as this case study suggests, memes' existence, and by extension their rhetorical endurance, is not always ephemeral as theorized (Rieser, 2013; Shifman, 2014b). Some Internet memes may resurface across time—albeit only momentarily—in new contexts to trigger old associations or conjure up fresh meanings for their producers and consumers (Mitchell, 2011; Mielczarek & Perlmutter, 2014; Zelizer, 2010), tapping into the recycling nature of remix culture. That is because famous images, spreading here through digital derivatives, rarely retire. As living organisms, they travel, evolve, lie dormant, and reactivate (Mitchell, 2011). In digital participatory culture, "the new materiality of the photograph multiplies the possible 'lives' that it may have simultaneously, from existing in online databases, to becoming valued visual content, to being printed and stuck on the refrigerator" (Hand, 2012, p. 73).

Iconic Images, Manipulation, and Digital Technology

The speed and immediacy of the Internet combined with a heightened image production in the digital age—more than 380 billion pictures get taken annually today as compared with 86 billion in 2000 (Schwarz, 2012)—have given rise to the "hypericon" (Perlmutter, 2006, p. 51). This "speeded-up famous image" (Perlmutter, 2006, p. 51) is instantly circulated and consumed by a global audience and can be more ephemeral than ever before. That is because "the hypericon does not have time to establish itself through long-term repetition because other quasi icons replace it quickly" (Perlmutter, 2006, p. 60). In the predigital environment, icons became familiar to audiences precisely because of high frequency of exposure over time, building up recognition and fame, processes that have been changing with the advent of digital and mobile technologies (Dahmen & Miller, 2012). The pepper-spraying cop snapshot fits the definition of a hypericon, though its ephemerality seems more stable than theorized. It resurfaced online, however briefly, after a five-year hiatus, evoking old rhetorical arguments in new contexts, as already mentioned.

No icon—or any photograph, for that matter—circulates and produces meaning in a cultural vacuum (Hoffman, 1998; Mielczarek & Perlmutter, 2014). Icons as building blocks of collective memory accrue cultural resonance as they tap into primordial topoi, myths, stories, and symbols, oftentimes connecting or being connected to familiar cultural themes that guide interpretation (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007; Perlmutter, 1998). In the case of the pepper-spraying cop picture, the image evokes the age-old trope of a perpetrator and a victim—the powerful and the powerless—a technique often used in journalistic storytelling (Bird & Dardenne, 2009). Such cultural cachet only amplifies the iconic photograph's recognition, celebrity, and fame among its audiences.

Image Manipulation and Instrumentalization

With continuing advances in digital technology, image replication, manipulation, and remixing—whether in newsrooms, advertising agencies, or living rooms—have gotten more prevalent, easier to perform, and harder to detect (Hand, 2012; Marsh, 2009). But unlike the pre-Internet technology, "new media, in contrast, is characterized by variability. Instead of identical copies, a new media object typically gives rise to many different versions" (Manovich, 2001, p. 36), allowing for, inviting, and promoting easy mash-up of content, including production of memes. Such malleability of images in digital culture makes them "liquid" (Hand, 2012, p. 73) and therefore prone and available for alteration, a practice as old as photography itself (Bonnell, 1997; Brugioni, 1999).

Photograph tampering has myriad motivations, from aesthetics to assertion of power to circulation of propaganda (Brugioni, 1999). Such instrumentalization (Eko, 2012) of images is typically strategic but not always ideological (Deuze, 2006). In remix culture, image manipulation and appropriation are par for the course. This "reworking of already existing cultural works" (Manovich, 2008, p. 198) is primarily concerned with participation of audience members as "active agents in the process of meaning-making" (Deuze, 2006, p. 66), a dynamic that lies at the heart of this project. Internet memes have certainly become a popular form of meaning cocreation in digital participatory culture.

The Pepper-Spraying Cop as Icon

The image was taken on November 18, 2011, and journalists, bloggers, and media pundits linked versions of the same shot taken from different

angles to two UC–Davis students, Louise Macabitas and Brian Nguyen (Garber, 2011; knowyourmeme.com, 2011). Two days after the snapshot made its public debut, the well-known journalist and media critic James Fallows likened its importance to photographs from the Civil Rights Movement that immortalized protesters being fire-hosed by law enforcement. "Such images," Fallows (2011) wrote in reference to the UC–Davis photograph, "can have tremendous, lasting power."

Some media commentators went a step further, suggesting that "the image—and its subsequent meme-ification—marked the moment when the Occupy movement expanded its purview: It moved beyond its concern with economic justice to espouse, simply, justice" (Garber, 2011). The pundits ascribed the original Pike photograph and its iterations transformational qualities, crediting them with shifting the national discourse from economic rights of the 99% (OWS's central motto) to civil rights for all. The picture and its subsequent digital derivatives certainly resonated with audiences off- and online in part by tapping into the familiar cultural narrative of power struggle, gaining prominence and celebrity through the frequency of exposure and mutation. In fact, Lt. Pike became an iconic figure himself (Rieser, 2013), a metonym for systemic abuse of power. He went from being "an iconic figure of the nebulous powers" to "getting inserted into art, pop culture and the documentary images, thus being transformed into an Internet meme. Such uses and abuses are prime techniques by which icons are constructed out of remarkable images" (Rieser, 2013, p. 14).

Theoretical Framework

The famous pepper-spraying cop picture mutated and replicated through Internet memes, producing hundreds of iterations that remixed the original with new content into new rhetorical statements, only to be remediated again (Huntington, 2013; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2013b; Shifman, 2014b). To understand how such melding took place and what it meant, this project relied on theoretical concepts of digital participatory culture, remixing, remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Deuze, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Lessig, 2004b; Manovich, 2008), and Internet memetics (Milner, 2013a, 2013b; Shifman, 2014b). The first three are theoretical companions and were chosen because they establish a larger theoretical context for the study—the mechanics of digital culture that rely on participation and remixing of content to produce fresh meaning that shapes public discourse (Lessig, 2004a, 2004b, 2009; Manovich, 2008).

Unlike in the predigital environment, when public members overwhelmingly relied on traditional news media to provide them with meaning, today's public participates in that process through simultaneous production and consumption—the so-called "produsage" (Bruns, 2006, p. 275)—of "indymedia" (Deuze, 2006, p. 63) outside or alongside the traditional media structures. Digital culture participants "adopt but at the same time modify, manipulate, and thus reform consensual ways of understanding reality" (Deuze, 2006, p. 66) by creating their own versions of what happened, in this case through Internet memes (Lessig, 2004a, 2009). Digital culture, in fact, is "remix culture" (Manovich, 2008, p. 196) that relies on the "systematic re-working of a source" (Manovich, 2008, p. 200), including images, to negotiate narratives of the everyday.

Internet Memes and Signification

A meme's definition has its roots in biology and treats it as a piece of cultural knowledge—an idea, a song, a fashionable piece of clothing, a fad, etc.—that spreads from brain to brain among societies, undergoing mutations along the way, much like a gene replication process (Blackmore, 1999; Dawkins, 1989). Those mutations happen as memes reproduce and diffuse through social networks, creating new rhetorical statements as a result. The definition gets a theoretical facelift in the digital era to account for the new technology's ability to modify and spread content faster than before and the heavy reliance on user participation in that process (Shifman, 2014b). An Internet meme, then, is "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance that were created with awareness of each other; and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (Shifman, 2014b, p. 8), eventually becoming a social phenomenon. Internet memes of the pepper-spraying cop image meet this definition as they produced groups of referential iterations that shared elements of form, content, and stance and were replicated, mutated, and shared by large numbers of Internet users through myriad channels.

Internet memes have been theorized as ubiquitous and ephemeral (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2014b). They come online constantly, pushing out their contemporaries through a fierce competition to replicate and become famous (Shifman, 2014b). Because of this constant production, circulation, and speed

of transmission, successful memes achieve fast fame across multiple platforms. They often—but not always—fall into virtual oblivion, outdone by newly minted iterations. The pepper-spraying cop meme was, as mentioned, resurrected a few years after its birth to comment on UC–Davis's attempts to erase negative publicity that followed the pepper-spraying controversy. Other examples of enduring Internet memes abound: the Obama Hope poster from 2008 that most recently resurfaced during the 2016 presidential elections as a formal of political speech, the 2007 "success kid" meme that features a baby with a clenched fist and still occasionally floats across social media, and the LOLCats meme that has endured for more than a decade (Knowyourmeme.com, 2017).

Production and Dissemination

A form of "vernacular creativity" (Milner, 2013a, p. 1), Internet memes function as "messages transmitted by consumer-producers for discursive purposes. (. . .) A successful Internet meme implies a modified narrative" (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015, p. 1892). In other words, an Internet meme retains some elements of the original that it replicates (Pike pepper spraying) but also mutates from it into new content (Pike pepper spraying Disney characters in Bambi). Repetition of such "textual 'hooks' or key signifiers" (Burgess, 2008, p. 105) in memes gives them cultural recognition, popularity, and swift replication online. Those signature elements become recognizable through repetition and "are then available for 'plugging into' other forms, texts, and intertexts—they become part of the available cultural repertoire of vernacular video" (Burgess, 2008, p. 105) and other forms of Internet memes.

Memes, Photographs, and Icons

One type of Internet meme relevant here is an image meme that uses photographs as templates (Milner, 2013a; Shifman, 2014a). Within that pool, the Reaction Photoshop genre (Shifman, 2014b) is of particular interest as it usually relies on famous photos to produce memetic responses, as was the case with the pepper-spraying cop news image. Those memetic photographs—the ones that lend themselves to becoming such templates—invite meme-ification because of two primary features they share: They display a "striking incongruity" (Shifman, 2014b, p. 90) among elements in the image, and they freeze a moment in time, often trapping characters in awkward, funny, or unfinished poses that get reworked in memes. Some images are riper for the taking than others (Shifman, 2014b). For example, juxtapositions that make a photograph look unfinished or "off" are prone to "memetic response" (Shifman, 2014b, p. 90) that involves people inserting the odd-looking elements into other contexts to continue the incongruity (much like in the pepper-spraying cop example) or plugging them into contexts that seem more fitting, diminishing or ending the visual incongruity altogether (Shifman, 2014b).

Although this project focuses on Internet memes of an iconic news image, not all memes, of course, stem from iconic photographs. Scores, in fact, do not and instead use obscure (often personal) images and unknown characters as fodder, as was the case with the popular 2011 "scumbag Steve" meme. It used a home snapshot of an unidentified young man wearing a backward baseball cap who engaged in inappropriate behavior. Another was the "rage guy" meme that utilized a comic stick figure to express rage and anger. Amid high traffic online, such unknown figures become culturally familiar and famous in their own right. Still some mash up both, an unknown character and an iconic moment, as happened with "the tourist guy" meme in 2001 that juxtaposed an unknown Hungarian tourist (from a 1997 family snapshot) with the September 11, 2001, attacks or the sinking of the Titanic (Shifman, 2014b). In the case of the pepper-spraying cop meme, Internet users combined the already-famous news image of Pike's spraying with familiar and unfamiliar characters to produce hundreds of iterations of that single moment in time.

In addition to mashing up photographs, some memes also add text. Called "image macros" (Shifman, 2014b), their rhetorical work stems from the interplay of both. None except for a couple of the pepper-spraying cop meme iterations analyzed here included writing. Their meaning, as the study argues, stems in part from the interaction of visual signifiers, with the gesture of pepper spraying chief among them.

Internet Memes and Intertextuality

One of the fundamental traits of Internet memes is intertextuality, which reuses cultural knowledge (Shifman, 2014b) and lies at the center of this project. This "pictorial echo" happens when images "acquire layers of meaning as they become vehicles of visual memory at certain moments in their production routine, echoing pictorial texts from the past" (Ilan, 2014, p. 2879). The outcome yields memes that "can blend pop culture, politics, and participation in unexpected ways" (Shifman, 2014b, p. 4), as this case study illustrates. But intertextuality within

an image "is not simply a matter of interlocking texts but of interacting and interdependent modes of visuality" (Mirzoeff, 2002, p. 209) that blend prior meanings with the produsers' (Bruns, 2006) experiences, history, social memory, and culture at large (Fiske, 1989; Rogoff, 2002).

Some memes are more easily discerned than others and may require different levels of Internet and pop culture literacy. They are likely to be widely understood if they connect to a popular cultural phenomenon, familiar cultural context, or a high-profile news event. For some to be broadly understood, however, their producers and consumers may require "detailed knowledge about a digital meme subculture" (Shifman, 2014b, p. 100) that may use its own symbols or language to convey meaning (Shifman, 2014b). The LOLCats meme, for example, relies on a particular form of the English language as a signature part of the composition. To create and "get" the dominant meaning of the meme, one must know and understand that particular context.

But given the polysemic character of images (Fiske, 1989; Howells & Negreiros, 2012) and the emphasis on "networked individualism" (Shifman, 2014b, p. 30) in digital participatory culture, memes do not necessarily have the "right" or "correct" interpretation. Even if their consumers "miss" the dominant meaning they "should have gotten," members of the public will form their own readings rooted in personal contexts, experiences, circumstances, and beliefs (Manovich, 2008; Shifman, 2014b). Such a "mis-reading" of a meme may perhaps lessen the rhetorical powers of the iteration to convey a specific message, but it certainly does not invalidate the response.

Rooted in the scholarship on iconicity and image appropriation in the digital era and guided by the theoretical frameworks of participatory digital culture, remixing, and Internet memetics, this project posed the following research questions:

> RQ1: How did the memes of the pepper-spraying cop icon spread and circulate online?
>
> RQ 2: What textual hooks did the pepper-spraying cop memes engage?
>
> RQ3: What new meanings did the memes generate online?
>
> RQ4: How were the memes instrumentalized and what functions did they serve as remixed rhetorical statements?

Methodology

The site knowyourmeme.com served as a starting point of the search for the digital appropriations of the famous picture. Launched in 2007, the portal advertises its commercial mission as bringing "Internet culture to the mainstream" (Cheezburger Network, 2015). The popular and comprehensive aggregator catalogues memes and other digital appropriations of a wide variety of ideas, including news, famous images, and fads. The keywords "pepper-spraying cop" helped to locate the memes of interest within this particular database and related links to other portals that curated the pepper-spraying cop meme. Additionally, the search also included the following databases and sites: Google, Google Images (and reverse Google Images), Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, Reddit, Tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest. The social media sites were chosen for two primary reasons: They have been among the most widely used networking sites since the advent of social media, and they have been known for incubating and diffusing Internet memes.

The analysis of the memes was predicated on the assumption that their producers and consumers saw the iconic template prior to remixing it, given its widespread presence online and the commentary accompanying scores of memes that referenced the original, indicating previous knowledge, familiarity, or awareness.

Iconographic Tracking

The main goal of this digital research method is to track the circulation, transformation, and consequentiality (change in function) of images online as they spread and mutate to produce new rhetorical statements (Gries, 2013). Here, iconographic tracking served as a systematic approach to finding out where the pepper-spraying cop memes traveled online, how they transformed in genre/medium/form, and how those transformations affected their functions. Mapping the various itineraries of the memes illuminated the "open-ended rhetorical becomings" (Gries, 2013, p. 338) of the pepper-spraying cop icon as it transfigured from a snapshot to a meme producing "multifaceted meanings" (Gries, 2013, p. 338) through "third party recomposition" (Gries, 2013, p. 335).

Iconographic tracking neither preimposes destinations on the image (though, as noted, some were deliberately chosen to include platforms known for hosting viral content), nor does it anticipate patterns of its diffusion, allowing both to emerge through casting a wide

net of Internet searches. The goal here was not to account for the pepper-spraying cop memes' every location online or to catalogue every remix produced and shared. Both were deemed impossible given the dynamic flows of the Internet, the ongoing production and circulation of remixed content, and lack of access to private social media accounts that undoubtedly hosted some of the memes of interest. Additionally, such meticulous accounting was neither relevant nor necessary to answer posed research questions. Instead, iconographic tracking allowed accounting for transfigurations and assessing the overall scope, directions, and velocity of the memes' spreading among diverse Internet platforms. Individual memes were chosen as exemplars that best illustrated specific findings.

Visual Rhetorical Analysis

The analysis proceeded in two stages: a study of the nature of the image followed by a study of its functions, both informed by the findings of iconographic tracking. The former comprised of analysis of presented and suggested elements (Foss, 2005) in chosen memes. Presented (manifest) elements are the content, size, and media used to produce the picture and inform the inquiry of the suggested (latent) elements of an image. These are symbols, concepts, themes, allusions, and metaphors that viewers are likely to infer by looking at the picture within a cultural context. The second phase investigated the functions the pepper-spraying cop memes performed for members of the public as they circulated cyberspace—their consequentiality (Gries, 2013). It is important to note that visual rhetorical analysis does not take the authors' intentions into consideration (Foss, 2005), instead focusing on the image as a "communicative artifact" (Foss, 2005, p. 143) received by an audience.

Justification of Choices

This project treated signification as a dynamic process that involves two broad "movements" that images perform in digital participatory culture: transformation of meaning and function through mutation and replication (from icon to memes) and diffusion and circulation through cyberspace. A single visual research method would have been insufficient in tracking and untangling these transitions comprehensively enough to answer all research questions. Equally, research methods that focus either on the image alone or on its context to the exclusion of the content would only partially help to answer the questions, neglecting substantial parts of the analysis. The two research methods were therefore deliberately chosen as complementary approaches that engaged the image (content) and its outside environs (context) in tandem.

Analysis: Online Dissemination and Textual Hooks

The pepper-spraying cop meme appeared on social media within hours of the original photograph's release, which happened on Reddit, a platform known for visual and viral content. Within hours, another Reddit user shared one of the first pepper-spraying cop memes registered online; it shows the Oscar winner Leonardo DiCaprio photoshopped into the original, casually strolling among the students. Although the DiCaprio meme did not travel far, hundreds of new iterations did, particularly proliferating Tumblr and Flickr that same day, underscoring the high velocity of meme replication and mutation in a digital environment.

Online Cross-Pollination

The diversity of the pepper-spraying cop meme manifested not only through a variety of content (to be discussed later) but also through multiplicity of visited destinations. The back-and-forth circulation flows of the meme among social media, personal blogs, and mainstream news sites suggest an initial directionality of diffusion and a particular division of rhetorical labor that the types of platforms performed. Social networking sites such as Tumblr, Reddit, and Flickr served as the initial go-to places for Internet users to post and launch the pepper-spraying cop memes into cyberspace, contributing to "pop polyvocality" (Milner, 2013b, p. 2357), the populace expression. They were the incubators and hubs of memetic mutation. Mainstream news and traditional information sites, on the other hand, joined that circulation process with some delay. They functioned as stops rather than birthplaces and took on a role of commentators and teachers rather than creators to explain to audiences the cultural practice and significance of meme production. They concluded in unison that memes poke fun and offer social commentary online.

Such a noticeable demarcation between the two types of platforms is presumably tied to their communicative functions. Social networking sites are open forums that are self-guided and driven by Internet users' contributions and communal participation. They are specifically designed to engage and capitalize on user interaction through content production and dissemination. Although mainstream media also rely on user-generated content (Lobato, Thoms & Hunter, 2011;

Thurman, 2008), their broader mission surpasses mere sharing and rests on their institutional roles to inform and explain.

What is more, the multidirectional spreading was also multilayered. The same pepper-spraying cop meme traveled not only to multiple locations online, it also surfaced at the same location via different routes. For example, a meme that had Pike pepper spraying Crispus Attucks during the 1770 Boston Massacre appeared in Google Images via the pop culture website Neatorama, which, in turn, retrieved it from Tumblr. The same meme made it to Google through Reddit via the online image-sharing site Imgur; other pathways abounded. Such multidirectional and multilayered platform hopping illustrates boundary-less flows of the Internet that make retracing chronology of memetic movements a challenge. It also gestures to the networked nature of memetics and helps to explain how popular content goes viral thanks to the power of networked audiences (and clicks) and the power of a resounding rhetorical argument. The memes' ability to surface in multiple places at once thanks to the networked publics and the technology that propels them also highlights the destination-less lives they lead in digital culture and frames them as somewhat allusive phenomena that appear from (and disappear to) everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Textual Hooks and Themes

The pepper-spraying cop meme had four dominant textual hooks that Internet users engaged to create new takes on the November 18, 2011, moment: the perpetrator, the gesture of pepper spraying, the victim, and the location of the act. Together, they defined what it meant to be pepper sprayed or to pepper spray others. Although the victim and the location changed depending on the producers' and/or the consumers' perspectives, almost all memes recovered through iconographic tracking retained the central dynamic of the icon: Pike as the villain. Overwhelmingly, his targets were framed as going about their lives—eating dinner, attending a funeral, or crossing a street—and getting ambushed through excessive violence in return. It is this decontextualization and exaggeration of the original event—a visually skewed dynamic—that perpetuated outrage. The memes fueled it by repeating the perceived injustice by casting Pike in the same role of a perpetrator hundreds of times, always spraying no matter the victim or the location. By omitting the "before and after" of the icon's decisive moment, the digital appropriations invited sympathy and indignation for the targets that meme creators selected for Pike to pepper spray. The authors presumably saw them as victims of a gross overreaction even though seconds earlier—off camera—some of them attempted to close in on Pike and his colleagues in a moment of chaos.

Getting Pepper Sprayed

Clad in a navy-blue uniform and equipped with a helmet and a gun, Lt. Pike acted in his official capacity as a representative of a law enforcement institution. His outfit and riot gear as tools of visual metonymy (Catalano & Waugh, 2013; Willerton, 2005) stood in for the system itself, one that punished perceived disobedience and exerted power, dominance, and control over those who transgressed. In other words, Pike was the embodiment of—and a rhetorical shortcut for—a repressive state that penalized its members for exercising their constitutional rights to protest. Meme creators appropriated and perpetuated this "conceptual metonymy" (Catalano & Waugh, 2013, p. 39) of Pike as a placeholder for the system throughout their creations, transforming their visual arguments from comments about a specific incident to a public discourse on perceived violation of civil rights on the part of the state.

But Pike towered over the students in another, more literal way. He walked among them as they sat on a sidewalk at his feet and appeared small and scared. As they locked arms and lowered their heads to protect their faces, they looked as if they were bowing before the officer, acknowledging his dominance—and submitting to it. Pike's ultimate exercise of superiority came through the act of placing the students under arrest, thus physically and emotionally controlling and conquering them. His armor—physical and ideological—rendered the students powerless in the frozen moment of the snapshot. The presented elements of the composition explicitly illustrated (and warped) power relations in the scenario: a literally and figuratively dominating police presence that squelched dissent—and ignited visual furor. It burned beyond the moment of the snapshot, stretching the offense and the outrage over time, location, and victim. It transformed a single static act into a dynamic reoccurrence and a singular collective victim (students) into hundreds of individual targets in the form of Internet users who felt sprayed by proxy and were compelled to spray back through memes. The act of pepper spraying, then, does not merely mean getting conquered in the moment by Pike (and the system, by extension). The prolific production of Pike memes suggests that it also includes a robust response in the form of a rhetorical argument

that multiplied and mutated as it spread online. What may have looked like an instant of dominance in the original famous picture unleashed a counterreaction that offered alternative takes on what the camera captured, returning some of the power to those at the receiving end of the orange mist by forcing Pike to reoffend—and repeatedly get punished.

The pepper-spraying gesture of pointing was crucial to that rhetorical argument as an indexical metonym (Catalano & Waugh, 2013) that represented the thing that it pointed to, i.e., the protesters through the aimed and discharged weapon. It was a gesture of implicit blame that Pike laid at the faces of those whom he perceived as disobedient and threatening, even if captured in the snapshot as tamed. The gesture had three main parts: Pike's casual step with one foot outward, the can of pepper spray as an instrument of violence, and the orange mist. The spring in Pike's step hinted at his nonchalance toward the event and his disdain for his targets. The orange mist had to be present for the gesture to be effective and fulfilled. It was so important, in fact, that even a handful of memes that used Legos to recreate the scene relied on red and orange blocks to mimic it. The orange mist was a physical manifestation of power and institutional abuse, a transgression that signaled more than a moment of poor judgment by this particular officer. The mist temporarily established hierarchies of power and granted control to Pike (and the state) while stripping it away from the students (and the audiences). The orange mist made those in opposition to Pike disappear, first by forcing them to cover their faces and then by leading them away from the picture, erasing their existence altogether.

Pike's dominance, as signaled, did not last long. Internet users hijacked the decisive moment of state control by transforming police brutality into antipolice retaliation. By co-opting this struggle in the meme, they ultimately renegotiated the narrative of what happened. Pike had to be rhetorically displaced to pepper spray myriad victims (the more innocent, the more effective) in various situations to seal his reputation as a notorious and power-hungry lunatic. The manipulation and remixing of textual hooks transformed the narratives of the victim and the villain.

Winners and Losers

Pike may have originally held the weapon that signified his strength and power, but his own actions—which the outraged public subsequently magnified through manipulation—turned him into the ultimate loser. His targets aided him in achieving such a repugnant status. Bambi from the beloved Disney classic, Jesus, and the Beatles were just some who strategically took the orange mist abuse to purposefully amplify Pike's original sin against the students, making it (and him) so vile as to be unforgiveable. The numerous substitution victims became visual metonymies (Catalano & Waugh, 2013; Willerton, 2005) that stood for a wide range of cultural, social, political, and religious values and viewpoints, all of which Pike—and the system he represented—unequivocally rejected. Pike is against everything that makes up (the primarily Western) culture, from its movies and music to its democracy, history, and collective memory. By pitting him against myriad known and unknown, real and fictional characters that signify that culture, meme creators deliberately alienated Pike from the rest of the society, demarcating a clear line between a power institution that punishes and a culture, however subversive, that exercises its rights to exist, thus expanding the argument of the pepper-spraying cop meme through visual metonymy beyond the UC–Davis incident.

By mobilizing Pike's transgression to their rhetorical advantage, his targets were not, in fact, passive victims. They took on, or rather, were assigned by the public the role of targets to disrupt power structures represented by the orange mist, effectively subverting the roles that they and the officer were given in the icon; they, in fact, reversed them. Pike was no longer in charge of his destiny or the destiny of his targets in the memes.

The digital derivatives of the icon created a virtual backlash to a real-life incident, elucidating memes' discursive powers that can extend beyond humor and deliver a rather painful rhetorical punch. The meme creators' engagement of textual hooks to transform the icon revealed memes as extensions of arguments that continued online after an off-line event was over. They became a coping mechanism and a retaliation tool for the public in the absence of other recourse to fix perceived injustice, though as mentioned, Pike's sin could not be repented. In fact, they were instrumentalized as tools of collective shaming that the public deployed for retribution; Pike was never going to stop pepper spraying.

Analysis: Fresh Meanings Through Transfiguration

This dominant enemy genre of the pepper-spraying cop meme demonized and condemned Pike's actions with the use of hyperbole, an

overstatement through exaggeration that exceeds (and warps) reality (Plett, 2001). One of the prime examples that branded the officer the ultimate villain through the use of such tactics was the "accidental napalm" meme posted on Flickr some 16 months after the original UC–Davis photograph was published. Called "napalm pig," the remix placed pepper-spraying Pike in the middle of the 1972 iconic Vietnam War picture that captured the aftermath of an accidental napalm attack on a village. Shot by the Associated Press photographer Nick Ut, the image displays several screaming Vietnamese children running toward the camera. The viewer's eyes focus on one naked girl in the center of the picture who is running and screaming because of the invisible burns on her body. Ut's photograph has become one of the defining images of the Vietnam War (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007), an "iconic visual as memory" (Chidester, 2015, p. 10) of trauma in American history (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). The picture has elicited highly emotional and complex reactions throughout the years, "activating this deep register of moral response" (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 178), with some, for instance, focusing on its documentary powers of exposing human suffering and others perceiving it as another piece of evidence that forced Americans to confront the idea of an immoral war (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007).

In the meme, Ut's black-and-white picture is the color of the orange mist, appointing Pike the sole perpetrator of the trauma. He is the napalm pig as he pepper sprays the iconic figure in the American collective memory of Vietnam War, the suffering naked girl running for her life. This "excess through hyperbole" (Fiske, 1989, p. 90) interrogates power relations in the image. Instead of rescuing her as his job would dictate, Pike revictimizes her, adding proverbial insult to injury. By portraying Pike as physically larger, stronger, and more aggressive next to the suffering child, the meme traps and exposes Pike as a ruthless cop whose use of force looks disturbing and greatly disproportionate to the perceived threat, echoing the perverted power dynamic of the pepper-spraying icon. The meme, then, appropriates trauma from both iconic photographs to create an image of Pike that renders him—once again—an unforgiveable villain. Such use of hyperbole by meme producers here and in other iterations sets up visual irony (Scott, 2004) that further comments on Pike's transgression—a uniformed cop charged with protecting society harms it instead.

The "napalm pig" meme operates rhetorically on a broader cultural level, offering an interpretational by-product. By his sheer presence in Ut's famous photograph, Pike interferes with the collective memory of Vietnam War, reversioning it (Wilson, 2009). By pepper spraying the innocent Vietnamese girl, he marks her as the transgressor in the scenario, attempting to rewrite the original iconic moment. The dynamic suggests Pike's insistence on erasing physical evidence of suffering and war, perhaps to deny American culpability.

Humor and Resistance

Although familiar, this mocking cop-child relationship echoes other memes in that it flips Pike's narrative as a civil servant charged with protecting his community. By manipulating the location and the victim to form visual extremes, the meme transforms the man from an officer of the law to a power-hungry egomaniac in need of restraint, effectively ridiculing and humiliating him through such biting humor. The meme attempts to renegotiate the official narrative of a university cop "doing his job" by reframing him through hyperbole and parody as the violent man causing harm to others—here, and over and over again throughout hundreds of other iterations. His gesture is reappropriated through the swap of textual hooks to distinguish the powerful from the powerless, with Pike being both, the former and the latter. He may still hold the weapon and exert control, but his exercise of power gets mocked and ridiculed by the public when Pike targets the metonymic victim, i.e., anyone and anything, looking pathetic and ridiculous. Pike's ability (real or perceived) to harm, then, hurts and amuses. The pepper-spraying cop meme, as the editor of an arts and culture criticism site Hyperallergic wrote after the famous picture became meme-ified, "is not just any meme but one that is walking through art works of every stripe if only to prove how ridiculous and absurd his [Pike's] reactions were in the face of non-violent resistance" (Hrag, 2011).

In this context, the strategic repetition of the gesture in part as entertainment reframes the significance of the orange mist in relation to the victims, not to Pike, as was the case in the iconic original. It empowers the former and weakens the latter, where the mist no longer serves as the symbol of Pike's dominance but of his weakness, a source of both humor and resistance. As one news blogger noticed after the pepper-spraying cop picture became a meme, "one way powerless Internet onlookers have chosen to rebel is to make Lt. Pike the butt of the joke" (Graupmann, 2011) by "using humor to shift the scales of power" (Graupmann, 2011) in the pepper-spraying cop meme. The many online iterations

of the original picture created an avenue for the virtual public to "give The Man a taste of his own medicine" (*The Week*, 2011).

That is exactly what one Flickr user seemed to have done in 2011 when he created a pepper-spraying cop meme entitled "Fight Pepper Spray with Gort," referring to the robot character from the 1951 movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. An outlier among the hundreds of Pike memes, the iteration shows the officer pepper spraying the robot—and the robot spraying the officer back. In a role reversal, it is now the much taller machine that towers over the overeager cop in this scenario, spraying him with a laser beam—a more potent weapon—very clearly appointing Gort the winner. But the example that perhaps may best illustrate the transformation of the meme from a joke to an instrument of resistance—"the ultimate act of Inception-like recursion" (Jardin, 2011), as a popular blogger Xeni Jardin called it—happened when UC–Davis students mobilized pepper-spraying cop memes as posters to protest at the site of the initial confrontation days after the original incident, (Jardin, 2011).

The "Napalm Pig" and Ideology

But Pike's deed in the "napalm pig"-type meme makes broader rhetorical statements that engage ideology, war, and social norms, tapping into memes' rhetorical versatility. Through Pike's actions, the meme tells a cautionary tale and again becomes ideological. It suggests that norms and ideologies are dangerous because they may lead to blind fanaticism that shifts power dynamics overwhelmingly to one side with dire consequences. It also speaks to the idea of intellectual flexibility. Rules sometimes need to be suspended or redefined to uphold the values that figure prominently into the narrative of what it means to be American: justice, honor, and civic duty. Those lessons, the meme suggests, extend well beyond the Vietnam War and apply to any power dynamic, including the Occupy UC–Davis moment, during which excessive use of force and definitions of enemy should have been reevaluated.

Pike and Public Shaming

Within a couple of days of the UC–Davis incident, a Buzzfeed writer encouraged Internet users to mock Pike by explicitly naming his sin: "photoshop him taking away people's civil rights into everyday situations" (Stopera, 2011), fueling the "mass online destruction" (Ronson, 2015, p. 79) of the officer. Internet users responded accordingly, doling out heavy punishment. What Pike experienced was "citizen justice" (Ronson, 2015, p. 31) in the social media era, with strangers publically and collectively shaming him through hyperbole and distortion. They created a one-dimensional caricature that redefined Pike solely through his transgression. This "cyberspace equivalent of mob justice" (Solove, 2007, p. 78) was successful and in part ruined the officer's reputation, career, and apparently mental health. "When shamings are delivered like remotely administered drone strikes, nobody needs to think about how ferocious our collective power might be" (Ronson, 2015, p. 56).

The campaign relied on a feedback loop that provided immediate positive reinforcement to those who chastised Pike, only to encourage more punishment. This self-propelling dynamic created an echo chamber among like-minded people who supported each other through social media commentary and boosted insult production in an effort to expose, shame, and punish the transgressor (Ronson, 2015), in turn fueling more mockery and shaming. They saw Pike as someone who broke social norms and "had to pay for it." They used the Internet as a "norm-enforcement tool" (Solove, 2007, p. 87) that left a permanent record of Pike's policing and its fallout. Although the officer had access to the same tool, he did not stand a chance of defending himself against the digital onslaught of insults, a rather typical outcome in mass Internet shaming campaigns (Solove, 2007).

By creating such explicit victims and perpetrators through hypershaming, the enemy genre memes took the moral side of the original and subsequent targets. They appointed victims, acting as their advocates who were absent in the icon but could partially remedy the perceived injustice by penalizing Pike after the fact. The memes took on an activist role by openly agitating about the right and wrong of the pepper-spraying incident. Through the inflammatory visual rhetoric, they operated as political tools that provoked viewers to analyze them beyond their composition and original event. Their creators were like watchdogs of the state who dispensed digital social justice in absence of other alternatives by manipulating the iconic scene to their advantage. They could not retaliate physically against Pike, but they certainly punished him in the virtual world by creating a monster.

Conclusions: Memes Beyond Discursive Functions

A litmus test for public opinion on the UC–Davis incident, the pepper-spraying cop meme

channeled collective outrage and contempt for the embattled police officer by transforming one image into many. An overwhelming majority of the remixed digital derivatives of the icon analyzed here portrayed Pike as the ultimate enemy who violated his targets' civil rights by using excessive force. They blew the original transgression out of proportion, weaponizing hyperbole to ruthlessly ridicule and shame the officer, demonstrating his gross overreaction through—ironically—their own exaggerations of facts. They strategically mobilized Pike's tactic of pepper spraying to symbolically pepper spray back, making the officer rhetorically work against himself—the ultimate payback through vernacular creativity. Pitting Pike against a suffering child was not so much funny as it was strategically outrageous and jarring as it showed a massive overreaction on the officer's part to a benign situation, exposing the apparent abuse of power and transforming Pike into a cartoon.

By consistently repeating this lopsided dynamic through ongoing swaps of victims and locations, the Pike meme performed a couple of rhetorical transformations. As mentioned, it operated as a branding iron that marked the officer as a perpetual villain. His original infraction was deemed so unforgivable that Pike got locked into a rhetorical purgatory that he cocreated by pepper spraying students in the first place. Although Pike pepper sprayed only once, his persona—the iconic figure of officer Pike—got hijacked to do it again and again, delivering relentless punishment from the public for the highly manufactured crime.

But the practice of continuous shaming and punishment that the meme performed toward Pike and what he stood for as a metonymic figure also highlights a role reversal that resulted from the public's ongoing memetic censure. The one who was the original oppressor was now transformed into a target himself by getting inserted into appalling scenarios that highlighted his transgression. Pike became a target of collective meme bullying. The irony and absurdity of this shaming cycle comes to the forefront. Though Pike was the one who—with the public's help—victimized myriad targets, he eventually transformed into a target himself of the same collective outrage that turned him into the enemy in the first place. He became a meme because of the original offense but was later forced to reoffend hundreds of times, only to be punished for it by becoming a target of endless production of the recurring crime.

Such a vicious cycle of what resembled cyberbullying by the meme could be seen as a surrogate for criminal prosecution that never took place in absence of evidence to indict Pike on criminal charges (Yolo County District Attorney, 2012). In the eyes of the outraged public, Pike and the corrupt system he represented were not going to get away with pepper spraying the college students. The meme dispensed social justice, though any claim of effect is unfounded. Its direct impact on Pike has not been publically measured, but it presumably contributed to the hateful publicity that the officer and the school generated, not to mention Pike's mental state following the controversy. Still, the case study suggests that memes can be instrumentalized as weapons in successful smear campaigns to shame, agitate, and bully on a mass scale with some off-line consequences that transcend public discourse. This case study illustrates how easily and readily they cross over to vitriol through synergy of strangers.

The Internet's anonymity and spreadability combined with the ease of photo editing make such character assassination a daily practice, propagating ideas that are impossible to correct or control in the social media environment (Ronson, 2015). Pike felt the sting of such meme bullying firsthand. He was thrown into the media limelight and under public scrutiny because of his actions caught in the iconic photograph, but it was the meme production that turned him into the public's enemy. As a writer from the online magazine CNET pointed out at the time, such "fame can be a hydra. One tentacle can lift you up. Then another wraps itself around your throat. Lt. Pike of the University of California at Davis police force might be feeling some constriction today, after the online world began to pay him many-tentacled homage" (Matyszczyk, 2011).

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