The Memetic Vernacular: Everyday Argument in the Digital Age

By

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Acknowledgements

The roots of this project go back to my high school days between 2000 and 2004. On the odd day without an after-school theatre rehearsal or speech team practice, my friend Isaiah and I would end up hanging out in his mother's basement. We'd pass these afternoons by playing video games or by showing each other funny things and terrifying things we'd seen on the Internet. As is typical for high school boys, dark humor and bad taste were the norm and felt refreshingly transgressive and original. These afternoons were my first exposure to websites like Homestar Runner, The Best Page in the Universe, and other major hits of the pre-Web 2.0 Internet. In 2002, Isaiah introduced me to Something Awful, where I'd habitually lurk for the better part of a decade before officially becoming a member in the early 2010s. In 2006, after I had moved away to college, Isaiah introduced me to 4Chan. Long after all my other friends had gone to bed, Isaiah and I would trade funny content back and forth while chatting over America Online's instant messenger service. Although I cannot recall the exact conversation, I have no doubt that Isaiah showed me my first meme (even if I didn't recognize it as such at the time).

Today, the Internet looks much different than it did back then. Still, many of the social dynamics I observe in my research remind me of my younger, stupider years in that basement. Although today's high schoolers may be more saturated in digital media than Isaiah and I were, I have no doubt that for many of them it is still a frontier for them to explore, discover, and colonize in the process of learning digital literacy. In that journey, I can only hope they have as good a friend as I did. To Isaiah Waid—thank you for being weird too.

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that viewing memes as a vernacular practice reveals how Internet users construct, circulate, and legitimate knowledge in their everyday communication online. Chapter 1 begins by asking a seemingly straightforward question—"why post a meme?"—and considering how memes function as a form of everyday argument enabled by the affordances of the digital age.

In Chapter 2, I argue that to answer this question scholars must look at Internet memes as a form of practice. This practice exemplifies a widespread form of everyday discourse online that uses recurring communicative genres to assert common knowledge and vernacular authority. Therefore, I define Internet memes as recurring generic practices in networked communication exhibiting variation and play as they are circulated informally between users, and I call this capacity for expression *the memetic vernacular*. Understanding Internet memes as a vernacular practice illuminates how the collaborative nature of memetic practice enables individual users to use memes to make arguments based on common knowledge and vernacular authority.

Chapter 3 traces the evolution of a single meme over a year on Reddit in order to argue that memetic communication practices gain vernacular authority as the result of aggregate volition. Chapter 4 looks at how Internet memes circulate, arguing that when assertions of everyday authority come into contact (and conflict) users appropriate existing memes as a form of counter-discourse. Chapter 5 looks at increasingly prevalent attempts by institutions to advertise using Internet memes. Centered on a memetic advertisement posted to Facebook by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, this chapter discourages dismissing institutional attempts at vernacular speech and argues for a more nuanced understanding of why some memes fail while others succeed. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes these findings and applies them to

the memetic practices of the alt-right during the 2016 United States presidential campaign. This conclusion explores not only how institutional agents might effectively leverage everyday communication practices but also how the memetic vernacular can help scholars understand emergent trends in digital communication.

Chapter 1: Introduction: Everyday Argument in the Digital Age

Not long ago, I found myself walking along an unfamiliar road with an old colleague. After we'd exhausted the usual chit-chat—family, friends, vacation plans—we found ourselves once again drawn to the topic of least resistance—work. We tossed questions back and forth: what are you trying to get published? What's your next research project? And so forth. We talked about her work with children's media, and we spoke about my work with vernacular communication.

When I mentioned my ongoing observation of Internet memes, her eyes lit up. She stopped for a moment and began to seethe. Turning toward me, she raised her index finger and drew a bead in my direction. "Maybe you can answer this," she said, her index finger wagging up-and-down to punctuate her anger, "It's about a meme I saw on Facebook." While I nodded affirmatively, she proceeded to take her phone out of her purse. As she thumbed over the screen—eyes darting up and down—she began to explain her frustration.

One of her relatives—an in-law, she assured me with resignation—had a history of publicly posting his political views on the social networking site. Although she was a staunch progressive who frequently disagreed with his right-wing views, these posts rarely phased her. This post, however, was different. It had caught her attention and wedged itself in her mind. She held up her phone so I could see the post in question. It was an image macro, a popular type of Internet meme. Judging from the date of the post, it had been bothering her for more than a week.

It was a pro-gun meme. One I'd seen posted before by some of my own social media connections. The image seemed fairly benign. Truthfully, I'd barely given it a second thought when it made the rounds through my own social network several months prior. Under the all-caps heading "WHY DO YOU NEED A GUN?" the image provided pictures of several firearms and the rationale for owning them. The talking points and the guns started small. "You need

these for muggers, rapists & carjackers" read the caption above a pair of handguns. Both the firearms and the rhetoric escalated as the viewer read down the page. Shotguns were necessary for defending one's property; rifles were essential for hunting. The image culminated with a picture of an assault rifle, useful for "self defense against enemies, foreign & domestic, for preservation of freedom & liberty, and to prevent government atrocities" (Figure 1). This final sentiment mirrored popular libertarian pro-gun arguments about the necessity of gun ownership as a way of preserving individual rights and keeping big government in check. Although I disagreed with many of the points the image was making, it seemed like a fairly mundane example of everyday discourse on social media.

Figure 1 - "WHY DO YOU NEED A GUN?"

I stared at my friend expectantly, wondering what else there must be to this story. Sensing my confusion, she pushed her point further.

"Why would someone be so insensitive?"

I looked down at her phone again, this time focusing on the image of the assault rifle. And then it registered. There had been a mass shooting last week.

She continued, “Why would someone post a pro-gun meme before anyone was reporting what actually happened? How could someone be so insensitive, and what’s the point in using a meme to do it?”

I finally understood why she was so livid. To her, this post seemed almost opportunistic—this person was trying to start and win an argument before the specific details of the massacre had even been reported.

This added context caused me to consider her frustration in a new light. While reflecting on the hundreds of memes I’d gathered over nearly two years, I began to think about many of my own friends on social media. High school acquaintances, many of whom never left our small town, had posted similar things in response to similar events—pro-gun memes following a shooting or anti-vaccine image macros following an outbreak. One even used a picture of Kermit the frog to dismiss others’ rationalizations during civil unrest in Baltimore (Figure 2).

Figure 2 - A Facebook user posts a “But That’s None of My Business” meme to oppose progressive narratives defending protestors in Baltimore

But this practice wasn't limited to class or locality. Academic friends and colleagues routinely used memes to respond to current events, mock public figures, or express their frustrations at local issues. On a wider scale, memes had let thousands of digital users respond to excessive force by police officers[1] and question a Republican presidential candidate's views on women.[2] Regardless of political viewpoint, social class, or scale, what did these meme-based responses have in common? How did posting a meme represent a different sort of action than simply posting a comment? Why would someone choose to post a response in the form of a meme only 20-minutes after a violent tragedy?

And then it clicked.

The Memetic Vernacular

In all these cases Internet memes represented a different type of knowledge, emerging from a different set of actions that separated them from institutional authority. If the subsequent news coverage of the mass shooting represented the institutional narrative of what transpired, then my friend's in-law didn't need (or want) to wait for the official reports. Instead, this post seemed intended to preempt the institutional narrative by asserting common knowledge. This user was effectively saying, "Hey, we're going to hear the same narrative as always from the news, but we everyday folks know how it really is." Such an action stakes a claim on truth, one that undercuts institutional authority and declares precedence through more everyday forms of authority. The frustration for my friend, then, stemmed from the fact that her expectations for everyday behavior online had been challenged by another user loudly asserting his own separate sense of everyday authority.

Networked digital communication technologies offer new potential for everyday communication. Users are more enabled to connect directly with other users. The nature of this

connection seemingly collapses geographic distance and circumvents institutional power structures.[3] As a result, the Internet has fostered many emergent forms of collective action and practice. On a large scale, such collective action may form the basis for a social movement (such as #blacklivesmatter)[4] or for a new cultural practice (such as sharing self-taken photographs known as "selfies" across social networks).[5] These forms of collective action exist on a communal level as well, such as when fans of the Vlogbrothers YouTube channel coordinate action to raise money for charity[6] or when members of the forums on Something Awful identify each other in public by asking "Do you have stairs in your house?" The collaborative (or "crowdsourced") processes that give rise to these practices also lend them a sort of grassroots credibility. These practices serve as a public resource for users—they are simultaneously owned by no one and everyone.

Internet memes are some of the most visible and widespread practices to emerge from this aggregated volition of everyday communicators in the digital age. Since these practices bubble up from countless everyday interactions, they empower users to imagine their communications as conveying knowledge and authority that exist independently from institutional agents and structures. Instead, ideas like credibility and knowledge gain power from being seen as everyday, emanating from the common sense and authority of everyday users.[7] In effect, the crowdsourced process that enables the creation and circulation of Internet memes also enables users to deploy Internet memes as forms of everyday argument.

Since Internet memes come from a large group process, individuals can use them to make specific arguments that are enabled by the practices of the larger group. This practice exemplifies a widespread form of everyday discourse online that uses recurring communicative genres to assert common knowledge and vernacular authority. Hence, I call this capacity for expression *the*

memetic vernacular. The memetic vernacular represents a way of communicating enabled by the digital age that is simultaneously individual and collective. It offers users new potential to seek empowerment by circulating and legitimating their own sense of authority and common knowledge. This potential is appealing to users because, compared to other everyday forms of digital communication (like posting a comment or a link), the recurring nature of these underlying practices makes speaking in the memetic vernacular a more spreadable[8] and more visible[9] way to assert everyday knowledge and authority in the digital age.

Why post a meme?

The digital age enables people to connect in new ways. Although networked digital communication technologies do not determine action, they do offer certain potentialities. For instance, everyday communication between individuals with similar interests, ideas, or values (no matter how niche) is no longer limited by geography. We can easily form communities with people we have never—and likely, will never—meet in person. Similarly, individuals can connect with their offline friends on the go, during their commute, and as they drift off to sleep. An individual can fluidly shift between numerous different web spaces and identities. In the span of only a few seconds, I can reply to a post on Reddit, check the news, refresh my work e-mail, and text my partner about that evening's dinner. These communications are multi-media, containing a mix of oral, written, and visual elements. Some are private; many are visible, recorded and viewed in posterity by my social networks or my followers. This is an age of participatory media, Web 2.0, and what many have called "participatory culture."

As communication scholar Limor Shifman notes, Internet memes spread "the notion of participatory culture itself."[10] Shifman suggests that Internet memes signify more than just funny pictures with text on them. Taking into account the wide variety of ways in which Internet

memes manifest—ranging from memetic phrases, to image macros, to photoshops, to embodied performances—suggests viewing them not as discrete artifacts, but instead, as manifestations of a larger body of practice that exhibit variation and play as they are circulated informally between users across networks.

Adopting this practice-driven framework helps scholars better navigate the relationship between individual communications involving Internet memes and the larger body of practice from which they emerge. Since memetic practices emerge as the aggregated result of millions of individual, everyday actions, users tend to perceive them as non-institutional (or "vernacular"). Here we begin to see a gap between individual memetic artifacts (which often make vernacular assertions) and memetic practice (which is assumed to be a form of vernacular expression). This dualistic relationship gives an individual memetic communication a sense of something greater than itself, creating legitimacy because it emerges from a larger crowdsourced practice. As a result, Internet memes enable everyday argument by facilitating individual assertions of vernacular authority and allowing users to actively construct, circulate, and legitimate ideas like "common sense."

Why study memes?

Because of the nature of networked communication and spreadability inherent to Internet memes, it is inevitable (and frequent) that competing notions of common knowledge will come into contact. Additionally, once an Internet meme becomes popular enough, it may even attract the attention of institutional agents, seeking to leverage the power of vernacular speech for their own ends. Although the stakes may seem low, users take such challenges surprisingly seriously—just as my friend did with the pro-gun meme. In these moments, when assumed knowledge about this vernacular practice is challenged, users must deal with a breach of their

expectations for everyday communication. The challenge presented by this breach hails users to reassert their control over vernacular authority and common knowledge. In other words, studying Internet memes exposes how users attempt to establish, negotiate, and retain control over vernacular authority.

This project chooses Internet memes as its focus in order to make a larger point about the changing nature of everyday communication in the digital age. As networked digital communication technologies offer and normalize new ways of forming relationships and developing communities, users are also enabled to create their own sense of authority. This authority is not vested in any single institution but, instead, in the aggregate volition of the group. This authority is extremely idiosyncratic, but at the same time it imagines itself as "common sense"—the widely applicable result of lived experience and correct thought. As a result, the digital age has widely expanded the potential for users to create (and legitimate) their own forms of non-institutional knowledge and authority. Posting a meme, then, serves as one of the quintessential ways in which everyday argument is being extended by the affordances available in the digital age.

Chapter Outline

So far, I have suggested the potential for Internet memes to construct, circulate, and legitimate ideas of vernacular authority and common knowledge. *Chapter 2* continues to develop this theory of the memetic vernacular. I begin by considering the relationship between networked digital communication technologies and society in order to suggest four major ways in which everyday communication has been changed by the digital age. Reviewing a wide variety of digital media scholarship, I suggest that everyday communication has become more connected, participatory, visual, and visible as a result of the affordances made available by the digital age.

These affordances have changed memes to Internet memes, turning isolated events and abstract cultural building blocks into visible and spreadable practices. After providing a practice-based definition of Internet memes, I suggest how such a practice functions as a form of vernacular discourse. This perspective enables a better understanding of how Internet memes function both as individual communications and as collective action. As a result, this practice-based framework illuminates how Internet memes enable users to deploy common knowledge and assert vernacular authority.

In *Chapter 3*, I put this theory into practice by reviewing the contentious 10-month lifecycle of a single memetic practice on the social networking website Reddit. The case of Unpopular Opinion Puffin demonstrates the aggregated and negotiated process through which Internet memes develop a perception of vernacular authority. However, once this authority developed and the memetic practice became popular, users began to deploy it for their own personal gain. Initially, the practice facilitated posting low-effort content as a way of generating social capital. Over time, users moved from creating manufactured controversies (usually involving issues in popular culture) to using the popular memetic practice as a way to express racist viewpoints. These performances of whiteness used memetic practice to police other users and exert hegemonic power. The popularity of the larger practice enabled these users to deploy vernacular authority and common knowledge in these specific instances in order to legitimate their racist attitudes and construct a veneer of marginalization.

Chapter 4 looks at what happens when networked communication enables two very different senses of vernacular authority to come into contact and conflict as well as how the Internet enables acts of appropriation and hegemonic masculinity through memetic practice. This chapter begins with a group of young women who created a meme in order to counter what they

saw as negative connotations for the word “feminism” in vernacular discourse. The subsequent popularity of the Who Needs Feminism? meme attracted the attention of several anti-feminist groups. These groups created their own version of the meme, appropriating Who Needs Feminism? into I don’t need Feminism. This chapter looks at the ensuing (and often indirect) back-and-forth between feminist and anti-feminist discourse, demonstrating how tactics like memetic appropriation can serve as ways to resist others’ assertions of control over the memetic vernacular.

For my final case study, *Chapter 5* looks at what happens when Internet memes become so popular that they receive institutional attention. The everyday authority offered by communicating in the memetic vernacular offers an appealing sense of credibility not just to digital users but also to politicians and businesses. But, although some attempts at using memes in advertising and politics succeed, the vast majority of these institutional attempts fail. This chapter suggests that this failure is partially due to the often contradictory ways in which these messages emerge. When institutions fail in their attempts to speak in the memetic vernacular, it hails users to respond in ways that reassert collective control over vernacular authority and undermine the organization's institutional authority. The result is that institutional appropriations of Internet memes fail when users perceive them as moving too far from their crowdsourced roots.

Finally, *Chapter 6* offers a synthesis of these findings, proposes avenues for future research, and discusses the significance of everyday communication in the digital age—both online and off. To do this, I bring the arguments developed in the preceding chapters together to explain how the phenomenon of “meme magic” functioned in the 2016 American presidential election. In doing so, this chapter not only demonstrates how my theory of the memetic

vernacular can help scholars understand emergent trends in digital communication but also how the memetic vernacular enables institutional agents to leverage everyday communication practices for their own goals.

This dissertation demonstrates that viewing Internet memes as a vernacular practice reveals how users construct, circulate, and legitimate knowledge in their everyday communication online. Whether expressed as text, images, videos, or any of the multitude of forms in-between, Internet memes are an increasingly prevalent element of everyday communication in the digital age. As a result, a study of Internet memes is not only a study in the negotiation of vernacular expression but also a study in how users and institutions alike find power and authority in vernacular practice.

Chapter 2: The Memetic Vernacular: Internet Memes as Vernacular Discursive Practice

This is Bill. Bill leads by example. Bill has some advice for you (Figure 3).

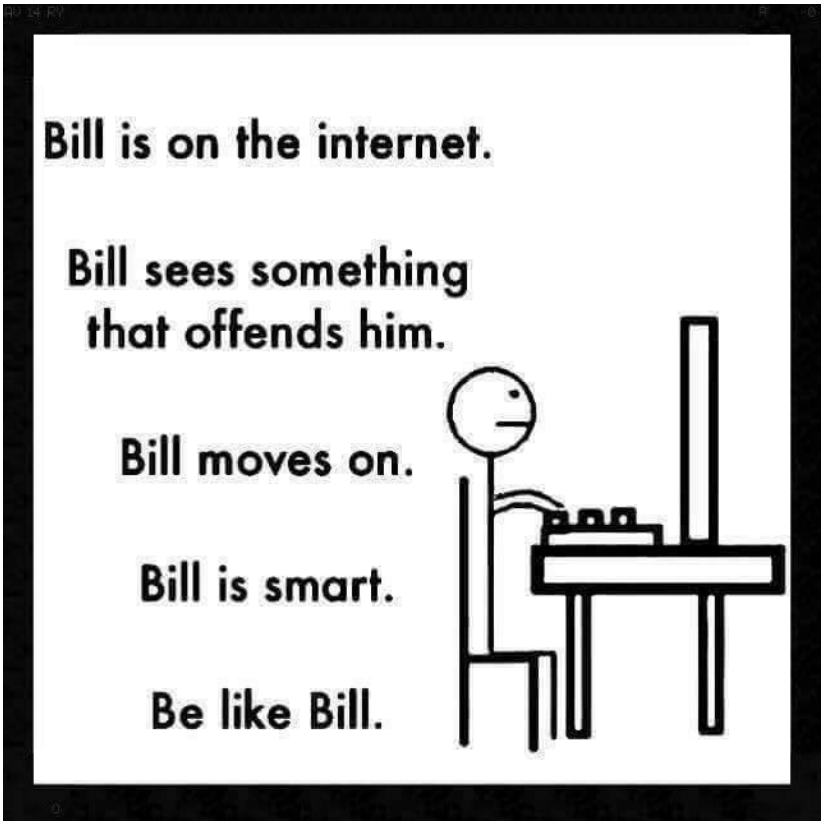

Figure 3 - An early example of the "Be Like Bill" meme

When Bill sees something on the Internet that offends him, he moves on. When Bill goes to a concert, he doesn't film the entire show on his smartphone and post it to social media. When Bill sees the new Star Wars movie, he doesn't post spoilers. When Bill sits down to eat, he doesn't take pictures of his food and post them on Instagram. When Bill is running for president, he doesn't bombard his followers with memes. When Bill wakes up to newly fallen snow, he remembers his friends have windows and doesn't post about it on social media.

Bill is smart.

Bill is also a little bit pushy (and a tad passive-aggressive).

In the first few weeks of 2016, it seemed like just about everybody on Facebook wanted all their friends to just "Be Like Bill" (Figure 4).

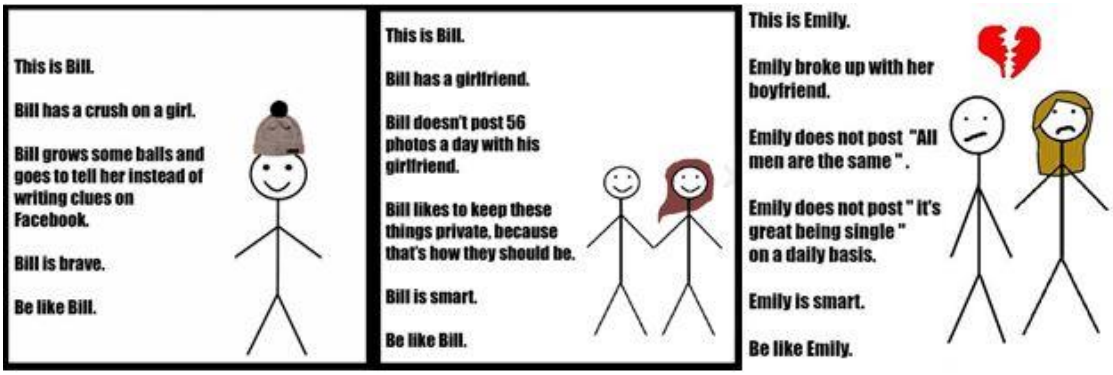

Figure 4 - Three typical examples of the "Be Like Bill" meme. Despite containing similar themes, each was posted by a different user. The rightmost image focuses on Bill's female equivalent, "Emily."

The Be Like Bill meme emerged from users posting images of the titular stick-figure (or his female equivalent, Emily) along with advice for others to follow. This advice—presented as black text on a nondescript white background—was usually written in short, truncated sentences and mimicked the etiquette advice in a children's book. These images conveyed a sense of proper Internet etiquette, but users weren't content letting Bill monopolize efforts to propagate a sense of social order on social media. With the help of websites and apps like "Be Like Me" users began generating variations of the "Be Like Bill" meme that put themselves at the center (Figure 5). Organizations and digital communities were also eager to engage with this memetic trend and gave advice on decorum by posting their own "Be Like Bill" variations. These variations used the meme to express communal inside jokes, reference popular culture, or mock public figures (Figure 6).

Figure 5 - Facebook users share randomly generated "Be Like Bill" memes created with the help of meme-generating website blobla.com. These generated images replaced "Bill" with the user's name and asked other users to do the same.

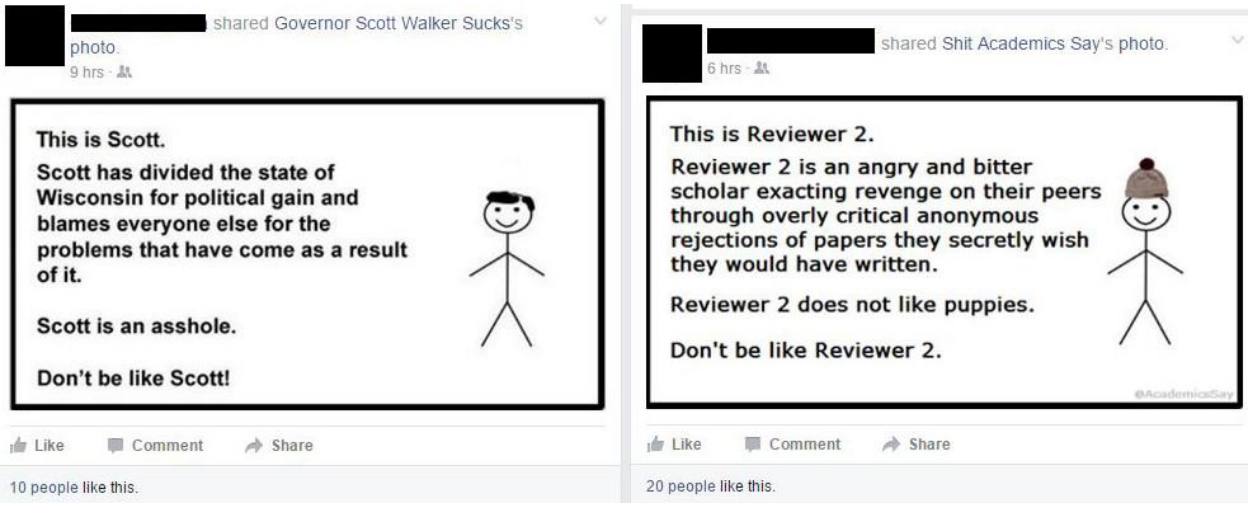

Figure 6 - A "Be Like Bill" image mocks Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker (left); A user reposts a "Be Like Bill" image to humorously express her frustration at the academic peer review process

However, this deluge of mundane and unsolicited advice quickly became controversial. Many users were frustrated by what they saw as attempts by others to widely impose social norms across their social networks. These user reactions recognized the power of vernacular speech and balked at individual attempts to exert vernacular authority. Some bloggers called it

the worst thing on Facebook,[11] others pleaded for users to resist the lure of joining the digital mob just to express a sense of moral superiority.[12] One organization even gave Bill the final frustrated words on the subject—"Stop it." (Figure 7).

Figure 7 - The Facebook page for a Kansas-based radio station uses a Be Like Bill image to express frustration over the meme.

Despite these diverse user reactions ranging from facetiousness to frustration, Be Like Bill represents a fairly typical example of an Internet meme. It seemed like it was everywhere on social media during the first weeks of January 2016, but by February it had all but disappeared. A few months later, it had almost totally vanished—relegated to occasional appearances on end-of-the-year trend lists and VH1 pop culture retrospectives. So, what is the significance of something so fleeting, fracturing, and seemingly frivolous? Although this specific meme was highly ephemeral (as most memes are), it also suggests several broader trends enabled by the affordances of networked digital communication. As a result, the disparate reactions surrounding

Be Like Bill raise several larger questions about the changing nature of everyday communication in the digital age. Why do everyday users engage with Internet memes as ways of expressing opinions, frustration, and authority? How do memes function as part of everyday vernacular discourse in digital communication? What is gained from speaking in this memetic vernacular and what is lost?

In this chapter, I address these questions by extending current conversations in the study of digital cultures toward a theory of the memetic vernacular. The case of Be Like Bill is just one very clear example of an often overlooked capacity in digital communication—the ability for everyday users to create, circulate, maintain, and assert their own sense of vernacular authority by engaging with Internet memes. The idea of authority that emerges alternately from institutional authority through grassroots processes is not a new one.[13] What is new here is that memetic practices represent a reserve of vernacular potential. When someone shares an Internet meme (like a Be Like Bill image), they are making a singular communication that draws argumentative force from existing alongside a much larger, shared body of practice. Similarly, when someone dismisses a memetic communication (such as telling Bill to "stop it") they are seemingly rejecting others' attempts to exert singular control over concepts like vernacular authority and common knowledge that exist as the result of aggregate volition.

I begin by discussing the mutually constitutive relationship between technology and society in order to suggest how everyday communication has changed as a result of the affordances available in the digital age. These affordances extend existing dynamics of everyday communication by offering new potential for connection, participation, visuality, and visibility. I then argue that Internet memes embody the essence of these four facets and, as a result, the study of memes is the study of the changing nature of everyday communication in the digital age. I

then review the origin of the term "meme" and explain why several contemporary digital media scholars have grappled with the term. Based on these trends in current digital media scholarship, I then suggest that Internet memes represent recurring generic practices in digital communication exhibiting variation and play as they are circulated informally between users. Next, I transition to the implications of this definition, discussing how memetic practices function as resources for vernacular communication. This vernacularity, I argue, emerges not only from the artifacts themselves, but from the communal practices and technological affordances surrounding them. Having established memes as quintessential resources for vernacular communication in the Web 2.0 era, I then move to explain how this sense of vernacularity enables memetic practices to participate in the construction and maintenance of common belief.[14] As I conclude, this theory of the memetic vernacular is useful because it accounts for the relationship between local, contextual communication events and widespread, viral communicative genres. Adopting such a view reveals memetic practices as dual-layered communications that draw on perceptions of virality while making specific assertions.

Affordances of the Digital Age

Digital communication is increasingly a part of everyday communication.[15] As rhetoricians Jennifer Bay and Thomas Rickert suggest, new media technologies have extended themselves into everyday life to the extent that technologically enabled practices verge on constituting new ways of being.[16] Digital communication devices are nearly ubiquitous in American society, so much so that the virtual/real dichotomy of the early 2000s seems more antiquated with each passing year. As I write this introduction in early 2016, over 84% of American adults are online, a number that has been holding steady since 2012.[17] Due to the proliferation of smartphones, tablets, and other Internet-ready portable devices that we are rarely

separated from, more than one-in-five Americans report going online "almost constantly."[18] Digital communication has become an extension of us, a change scholars of digital media have seen coming for more than two decades.

The first 10 years of this slow march toward normalcy are well-documented in a 2004 article by sociologist and network scholar Barry Wellman. Wellman reflects that as early as 1992 he tried to proselytize for the potential for networked communication at a professional conference, suggesting that the future of digital communication "is in understanding that computer networks support the kinds of social networks in which people usually live and often work. … Moreover, people don't just relate to each other online, they incorporate their computer-mediated communication into their full range of interaction."[19] Wellman notes that his call for increased attention toward understanding the intersection of networked communication and everyday life fell mostly on deaf ears. Instead, the first several years of Internet research tended to be defined by grand prognostications and dystopic prophets. By the late 1999s, the Internet had begun to receive attention from a wider body of scholars, many of whom began to document the Internet's users and uses.[20] In 2004, the year Wellman published this retrospective, he claimed we were at the dawn of a new era—one that traded simple description for more in-depth analysis.[21] That same year, Malcolm McCullough noted that digital technology was becoming increasingly embedded in everyday life.[22] A comprehensive study by Tomasello, Lee, and Baer of scholarly journal publication patterns from the same period concluded that new media research was thriving across a variety of disciplines[23] in what we now view as the early years of the Web 2.0 era.

However, despite Wellman's claim, neither the utopists nor the dystopists remained confined to the '90s. The onset of Web 2.0 was marked by the emergence of new forms of

participatory media. To many, participatory media offered the promise of new opportunities for collaboration and, with it, liberation. In his 2006 book, *The Wealth of Networks,* Harvard University legal scholar Yochai Benkler offered that "we are in the midst of a technological, economic, and organizational transformation that allows us to renegotiate the terms of freedom, justice, and productivity in the information society."[24]

When this transformation promised by the era of participatory media stalled, looking more like new extensions of old hegemonies, other scholars and researchers began to take umbrage. Sherry Turkle, for instance, accused the digital age of creating a sense of human isolation resulting from technological dependence.[25] Cass Sunstein feared the ease with which digital technology allowed us to insulate ourselves from divergent or uncomfortable viewpoints.[26] Nicolas Carr asked if Google was making us stupid by providing infinite distraction that substituted breadth for depth.[27] Others worried that the digital age was destroying "real" art[28] or about the flaws of digital democracy.[29]

Many of these views are overly deterministic. The relationship between technology and society is much more complicated than claims of damnation or redemption could elucidate. Instead, we must consider not only technology but also context.[30] We might consider the relationship between technology and society as a mutually constitutive feedback loop in which neither force is solely dominant and each is continually influencing the other. Scholars in a variety of disciplines, including communication scholar Nancy Baym as well as sociologists Donald MacKenzie and Judy Wajcman, call this perspective the "social shaping of technology."[31] This perspective suggests not only that technologies have certain uses to which they are better or less suited, but also that people often adapt technologies to serve their needs.[32]

Baym uses the term "affordances" to refer to the capabilities enabled by a technology. These affordances influence—but do not determine—use.[33] A standard household claw hammer, for instance, is well-suited to pounding in a nail. In a pinch, it could also be used as a weapon. It would make a terrible toothbrush. This perspective suggests technology exists in a state of "interpretive flexibility." In other words, different groups can have very different understandings of a technology;[34] similarly, different groups may also have very different understandings of the customs and norms related to using a technology. In other words, technologies provide users with structure while also leaving potential for individualization and variation inside that structure.

Hence, when I discuss the changing nature of everyday communication in the digital age in the section that follows, I am neither speaking in absolutes nor determinants. Instead, I am referring to capabilities enabled by digital and network technologies and seeking to understand the various ways in which users have engaged that potential. Developing this understanding of everyday digital communication will subsequently provide a basis to explore the role Internet memes play in that communication.

The Changing Nature of Everyday Communication in the Digital Age

The digital age has altered and expanded existing dynamics of everyday communication in several interconnected ways. A study by Flanagin et al. provides a starting point for understanding how the affordances of networked digital communication technologies are changing the nature of everyday communication. Looking at the central communicative characteristics of the Internet, they write:

> Overall, the internet's technical design supports interoperability and open access, while suggesting an enormous capacity for personalization and innovation. In turn, these technical

> features support the emergence of myriad collective social activities, resulting in a sense of individual empowerment achieved through enhanced agency. Significant countervailing forces, however, inhibit this potential.[35]

These ideas, such as interoperability and collectivity, suggest the centrality of connectedness as a defining factor of the digital age. Connectedness, however, is not the only factor. In the sections that follow I offer a brief synthesis of digital media scholarship in order to suggest four major facets that define the changing nature of everyday communication in the digital age. Everyday communication in the digital age is more: 1) connected, 2) participatory, 3) visual, and 4) visible. Having offered this synthesis of academic literature, I then turn to a discussion of Internet memes, suggesting that they embody the essence of these facets and—as a corollary—of the new potential for everyday communication in the digital age.

Connected

Networked digital communication technologies offer the potential to decouple interpersonal connection from geography and locality.[36] Connection in the digital age enables interaction between groups and individuals who would not otherwise meet in the course of their everyday lives. As a result, digital communities tend to form based around mutual interests or similar values.[37] Early work by Nancy Baym, for instance, demonstrated the utility of digital communication for connecting geographically diverse soap opera fans.[38] Similar dynamics of connectivity form the basis for a diverse range of digital communities, including black users on Twitter, Asian-American activist bloggers, Christian fundamentalists, Star Trek fans, fans of the supernatural, fans of Supernatural, and rural LGBTQ youth.[39] These communities may emerge in their own discrete web spaces or as a part of a larger web site.

Digital communication can also help us feel more connected to those we see every day.[40] In her study of networked media use among adolescents, danah boyd, notes that teens tend to use the Internet as a social space to hang out with their friends—occupying a similar role to the mall, movie theatre, or arcade in decades past.[41] For young people, these technologies enable connections that allow them to circumvent limitations and continue maintaining their face-to-face friendships, even after curfew or without a car. Similarly, a new couple may use text messaging as a way of flirting between dates, and a long-term couple may stay connected during their workday by using Google chat.

The connections enabled by digital communication are always on, offering the potential for users to "feel emotionally close and connected to others even when they are physically apart from them" at all hours of the day.[42] This creates an expectation for constant connectedness. At 3 o'clock in the morning, a fan can post on a community message board, or a friend can be texted for advice. Often, this communication is faster and more frequent than pre-digital communication, even when interaction is asynchronous.[43] As media scholar Henry Jenkins observes, this increased speed and frequency may intensify the social bonds within a community.[44]

Ongoing connection fosters community, and, in the digital age, community membership tends to be defined by a sense of fluidity. Users are presented with many more options for where to engage and how to define themselves. At the same time, users are also more enabled to easily shift between those spaces and identities.[45] Even the platforms themselves are constantly updating and changing their digital architecture.[46] Many scholars have referred to this aspect of digital communication as demonstrating "weak ties" or exhibiting "loose connections."[47] However, digital communication scholar Ashley Hinck offers a compelling case for forefronting

fluidity. Whereas "weak ties" suggests an inferior way of associating, fluidity is meant to suggest a larger cultural shift, one in which "the agent chooses and constructs his/her own lifeworld from the vast array of options available in an increasingly globalized information society."[48] Fluidity, then, focuses attention on the simultaneously transient and inclusive role of choice among a multiplicity of connections.[49] "Fluidity" denotes ease of shifting between typing an e-mail to one's mother, reading a new post on Reddit, and trolling on 4Chan within a short length of time.

Fluidity also suggests the complex relationship between individuals and the digital communities they create. Individuals may be in constant motion, but, at the same time, specific expectations of behavior emerge around any given network location and guide the possibilities for interaction. Digital communities continue to function because individuals enact social identities that they perceive to be consistent with group expectations and values.[50] When a user posts something and no other users respond, it is taken as an indirect comment on the post's quality.[51] The paradox here is that group membership in the digital age may be more fluid, but users still imagine a static community. This imaginary, in turn, exerts force on the potential for user interaction.

The fluid nature of digital group membership among individuals means that every network location maintains a unique set of shared expectations derived from the product of ongoing group interaction yet belonging to no specific individual. These shared expectations are "displayed, reinforced, negotiated, and taught through members' shared behaviors"[52] and "any newcomer to an Internet chatroom, or a Facebook page, or even a back-and-forth mobile phone texting scenario, will know that there exists a certain shared body of knowledge about how to behave in such settings."[53] These shared expectations, in turn, affect how individuals manage and perform within their social and group identities. Since users imagine each other within the

confines of these shared expectations when communicating online,[54] these shared expectations guide and delimit the emergent possibilities for interaction.[55]

Participatory

The new possibilities for connection in the digital age also enable new possibilities for creation that often complicate ideas like authorial intent, monologic texts, and the authority of top-down media flows.[56] Because of the affordances of digital media, users can more easily collaborate, repurpose, and remix when engaging in acts of personal expression online.[57] This process of collaboration might be direct, such as when several users work together to complete a task by contributing small amounts of labor or capital to the overall project. Wikipedia is perhaps the most visible example of the former, while any number of crowdsourced projects would constitute collaboration of the latter type.[58] More often, however, collaboration in the digital age becomes a more diffuse and nebulous process; one that is iterative, with users creating variations and personalizations of work that has come before in order to express themselves.[59] Consequently, everyday communication in the digital age exists in a constant feedback loop where cultural forms are continually negotiated. Digital communications may end but they are rarely final.

One of the key ways this increased potential for participation has been conceptualized is through the idea of participatory culture, a label popularized by Henry Jenkins.[60] In *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century,* Jenkins et al. offer the following definition for participatory culture: "A *participatory culture* is a *culture* with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices."[61] Significant scholarship of participatory culture focuses on

the relationship between traditional media producers and fans.[62] Although fans certainly produced and remixed media before the digital age (such as zines or fanfic),[63] the advent of networked communication significantly lowered the barrier between fans, media producers, and media objects.[64] As a result, everyday users (especially those frequently underrepresented in mass media) are more enabled to collaborate with each other to create their own media[65] to speak back to institutional media producers,[66] and to remix existing media in order to create new interpretations.[67]

The fundamentally social nature of participatory culture[68] points to a huge array of collaborative behaviors. Remixes, for example take many forms—written, audio, visual—and allow users to deploy popular culture against itself.[69] Remixing reclaims an institutionally produced object and imbues it with a sense of public ownership—reminding other users that it exists beyond single authorship. The resulting media emerges in conversation with not only the original media object and producer, but also with the user's community. A recut of *Sex and the City* may present a reinterpretation of the lead character as queer in order to critique what the remixer sees as an over focus on heteronormativity and a lack of representation of her community on television.[70]As this example suggests, these collaborative behaviors are built upon existing bodies of practice and often straddle the boundary between entertainment and politics.[71]

In *A Private Sphere* Zizi Papacharissi refers to this blending of humor and politics as "the rebirth of satire and subversion," again, the result of collaborative processes.[72] Although Papacharissi frames YouTube as a central location for satire, several other scholars have noted the often irreverent and jokey tone of everyday digital discourse exists more broadly across digital communities, even when encountering tragic or serious topics.[73] And, as Trevor J. Blank reminds us, many of these joke forms existed long before the Internet.[74] The change here is less

revolution and more evolution, brought about by new affordances in collaboration that create high levels of interactivity.[75] As Limor Shifman and Menahem Blondheim note, "comic texts transform the dilemmas of each agonizing user into a shared inter-subjective experience."[76] In other words, despite the high copy-fidelity made available by digital media, users continually evoke the fundamentally collaborative nature of digital communication by creating endless personalized variants that express their identities and perform community membership.[77] The result of this process is content that is more polysemic and protean, innovatively blending boundaries of communicative genres while also being highly referential and intertextual.[78]

Although the collaborative potential of digital communication is usually framed as a positive, scholars like Lisa Nakamura remind us that it can just as often become the basis for reinscribing hegemony. Nakamura writes, "While many scholars have noted the democratic, empowering effects of participatory media upon media for users, it can also provide fans with a powerful vector for distributing racializing discourses."[79] Other scholars, such as Adrienne Massanari, Whitney Phillips, Ryan Milner, and Robert Glenn Howard, have shown how collaboration enables potentially harmful behaviors like trolling, witchhunting, and enclaving.[80] Works by Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin; Van Dijck and Nieborg; Duffy; Duffy and Hund; and Kreiss, Finn, and Turner suggest that the emergent collaborative dynamics of the digital age may simply reproduce hegemony and cultural roles, perpetuating identities cultivated by institutions and marketers while merely paying lip service to the spirit of communalization.[81] The key takeaway here, as Hiesun Cecilia Suhr suggests, is remembering that the best ideas or most noble values are not necessarily the ones that gain prominence in web communities.[82] Instead, scholars should seek to problematize digital collaboration by understanding how differing sets of values are maintained and contested by users.

The Internet didn't create participatory cultures, but it provided mechanisms for existent DIY and folk cultures to grow and circulate[83] and, as Henry Jenkins reminds us, "Do It Yourself rarely means Do It Alone."[84] Participatory media emphasize ideas like interactivity, modularity, and discursive coproduction over the consumption of monologic texts.[85] Although these co-productive acts can range from liberating, to irreverent, to hostile, users engage with participatory media to perform social connection and because of a belief that their contributions matter.[86] Adopting such a view acknowledges the fundamentally collaborative nature of everyday expression the digital age, where even ostensibly singular works emerge in dialog with a vast array of similar examples and practices.

Visual

Everyday communication in the digital age is increasingly visual. Networked and mobile digital communication technologies allow users to easily capture and circulate media in course of their everyday lives. Smartphones, for instance, make it easy to record a video or snap a photograph at a moment's notice. These devices are becoming more and more ubiquitous—cameras are everywhere and easy to use. The result, as sociologist Martin Hand argues, is that "digital imaging and photography have become thoroughly ordinary accompaniments to communication and connection practices in daily life."[87]

While these technologies make it easy to document the everyday, it is the networks they connect to that enable the circulation of this documented media via the click of a button.[88] This novel landscape is aided by the prevalence of digital locations that forefront or integrate the visual. Media-sharing websites like Instagram, Imgur, and YouTube make uploading media and finding content widely accessible. Social networking sites make it easy to curate one's everyday life via media and to share that media with other users. Even a more simplistic expression, like a

colon followed by a parenthesis, adds a sense of visuality to text-based communications by mimicking a facial expression. Writing about Flikr, an image-hosting website, Susan Murray notes that this turn toward the visual on the web facilitates, "a collaborative experience: a shared display of memory, taste, history, signifiers of identity, collection, daily life and judgement through which amateur and professional photographers collectively articulate a novel, digitized (and decentralized) aesthetics of the everyday."[89] In other words, the affordances offered by these devices and platforms have enabled the emergence of new social norms that emphasize an intersection between everyday communication, visuality, and connectedness.

These observations of the mundanity of capturing and sharing everyday experiences on the Internet suggest digital technologies may enable these practices but social norms have embraced the affordances of these technologies in ways that make the visual documentation and circulation of everyday life not only possible, but also expected. As Hand writes, the unprecedented levels of visual mediation in Western culture has led to social norms which support "the visual publicization of ordinary life in a ubiquitous photoscape."[90] Several other scholars have also noted this convergence between everyday life, digital media, and visual communication. Aaron Hess, Christina Smith and Kelly McDonald, Lei Guo and Lorin Lee, and Kari Andén-Papadopoulos have argued that user videos posted to the popular video-sharing website *YouTube* constitute forms of everyday argument.[91] Similarly, scholars such as Trevor J. Blank, Ryan Milner, and I have noted the popularity of image manipulation ("photoshopping") as a form of everyday argument and resource for vernacular resistance of institutional narratives.[92] Hence, whether uploading pictures of a fancy meal or sharing a picture of oneself at a major tourist attraction, every image, Murray notes, "becomes something that even the amateur

can create and comment on with relative authority and ease."[93] Digital communication has made the visual not only more everyday but also more discursive.

The emergence of these new affordances and social norms also enable users to appropriate or remix institutional media in their acts of everyday expression.[94] A social media user can post a GIF from a television show in order to express frustration over a bad day at work. A screen capture from the first movie in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy can be repurposed for political ends, informing a user's social media network that "One does not simply pass gun control through the senate."

As the above paragraphs suggest, everyday visual expression online comes in a wide variety of forms, ranging from photographs, images, and videos to GIFS, image macros, photoshops, drawings, remixed videos, or emojis. These forms are rarely discrete. For instance, a GIF or emoji can be an appropriate reaction to a textual conversation, or a user may overlay text on an image to create an image macro. Digital communication not only blurs lines between institutional media and personal expression, it also blurs boundaries between verbal, written, and visual communication.

Digital technologies allow for a mix of oral, written, and visual elements in everyday communication. "The devices," Hand writes, "enable and are enabled by new visual rhetorics and techniques, all of which are producing a novel landscape of screens and images."[95] Since digital communication often bears the signs of both written and spoken language, Nancy Baym suggests that it is best viewed as a mixed modality.[96] More than just remediation, digital technologies allow users to blend and extend written, oral, and visual communication in novel ways. The result, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett eloquently writes, "is neither speech nor writing as we have known it, but something in between, and, increasingly, with the convergence

of technologies, it is multimedia."[97] Therefore, regarding digital communication as a mixed oral/visual/textual modality is fundamental to understanding how the multi- and cross-mediated ways individuals choose to engage in acts of everyday expression in digital spaces.

Visible

The digital age allows users to more easily capture and circulate the details of their everyday lives across networks, which, in turn, makes the practice of everyday life more visible.[98] A user might post status updates reacting to the latest episode of *Game of Thrones*, interacting with other users as if they were present on the living room couch and hailing them into the Sunday night viewing routine. Another user is reminded by Facebook to send birthday wishes to a friend and is enabled to do so via a few button presses from 600 miles away. Other users engage in intense arguments with friends, acquaintances, and strangers on topics ranging from the personal to the political, which play out in myriad forms across status updates, tweets, and comment sections. Vacation and baby photos are expected forms of public self-documentation. Mobile applications allow users to check in at a concert, share a photograph of a meal at a fancy restaurant, or post a map of that day's jogging route, notifying their social networks of their location while also publicly displaying their movement through everyday life.

These public displays of connection are vital to personal identity work on social networking sites,[99] and, as Robert Glenn Howard notes, "If the vernacular process of public self-imagining were to stop, no geographic location would be there to bind the individuals together."[100] As a result, sharing these quotidian details forms the backbone of social media and the Web 2.0 era. This can create a legitimating effect, allowing fringe or subcultural behaviors to transcend from the periphery toward the mainstream.[101] Through these public displays on a mass scale, a silly trend like planking can become a full-blown cultural fad. These trends point toward

the emergence of a culture of sharing, through which connection and expression create new potential for visibility and awareness of everyday practices.[102]

The visibility of everyday life enabled by new media creates an awareness that individual actions exist as part of a larger body of practice. As everyday acts circulate across networks and become more visible, users begin to recognize them not only as distinct actions but also as parts of a larger practice. Digital communication scholar Limor Shifman observes that by documenting and sharing everyday actions across networks, users make these formerly ephemeral and interpersonal communication events more visible across space and more persistent over time. The sum total of these interactions are catalogued on a variety of web locations, allowing previously uninitiated users to quickly learn about the myriad variations at play.[103] This mass sharing inadvertently results in a widely accessible archive of everyday practice where "it only takes a couple of mouse clicks to see hundreds of versions."[104] The outcome of these changes in visibility, Shifman argues, is an increase in user awareness of the overall sum of these actions.[105] The affordances of the digital age enable users to see their individual actions not only as discrete forms of everyday expression but also as connected to a larger body of everyday practice.[106] In other words, the visibility created by digital communication makes us more aware of genres of expression in our everyday lives.

This increased visibility also carries the potential to bring everyday behavior to the attention of the institutional, corporate, or political entities. A major news network, for instance, might spend part of their newscast covering a hashtag trending on Twitter or allow web users to respond to a story by using a certain hashtag. Similarly, users may circulate a bystander video or a blog post that provides initial or timely coverage to an event not yet covered by local news, creating visibility and possibly even setting the agenda for subsequent coverage by major news

outlets.[107] A political campaign might harvest publicly available demographic information to micro-target individual users by promoting appealing features while concealing less appealing ones,[108] and a corporation can monitor large-scale social media trends as well as individual users crowdsourced to prominence.[109] Visibility, then, should be construed as a mixed blessing. It can give everyday users some influence over institutional narratives, but it also creates new opportunities for institutional influence and appropriation of everyday communication.

As the previous paragraph demonstrates, increased visibility means that digital expressions of everyday life often flow in unexpected ways and reach unintended audiences. Building off Joshua Meyrowitz's seminal *No Sense of Place,* Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd suggest that "In sites like Twitter and Facebook, social contexts we used to imagine as separate co-exist as parts of the network. Individuals learn how to manage tensions between public and private, insider and outsider, and frontstage and backstage performances."[110] In their study of iconic images, Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites note the unpredictability and unintended audiences inherent to digital circulation,[111] while digital media scholars Klaus Bruhn Jensen and Rasmus Helles have called the Internet "a distinctive kind of medium comprising different communicative genres—one-to-one, one-to-many as well as many-to-many communication."[112] And, as Barbara Warnick observes, digital communication complicates ideas like authorial intent, credibility, and audience by enabling communications that are often co-produced, non-linear and highly contextual.[113] Warnick's solution to navigating these complicated media flows is an approach that observes the interplay between individual communication events and the communicative genres that shape them.[114] This approach positions communication events not as discrete artifacts, but instead, as constantly emerging co-productions between users that are both instance-specific and affected by generic expectations.

Why Memes Matter

If everyday communication in the digital age is defined by emergent forms of connection, participation, visuality, and visibility, then the study of Internet memes is the study of the changing nature of everyday communication in the digital age.

These four facets (connected, participatory, visual, visible) define not only the changing nature of everyday communication in the digital age but also the nature of Internet memes. Internet memes demonstrate connectedness, emerging from collective action and fluid social interaction. They are constantly in motion and changing while at the same time conforming to the generic expectations that result from aggregate volition. Internet memes are participatory.[115] They embody ideas like polyvocality, intertextual reference, remix, humor, and collaboration,[116] giving rise to countless personalized variants that express both individual and collective identity.[117] Internet memes are enabled by the visuality of the online medium[118] and blur the lines between written, visual, and oral communication. As they circulate, Internet Memes make everyday life more visible[119] and have been used to create grassroots visibility for a variety of social and political causes.[120] As Limor Shifman writes, "the meme concept is not only useful for understanding cultural trends: it epitomizes the very essence of the so-called Web 2.0 era."[121]

In light of these facets, this dissertation understands Internet memes to be *recurring generic practices in networked communication exhibiting variation and play as they are circulated informally between users*. Adopting such a definition is the first step to understanding our central questions about the role of Internet memes in digital communication. However, to understand the significance of this definition, one must first understand the lineage of scholarship upon which it is built. In the next section I discuss the history of the term "meme" in order to provide context for why a redefinition is necessary.

Memes, Memetics, and Internet Memes

In 1976, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term meme to refer to a "unit of cultural transmission" that replicates by "leaping from brain to brain" through a process of imitation.[122] Dawkins suggested that memes are to culture as genes are to biology. The relationship that links both pairs is that their spread is the result of an unconscious process—an idea with critical mass propagates itself. Dawkinsian memes focus not on a social process or action, but on how the idea copies itself, traveling from brain to brain. Later proponents of memetics, such as Susan Blackmore, have argued for its legitimacy as a scientific field of inquiry by choosing to focus on Dawkinsian memes as replicators, explicitly separating them from Dawkins's genetic overtones.[123] However, despite a conscious effort to move away from seeing Dawkinsian memes as genes, many of these viewpoints remain rooted in deterministic biology.[124]

Scholarly conversations from the *Journal of Memetics* (1997-2005) reflect a major recurring issue with memetics: although memetics offers a strong conceptual framework, it fails to provide a solid, novel, or practical methodology for observing real-world phenomena. Susan Blackmore argued that all complex human cognitive processes are based on imitation and, as such, memetic.[125] Derek Gatherer suggested that memetics needed to observe both behaviors and artifacts; that memetic spread was highly unstable, especially when confronted with increased heterogeneity; and that memetics should make use of existing quantitative data to support their assertions about memetic trends.[126] Francis Heylighen noted the need for a better general theory of memetic transmission that can be operationalized and empirically tested on an individual basis.[127] Both Francis Beer and Nick Rose interrogated if the view of memetics as pervasive is overly deterministic and what that might mean for free will and agency.[128] Aaron Lynch

observed the lack of a concrete definition for the units of Dawkinsian memes and acknowledges that just because an idea is self-replicating, it does not mean that it is exactly the same between individuals.[129] Although his observations are useful, the new definition forwarded by Lynch found little traction.[130] In 2002, Bruce Edmonds noted that, in order to survive, memetics had to show that it was more than a conceptual framework. Memetics, Edmonds argued, was currently lacking three things: "a conclusive case-study; a theory for when memetic models are appropriate; and a simulation of the emergence of a memetic process."[131] A few years later, Edmonds wrote that the inability of the field to complete these tasks satisfactorily, "was indicative of the poverty of the memetics project resulting in a lack of demonstrable progress which, in turn, has meant that it has failed to interest other academics."[132] This critique was published in the final issue of the *Journal of Memetics.*

The years following the final issue of the *Journal of Memetics* saw a distinct rise in popular use of "meme" as the emic term to define recurring genres of digital communication. These communications differ from other viral content because, as Shifman notes, memes tend to vary as they are shared, whereas viral content "spreads to the masses via digital word-of-mouth mechanisms *without significant change.*"[133] As Dawkins himself would later note in a 2013 interview, the popular use of "meme" by users in digital communication has diverged appreciably from his original conception, and "Internet meme" represents memes that are deliberately altered by human creativity.[134]

Scholars of digital communication have also noted the importance of creativity, circulation, and agency in studying popular communication online. As Jenkins, Ford, and Green have noted, biological metaphors like viral and meme (in the original Dawkinsian sense) don't adequately stress *how* content circulated.[135] Because of the problematic lack of agency implied

by terms like viral and meme scholars like Jean Burgess,[136] Limor Shifman,[137] and Ryan Milner[138] have also had reservations about taking up Dawkins's definition wholesale. Shifman, for instance, explains what she sees as a lack of agency in Dawkins's original formulation as being problematic because it misses one of the most notable aspects of Internet memes. Of her choice to analyze a YouTube video as a meme, she cautions, "I wish to stress that human agency should be an integral part of our conceptualization of memes by describing them as dynamic entities that spread in response to technological, cultural and social *choices* made by people. As a result, memes should not be treated as isolated, discrete units; instead, memes should be viewed as the building blocks of complex cultures, intertwining and interacting with each other."[139]

Departing from Dawkins, both Shifman and Milner stress variation and intertextual play in their observations of memes.[140] This foregrounding of the ways in which genres are constructed and played with by Internet users supports seeing memes less as autonomous cultural replicators and more as cultural building blocks that function as expressions of perceived self and group identity. These building blocks often reference, play with, and build on other popular memes, continually recreating their own genres through widespread interaction and communication.

In *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman offers an update to the Dawkinsian meme, suggesting the following tripartite definition for Internet memes:[141]

> "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users."[142]

Building off of Shifman's work, this dissertation offers the amended definition of "Internet memes" above in order to refocus scholarly attention from texts to practice.

In my definition, Internet memes are, at their heart, recurring online *practices*. This focus on practice keeps many of the important facets so adroitly observed by Shifman while also extending them based on other trends in digital studies and Internet meme scholarship. Variation remains a key component of memetic communication. So, too, does the stress on interpersonal or communal creation and circulation—although a focus on the informal, everyday nature of this communication is added by my definition. Because memes exist not only virally but also in small communities (and even in ongoing instances of dyadic communication), the qualifier "many" is absent from my definition. This allows appreciation of memetic communication on a wider variety of scales. Cross-memetic awareness and reference by creators, while certainly prevalent, is not fundamental. Instead, I have chosen to use the more inclusive "play" in my definition to better capture how memes reference not only other memetic artifacts but also popular culture, community norms, traditions, and the generic expectations surrounding the memetic practices themselves.

These considerations are all important, but it is the word "practice" that adds the most to my reformulation of Shifman's definition. In the next section, I discuss the significance of this move from text to practice at length, suggesting the implications of viewing memes through a practice-driven framework and outlining how memetic communication practices come to see themselves as forms of vernacular expression.

Memes as Practice

Expanding "meme" from sets of discursive texts to practices is a significant move, but it is not unprecedented. In *Memes in Digital Culture*'s closing quarter Shifman herself acknowledges that a text-centric view[143] may be flawed, adding that what is being replicated across memes is "*the practice of creating simple and repetitive content.*"[144] This expansion from

meme as text to meme as practice allows us to widen our perspective beyond a series of artifacts and into the patterns of behavior exhibited underlying memetic communication. Instead of theorizing about artifacts that represent brief moments in constantly changing body of practices, we must shift our focus to the practices themselves because the fundamental dynamics they represent (informal circulation and variation) are digital remediations of human creative traditions. Hence, understanding memes through a practice-driven framework provides the first step to answering this chapter's central questions about the role of memes in everyday communication as well as elaborating on Shifman's model of memetic analysis.

Calling something a practice emphasizes the role of social and structural dynamics in the creation of individual artifacts and in individual acts of volition. A practice-driven framework is inclusive. It still values the importance of individual artifacts and content, but it also understands that these fragments are not created in a vacuum. Digital communication practices emerge as part of a greater whole that includes not only acts of individual volition but also communal norms and traditions of behavior as well as the underlying structure and affordances of the technology itself. These facets may seem discrete, but they are constantly influencing each other in a mutually constitutive feedback loop that is simultaneously individual, collective, and structural.[145] In other words, individual acts of memetic creation emerge both in concert and in tension with the community's rules for sharing (both formal and informal) and the technological affordances (the options for communication made available [and preferred] by the underlying platform) present in any and every given scenario. Put more simply, these facets work together to structure the modes of engagement users often find themselves engaging (and playing) with.

From this ongoing process of negotiation certain shared expectations become routine over time. According to anthropologist Richard Bauman, these expectations act as a shared

resource for communication and performance, giving rise to the generic expectations that "make up the structured system of conventionalized performance for the community."[146] On the individual level, as Carolyn Miller observes, genres are typified communicative *actions* based on recurrent situations.[147] From the knock-knock joke to the novel, genres exist because of a complex system of communicative actions. Every communication draws on pre-existing social expectations and medium-specific affordances, while also creating new expectations that structure further interactions. As Anis Bawarshi notes, genres are not only "the rhetorical environments within which we recognize, enact, and consequently reproduce various situations, practices, relations, and identities" but also "sites for cultural critique and change."[148] Communicative genres give structure to social situations and can be observed or played with (invoked, called out, stretched, subverted) but never completely transcended nor disregarded. In this way, generic expectations are simultaneously normative and generative. We can innovate only because we share communicative genres and can recognize divergences in those generic expectations.

Thus far, I have outlined what it means to call memes a practice, how we might observe these practices, and how "practice" helps us extend our vocabulary beyond individual artifacts and toward looking at the emergence of memes. Viewing memes as emergent acknowledges that memetic communications result from a process of continuous, iterative negotiation across multiple communicators.[149] In other words, the communication event that arises surrounding a single memetic artifact will always emerge differently in each location even if all the aspects of the artifact (form, content, stance)[150] remain the same. Unlike a television show or movie, it is essential to view memes as a practice because of their inherently participatory nature. Acting as distillations of the networked logics undergirding the Web 2.0-era, memes are a microcosm of

user-centered engagement. Since, as Shifman argues, memetic culture spreads "the notion of participatory culture itself," a move to viewing memes as practice—enabled not only by individual action but also by community norms and technological affordances—constitutes a natural extension of Shifman's work.[151]

Practice & Method

Defining memes as a practice introduces a methodological problem of scope. As Nancy Baym and Annette Markham note, Internet-based qualitative research must increasingly grapple with how to identify a single phenomenon when convergence intertwines many different behaviors, media, and practices.[152] Whereas a more traditional media text (like a TV show, a movie, or a static image) has easily definable boundaries, a practice (even one with a mediated component) is trickier to isolate. A social media site, like Facebook, differs significantly from a traditional text, constituting what communication scholar Lisa Silvestri calls a polymediated social space.[153] Since communication in such a space is inherently multiple, contingent, dynamic, and ongoing, Silvestri argues that digital researchers need to embrace methods that go beyond textual analysis and adopt methods more apt for observing street-level discourse.[154] As a result, viewing memes as an emergent practice (i.e., ongoing, iterative, decentralized) requires a method that combines close-reading with digital participant observation. In other words, viewing memes as a practice necessitates adopting an ethnographic approach.

Ethnography ("writing culture"[155]) seeks to describe human behavior based on the researcher's first-hand observations[156] and is best understood as a methodological orientation, rather than simply as a single method.[157] Ethnographers employ a variety of approaches, including: participant observation, researcher participation, interviewing, taking field notes, close textual analysis, and archival research.[158] Ethnographic work is inherently adaptive, changing as

new data, patterns, and field sites are identified.[159] But, despite these varied approaches, the ultimate goal of ethnographic work is to study the cultural connections and meaning-making practices of a community, culture, or group.[160]

Adopting an ethnographic approach helps deal with the problem of scope by emphasizing that boundary construction is a social process.[161] In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz, a foundational scholar of symbolic anthropology writes, "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."[162] These "webs of significance" suggest that cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete.[163] Any practice or behavior merely represents a set of nodes with contextual connections that extend and connect to other cultural nodes. These connections and nodes extend infinitely in every direction. As a result, engaging in ethnographic work means dealing with the messiness, complications, and ambiguity of culture and everyday life[164] while also seeking to understand how living subjects actively construct their social environment.[165] Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the ethnographer to make choices based on the patterns in their data and in their observations about where the webs of significance begin and end[166] and to place their observations and interpretations into an "intelligible frame."[167] In doing so, the scope of the ethnographer's project emerges.[168]

However, engaging in ethnographic work online (variously called digital, online, virtual, or internet ethnography) does introduce new challenges that complicate traditional ethnographic methods. As danah boyd notes, "Networked technologies have completely disrupted any simple construction of a field site."[169] For somebody like Clifford Geertz, "the field" was a clear location bounded by geography, and a person was either present or not present in that location.[170]

Early ethnographic work on the Internet carried many of these place-based ideas over into cyberspace, emphasizing chatrooms and MUDs as bounded places for research.[171] Over time, digital architecture evolved in such a way that many of these boundaries were no longer meaningful; instead, boyd argues, contemporary digital communities are more defined by relationships and connection than by interest or structure-based boundaries. [172] The implication of this argument, as communication scholar Adrienne Massanari demonstrates in the introduction to her book *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit,* is that a website doesn't have a culture; cultures exist on websites. Some cultural elements may be site-wide while others exist only in subsections or in small groups of communicators, "but getting a handle on the latter requires a good understanding of the former."[173] In light of this, Silvestri suggests a reorientation toward digital field site as bound not by location but by common practice. She writes, "Internet texts are both digitally diffuse *and* culturally specific, prompting critics to immerse themselves in the emergent habits and practices of online populations."[174] Adopting this view suggests that insight into behavior online does not necessarily come from a particular field site, but from engaging with practices wherever they may be found.[175]

Because of the protean nature of digital communication, an ethnographic study of digital media requires the collection of high-context fragments of digital communication.[176] Because these digital fragments only emerge as meaningful through context (and since context can emerge in many different ways), the methods to gather them are inherently responsive.[177] By casting a wide net, over time the ethnographer's attention is drawn to circulation patterns and processes of production.[178] The goal of collecting these data fragments is to help the ethnographer develop insight and criticality of the cultural phenomenon they have chosen to observe and explain how the nodes in the webs of significance are connected.[179] By engaging in

this type of "thick description"[180] the ethnographic researcher strives to explain how these data fragments are embedded in deep frames of meaning-making.[181]

To collect a wide variety of data fragments, I conducted daily participant observation from August 2014 to September 2016. I began this observation in a variety of web locations known for memetic creation and circulation.[182] These websites included:

- 4Chan, an anonymous imageboard with a reputation for dark humor.
- Reddit, a digital content aggregator driven by a user-based voting system.
- Something Awful, the irreverent forums of a comedy website.
- Tumblr, a micro-blogging platform that frequently integrates visual media.
- Twitter, a rapidly moving social network centered around short messages.
- Know Your Meme, a user-driven meme database.

Over time, I extended my focus to include places where I frequently encountered memes in my own everyday life. This included my own Facebook newsfeed as well as memes appearing in more traditional forms of media (advertising, television, news articles, etc). I also began to focus in on certain web locations where I observed a high frequency of memetic circulation. I began habitually browsing several subreddits that frequently engaged with meme culture (such as r/adviceanimals, r/FellowKids, and r/gaming). I started spending more time on /b/ (4Chan's random, not-safe-for-work board). On Something Awful, I expanded from specific meme threads in Post Your Favorite (PYF) to observing threads in the General Bullshit (GBS) and Fuck You And Die (FYAD) forums. Whenever I came across a communication that involved a meme (whether that meme was the first post, a reply, or a tangent), I archived it. The resulting data fragments included not only memetic artifacts but also any related communications, site-specific metadata, and pertinent annotations. To date, I have captured over 2,000 context-heavy data

fragments. These fragments include images, online discussions, news articles, blogs, forum threads, videos, and photographs involving Internet memes. In total, these fragments are over 20,000 pages long.

Ethnographic research puts human behavior under a microscope, revealing the complexities of small-scale interactions.[183] Its implications are similarly micro-level, lending themselves to close analysis of the observed social actions. However, Geertz reminds us that these social actions are often comments on more than themselves and that "small facts speak to large issues, winks to epistemology, or sheep raids to revolution, because they are made to."[184]

For the purposes of this project, the goal of adopting an ethnographic approach is three-fold. First, as discussed at the beginning of this section, it helps solve the problem of scope when looking at a practice. Second, this project is fundamentally concerned with the changing nature of everyday argument in the digital age, and, as sociologist Christine Hine notes, digital ethnography can be a useful tool in developing an understanding of the relationship between technology and culture.[185] Finally, in the remaining sections of this chapter, I turn toward exploring the roles of vernacular authority and common knowledge as discursive resources in everyday digital communication. An ethnographic approach is particularly useful because "Paying attention to practices illuminates a culture's "politics of *doxa*"—the backdrop of shared values and beliefs, or the vaguely held notion of common sense that motivates action."[186] Understanding how these ideas—common sense, *doxa*—are deployed and given meaning by digital communities is fundamental to understanding how memetic communication makes arguments.

Memes as Vernacular Practice

Memetic communication reveals itself as vernacular through the informally circulating, communal aspects of the practice. Vernacularity emerges when a practice imagines itself as existing in alterity to the institutional.[187] Memetic practices are taught and learned informally, with rules for participation vetted by use and response.[188] In this way, the voices of many communal users are coded into every individual artifact, creating a sense of polyvocality.[189] Since the generic expectations that guide memetic practices emerge socially from "mundane transactions of words and gestures that allow us to negotiate our way through our quotidian encounters,"[190] these practices are enabled to see themselves as outside the bounds of institutional practice and as representing alternatives to institutional authority and knowledge. Since the generic expectations for memetic practices develop not from institutions but, instead, from informal collections of loosely connected individuals that comprise digital communities, they represent an emergent vernacular practice.

Vernacularity emerges from a diffuse process and not from any specific individual's identity or social position.[191] Such a distinction allows us to better consider the often complex relationship between vernacular and institutional. For example, when then-President Barack Obama (perhaps the quintessential institutional agent) used the popular memetic phrase "Thanks Obama" in a video for a popular website he was engaging with the memetic vernacular. Conversely, an everyday user may use vernacular memetic practices to support hegemonic or institutional ideas. Calling something vernacular acknowledges how a communication or practice works; it is not a value judgment.

The vernacular is enabled by the institutional and, as a result, is never totally separate from it.[192] All vernacular communication on the Internet is enabled by a technological

infrastructure backed by the various national governments, access sold by digital service providers, and websites and software maintained by a multitude of institutions. On the level of individual expression, vernacular practices often borrow from institutional media and ideas.[193] For example, Warner Bros. studios holds the copyright on the popular Guy Fawkes mask used by the hacker collective Anonymous, and the studio gets a cut of each mask sold. The "not sure if" meme relies the reaction of a character from a cartoon owned by 20th Century Fox and a user's knowledge of this institutionally produced media (Figure 8).

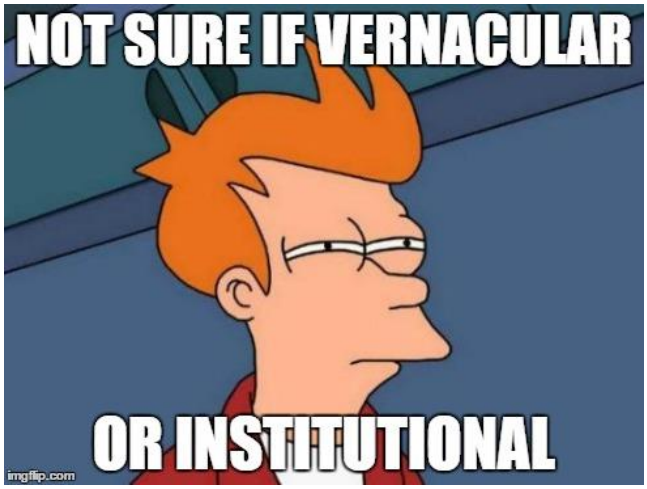

Figure 8 - In a typical example of the "not sure if" meme, Philip J. Fry, lead character from the cartoon Futurama, narrows his eyes and debates between two possibilities.

Vernacular expression can support or oppose institutions but, as Howard writes, it often does a little of both.[194] This disparity reflects the pitfalls of construing the vernacular and institutional as absolutes. To circumvent this problem, Howard suggests a reconfiguration that imagines a dialectical vernacular. This dialectical vernacular locates vernacularity in a process that "imagines a web of intentions moving along vectors of structural power that emerge as vernacular whenever they assert their alterity from the institutional."[195] At the most basic level, calling something vernacular means it expresses alterity from institutions, even when it is simultaneously enabled by existing hegemonic ideas or institutional structures. Hence, the

vernacular is not a material state of being (it is not something that one either has or does not have), it is a quality that emerges through practice in various levels of hybridity.[196]

Adopting the dialectical vernacular is useful for understanding not only how individual memes express alterity but also how memetic practices as a whole express alterity. If memes are construed as sets of artifacts, the emergence of vernacularity can only be established through looking at the level of the individual text and seeing how it does or does not express alterity to institutional forces. Looking instead at memes as a practice adds another level to this analysis. One can still look at how individual memes express alterity, while also looking at how the very act of creating or sharing a meme imagines itself as a vernacular response.

Having established Internet memes as vernacular practices that emerge from aggregate volition and the continuous interplay between individual, technology, and community, I now move to discuss the implications of adopting such a view. In the next section, I explore what is gained and what is forfeited by speaking in the memetic vernacular. In doing so, I offer a critical perspective useful not only for analyzing Internet memes but also for a much more enduring subject—the power available by speaking in the vernacular.

Vernacular Authority and Common Knowledge

Thus far, I have suggested a reorientation in scholarship toward looking at memes as a vernacular practice. In this section I explore the implications of adopting this theoretical perspective. That is—what are the implications of engaging in a common practice that users widely perceive as vernacular? This role positions memes as dual-layered—products of virality and community that tap into a public, shared "common sense" while actually participating in the construction and maintenance of the common sense of a group. This function, I argue, allows memes to argue with a sense of vernacular authority that appeals as a route toward empowerment

of both individuals and institutions. I conclude by offering theoretical implications of what occurs when memes are taken up by both these groups and suggest that using memes to appeal to vernacular authority is often problematic not only for institutional agents but also for the everyday users. Ultimately, the culmination of this chapter offers a perspective that will prove useful not only in this dissertation but also in the scholarship of everyday communication in the digital age.

Everyday memetic practices serve as markers of group competence and membership. On 4Chan's /b/ message board, for instance, a popular memetic practice is to write a triangular symbol made up of smaller triangles (called a "triforce") to prove one's long-standing group membership. The idea that "[new users] can't triforce" clearly represents an underlying dynamic often implied by memetic communication—knowing how to use a meme properly relies on obtaining competency of unspoken community rules through interaction and observation over time. In this way, memes are akin to inside jokes—being aware of the joke not only shows an ongoing relationship but also offers a generic baseline to play with the shared practice. However, instead of being shared only by a dyad or small group, these specific practices are shared by individuals who belong to and transition between various digital communities. Because of this amorphous flow, memes seemingly manifest paradoxically—they are simultaneously localizations based on larger bodies of memetic practice as well as the instantiations of the genre that set expectations for larger bodies of memetic practice.

It is this local/viral duality that imbues memes with a sense of the common. This relationship between virality and community makes the practice seem like a public resource that belongs to no specific individual or community. Since memetic practice seems like a public resource, it doesn't belong to any specific individual and, instead, expressions are specific

instances that inherit from larger bodies of practice. This suggests that underlying any memetic communication is an expectation that the event inherits from the force of a larger, broadly defined set of vernacular Internet communicators, drawing on a larger reserve of common knowledge existing independently from the specific communication event where these expectations may be invoked.

Individual memetic communications benefit from these expectations because they are positioned as artifacts that speak with vernacular authority. Contrary to expert or institutional knowledge, memetic practices are perceived as trafficking in the common knowledge of everyday users. As Dawkins suggested in his original conception of "meme," an idea with critical mass propagates itself.[197] Similarly, common knowledge persists (and is perceived as "correct") because it is widely shared. Through this process (which is further enabled by the affordances of digital communication), an idea with critical mass may become self-sustaining—a belief, a creed, something someone "just knows"—and exist in a state of alterity to institutional knowledge.

The idea of argument through "common sense" is neither new nor specific to memetic practices.[198] Many prominent rhetoricans writing in the 20th century recognized the contingent and ever-changing nature of common sense, as well as the ability to harness and redefine common sense for specialized ends. These scholars argued that rhetoric is concerned not only with persuasion but also with communal identification, interpellation, and socialization.[199] Such works build on a tradition of understanding *doxa* (from the writings of the ancient Greeks) and *sensus communis* (from the Roman tradition) as fundamental and powerful avenues toward rhetorical empowerment.

Isocrates saw logical reasoning (*logos)* as contextual and situated in the community, and Aristotle extolled the value framing rhetorical appeals "with the help of common knowledge and accepted opinions."[200] This idea of *logos* existing in the community is fundamental to Isocrates' conception of *doxa* (lit: "to effect"). Whereas Plato saw *doxa* as in opposition to "truth"—it was the common knowledge of the masses that obfuscated the idealized condition of a thing ("*telos")*—Isocrates's use of *doxa* is much more consistent with the idea that knowledge is social—consistently maintained through interaction. To Isocrates, the truth that can be known is what the community has created together,[201] and the community, to get at this truth, must come together publically and have each individual communicate and share their *doxa.* Although Isocrates most certainly placed Greek *doxa* at the forefront of what was known, his view of the social nature of rhetoric sets a long precedent in Western thought.

Writing in the last century BCE, Marcus Tullius Cicero saw a need for the ideal orator to be knowledgeable about the community and speak with the breadth of culture.[202] Influenced by the earlier writings of Isocrates (and privy to many of his works that are lost to us today), Cicero maintained that effective communication derived not only from a choice of words but also from the everyday knowledge specific to one's community, writing that "in oratory the very cardinal sin is to depart from the language of everyday, and the usage approved by the sense of the community."[203] A product of the more cosmopolitan Roman world, Cicero's writings on oratory and *sensus communis* (lit: "common sense") suggest both the power made available by everyday speech and the possibility of multiple existent common senses.

The centrality of *sensus communis* to a well-rounded education resonates across two millennia. Mere decades after Cicero, Quintilian praised a public education as part of what made for a good orator.[204] Hundreds of years later the Third Earl of Shaftesbury—drawing on this

Roman tradition—suggested a moral aspect of this public knowledge, positing *sensus communis* as a sense of the common good that exists in opposition to self-interest.[205] In the early 18th century, Giambattista Vico advocated for education not only in scientific knowledge, but also social knowledge. Vico, himself a scholar of rhetoric, saw an education in *sensus communis* as rooted not only in universal principles but also in the knowledge of one's community, group, nation, or culture.[206] Hence *sensus communis* suggests a double meaning that includes both its literal translation as well as "a sense of the common."[207]

Similarly, Cicero provides one of the earliest accounts as to the power of speaking in the vernacular, calling it an "indescribable flavor" that augments a speaker's powers of persuasion.[208] By mixing non-Roman expressions, mannerisms, and colloquialisms with Latin speech, Cicero argued, an individual's non-institutional characteristics could serve as a route toward empowerment. Unlike the earlier writings of Isocrates, here Cicero also leaves room for the existence of many common senses, suggesting the potential for power in their hybridization.

In the digital age, speaking in a vernacular mode represents a route toward empowerment for everyday agents without the resources or backing of institutions.[209] Similarly, speaking in the vernacular may also function as a way for institutional agents to gain legitimacy by appealing to a sense of the common. In both cases, agents are empowered through vernacular expression to create a sense of legitimacy based not on expert or institutional knowledge, but instead based on the unspoken (and contingent) truths that are perceived as widely shared and exist in the members of a non-institutional community. As a result, vernacular communications may serve as a route to power via an implied appeal to the sense of the common. At the same time, these vernacular expressions also create, maintain, and assert what, exactly, that sense of the common *is*. Hence, these communications emerge both as contingent (protean, the result of continual

interaction) and situated (representing a link to a history of interaction which, in turn, links the communicator with communal knowledge and the past). Such appeals create a sense of legitimacy by drawing on the knowledge of the community or common as existing legitimately in parallel (or superior) to the knowledge of the institutional. In other words, these appeals traffic in a perception of vernacular authority that results from "social connections that have endured through space and across time."[210]

The dualistic generation of memetic practices locates the individual artifacts as speaking with this "sense of the common" and appealing via vernacular authority. Since memetic practices are the widespread result of public engagement, the assertions made (often tacitly) by memetic artifacts tend to assume the implied agreement of a large, amorphous vernacular user base. At the same time, these artifacts also convey ideas that emerge from individual users and community-specific ways of engaging with memetic practice. In effect, memetic artifacts derive vernacular authority from a perception that they are widespread, public, and shared even when used in ways that are communal, small-scale, or insular.

Understanding memes as practice helps us navigate this paradox. Memetic practices are appealing as forms of vernacular expression because pre-existing memetic forms transcend any specific web location. I can find an image macro or photoshop on any number of websites. So, when an individual wants to create a community-specific communication, they have a larger practice to draw from. Drawing from this larger practice, the user is enabled to create an artifact that speaks directly to the smaller web community. Such communications receive vernacular power not only from the community but also from the public nature of the larger practice.

Indeed, it is from this local/viral duality that memes become appealing as a persuasive force in everyday communication. Through meme usage both everyday and institutional users

seek to empower themselves as being "of the people." By speaking in this memetic vernacular, agents are enabled to both appeal to and construct a sense of the common. There is certainly great potential for such practices to act as a route toward everyday empowerment—especially when they allow everyday users to speak back to institutions and set institutional agendas. However, memetic communication often fails to live up to its potential as it is taken up by both institutional agents and everyday communicators. As memetic communication becomes more prevalent, institutions increasingly seek to co-opt the memetic vernacular for their own ends, and everyday users may squander the liberatory potential of the memetic vernacular by using it to attack other users, reinforce ideological enclaves, or reinscribe hegemony.

Everyday Communication and the Memetic Vernacular

In this chapter, I argued for a redefinition that positioned memes not as groups of texts but as expressions of a larger vernacular practice. Such a move widens our analytical scope beyond images and words to the ways people vary and circulate memes as well as how memes interact with other communications in emergent digital communication events. By viewing memes as practice we are enabled to adjust our focus to include not only high profile viral memes but also smaller-scale manifestations of vernacular expression.

By adopting a practice-driven framework, a seeming disparity between the nature of viral and everyday memetic communication emerges. It is in this local/viral duality, however, that we see how the memetic vernacular gains its power—by drawing on a practice that imagines itself as public, communicators in small groups are enabled to make niche or personalized claims. Authority, then, derives both from the power given by the community and from the public nature of the larger practice. Everyday memes are enabled by viral memes; viral memes are enabled by everyday memes.

Understanding that we must turn our attention to more quotidian uses of memetic expression to better understand the whole picture of memetic communication, I suggested viewing memes in terms of what I called a "memetic vernacular." Like being privy to an inside joke, communicating using the memetic vernacular locates an individual as belonging to a group over space or time. Speaking in such a vernacular offers a route to power for everyday individuals by positioning their knowledge as common sense that emerges separately from institutional knowledge. Indeed, these communications matter not because every so often a meme makes the nightly news; instead, these communications matter because they are an everyday location where knowledge positioned as common sense is continually created, maintained, and circulated.

Memetic practices offer the potential for individuals and small groups to speak back to institutions and against hegemonic norms. However, this is merely a capacity, and nothing guarantees that this potential will be realized. As I elaborate in the chapter that follows, memetic practices engage in the continual construction and maintenance of a community's common knowledge. And, although those functions see themselves as public and shared, they are more often enclaving than deliberative or emancipatory.

Chapter 3: Much Ado About Puffin: Speaking in the Memetic Vernacular

On May 25, 2014, Reddit banned a meme.

Figure 9 - A typical example of the Unpopular Opinion Puffin meme

"The mod[erator]s have been discussing this internally for quite some time," coloicito, a mod of the "Advice Animals" meme subforum, wrote, "Starting now, all Unpopular Opinion Puffin submissions will be removed."[211] This decision, while not unprecedented,[212] was extremely unusual and surprised many Reddit users. No official reason for the ban was given, leaving many users to speculate and argue in the wake of coloicito's announcement.[213] Many users assumed it was because the memetic practice enabled casual and overt forms of racism (Figure 9); other users blamed the ban on political correctness, oversensitivity, and "power hungry" moderators.[214] Responses to this institutional disciplining of the memetic vernacular varied similarly, with some users expressing gratitude while others balked in consternation.

Figure 10 - Reddit user omart3 uses the now-banned Unpopular Opinion Puffin meme to express an "unpopular" opinion—frustration with the institutional banning of this memetic practice.

Responding to the moderator using the now banned Unpopular Opinion Puffin image macro (Figure 10), user omart3, defended memetic practice with memetic practice.[215] To omart3, this form of vernacular expression represents a humorous performance—one that may not share popular opinions, but is worth sharing nonetheless. In omart3's interpretation, the meme encourages open discourse and facilitates playful challenging of existing social constructs.

Many users disagreed with omart3's perspective, however, arguing that the practice predominantly created echo chambers that actually limited diverse viewpoints and productive discourse. User TheWallsAreTitans, for instance, responded in favor of the ban and with a different interpretation of the meme (Figure 11).

Figure 11 - "Stormfront puffin"

To supplement the photoshopped Ku Klux Klan hood, TheWallsAreTitans also referenced one of the meme's many popular derisive nicknames, sarcastically commenting, that "[the] white mans birden will be missed."[216]

As these posts demonstrate, users varied significantly in their estimations of this memetic practice. To some, Unpopular Opinion Puffin was a humorous way to express opinions, start discussions, and encourage free speech, while many others saw it as enabling racism and privilege by drawing on the playful veneer and vernacular authority enabled by speaking in the memetic vernacular.

As these very divergent opinions suggest, the banning of Unpopular Opinion Puffin represents only a single action resulting from a much larger body of ongoing memetic practice. Indeed, much of the meme's 10-month lifespan on Reddit was marked by a fraught, continuous back-and-forth between users who embraced the form and users who decried it. Observing the

contentious negotiation embodied by this memetic practice lays bare the evolving ways in which users construct expectations for engagement through a myriad of quotidian communications.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the emergence of memetic forms through such nebulous, everyday practices leads to a widespread perception of memes as vernacular artifacts. In this chapter, I use the case of Unpopular Opinion Puffin to extend that argument to the everyday practices themselves in order to demonstrate how, through practices surrounding memetic communication, users assert and draw authority from constructing vernacular positionality. The result is that communicating in the memetic vernacular serves as an opportunity for users to assert, discuss, and debate vernacular authority and authenticity. These appeals via memetic practices tend to align themselves with ideas like common sense, non-institutional knowledge, and lived anecdotal experience in order to create a sense of credibility via appeals to vernacular authority. By observing the emergence of (and breaks from) generic expectations over time, we are able to see how memetic practices seek empowerment in the vernacular as well as the positive and negative dimensions of that empowerment. As I shall demonstrate, communicating in the memetic vernacular offers counter-hegemonic potential, but that potential may also be co-opted to speak for privileged viewpoints under the aegis of constructed vernacularity and marginalization.

I begin by discussing the relationship between racial identity and digital communication in order to suggest how performances of whiteness can enact boundaries, exert power, and uphold essentialized ideas about race. Next, I locate Unpopular Opinion Puffin in an existing trajectory of memetic practice by explaining the roots and evolution of the "advice animal" meme genre. Moving to discussions precipitated by the introduction of Unpopular Opinion Puffin on r/AdviceAnimals, I demonstrate how early negotiations over the practice invoked non-

institutional knowledge of existing memetic practices to make arguments for or against adopting the new meme. The next section analyzes reactions to the memetic practice following a surge of popularity on Reddit and explores how users construct a sense of marginalized vernacularity, even when expressing widely held or low-controversy viewpoints. Enabled by the popularity of the practice and these constructions of marginalized vernacularity, the following section looks at how the memetic practice began to enable overt and casual forms of racism. Here I suggest that—in addition to constructing themselves as counter-hegemonic—this memetic practice enables users to appeal to common experience and common sense in order to rationalize hateful or privileged viewpoints on race. Finally, I explore user reactions to the puffin ban, which sparked fierce debate regarding issues of ownership and enforcement of the memetic vernacular.

Race Online and the Performance of Whiteness

Racism, as a systemic and pervasive issue in American culture, is highly prevalent in vernacular communication contexts, and memetic practice is no exception. To understand the evolution of Unpopular Opinion Puffin from seemingly banal to frequently racist, it is essential to unpack the relationship between digital media and race in order to explain the underlying power dynamics coded into these performances of whiteness. This section is not a full engagement of the expansive and important scholarship on race and media, but it does provide a starting point for understanding the role of racial performance in the development of this memetic practice.

Race is a socially constructed system of categorization based on arbitrary groupings of superficial factors called "phenotypes" (which include things like skin color, eye shape, and hair texture).[217] However, despite the socially constructed nature of these categories, race exerts a powerful force on lived experience and thought. For instance, many individuals in Western

culture are invested in viewing race as a biological fact.[218] This essentialized view of race upholds a hierarchy that privileges Western social, cultural, and political perspectives and bodies.[219]

At the same time, online communities frequently punish those who wish to discuss or call out race and racism.[220] As media scholar Sarah Florini observes, this new, dominant paradigm that has emerged in the United States in the last 40 years represents an ideology of "colorblindness"—a more subtle (but no less destructive) form of racism.[221] The dominance of the colorblind paradigm in popular thought, Florini argues, displaces racism out of public life and discourse, which "forecloses space for addressing ongoing structural inequalities and undermines assertions of a collective Black experience or identity, particularly one based on a shared social status of marginalization."[222]

The contemporary prominence of "colorblindness" resonates with much of the early scholarship regarding race online, which painted the Internet as a potential utopian space where racism could be transcended.[223] Studies of race online in the Web 1.0 era tended to deal with issues relating to access, digital literacy, and the invisibility of the raced body.[224] But, as race and media scholar Lisa Nakamura notes in her 2002 book *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, the digital divide was never the source of these problems of racial representation, it was a symptom.[225] Communication scholar Radhika Gajjala offers a similar critique of these early utopian and dystopian claims about race online. Gajjala writes, "[these views] overlook the fact that the individual is embedded within the practices, structures of power, and discourses that make up the community and that these work through interpersonal negotiations and economic and cultural practices whereby inclusions and exclusions with such communities are determined."[226] In other words, regardless of the visibility of the body, race matters online

because race matters offline,[227] and digital interactions inherit from knowledge, experiences, and values that are shaped by Western power structures.[228]

Indeed, the power to be disembodied in digital communication is not as emancipatory as it might initially seem. As Gajjala notes, the choice is often rendered between two extremes—pass or be a pariah. Whiteness is frequently assumed in digital spaces at both the social[229] and the structural levels.[230] As a result, users of color encounter a false choice when communicating online: either mark themselves as Others or, as Gajjala writes, "transform themselves into a Western-dominated information structure that is dictated by programming languages and Netiquettes laid out from a Eurocentric and U.S.-centric social, cultural, and political perspective."[231] The result is that the liberatory dream many early scholars had for digital communication promised freedom only to the assimilated and privileged Other.[232]

The Web 2.0 era has given rise to a different—yet equally troubling—imaginary.[233] As Nakamura observes, while the era of participatory media may not overtly claim to be a post-racial utopia, it does put the impetus to generate digital content (such as profiles, avatars, favorites, comments, pictures, wiki postings, and blog entries) on the individual user.[234] "Once again race is 'on *us*,'" Nakamura writes, "[Web 2.0] claims to harness collective intelligence by allowing everyone to participate in a more or less equal fashion. These claims are implicitly postracial."[235]

The centrality of user-generated content and participatory media in our current digital moment means that race online gains a performative element, especially in digital spaces lacking traditional markers of identity.[236] As communication scholar André Brock notes, these constructions and deployments of racial identity in digital spaces call attention to the nature of those identities as "a socially constructed artifact with more to do with social and cultural

resources than with skin color."[237] The power of digital communication, Brock concludes, lies in its interactive and discursive elements. Users are enabled to more easily respond to exterior renditions of their identities, allowing interior perspectives to become a more active part of the overall conversation.[238] Although Brock is specifically writing about black identity, it is not difficult to see how his conclusion might apply to people of color more broadly.

Furthermore, the performance of racial identity online may help hail like-minded others into discursive enclaves.[239] These enclaves function as staging areas where subjects can discuss social, cultural, and political life.[240] Brock (who borrows Oldenburg's concept of "third space" to describe these enclaves), notes their regenerative function, that they can allow users to work through both internal and external ideological constraints imposed on them.[241] However, both Florini and Brock note that, unlike offline enclaves, these digital spaces are more likely to be encountered by outsiders.[242] The public nature of these enclaves reveals the heterogeneity and complexity of performance of black identity online for visitors interested in learning more about racial identities.[243]

Problematically, while these performances of racial identity may offer routes toward empowerment and representation for people of color online, that same capacity is also available for individuals seeking to reinforce hegemonic ideas and essentialized ideas about race.[244] While white nationalists have been using the Internet effectively as a mode of communicating and organizing since the early days of the medium,[245] I share Nakamura's sentiment that, "I am more interested in 'normal' racism, the kind that we all accept as part of the bargain we've made with the Internet in exchange for free and less-moderated content than we can get in 'old' media."[246] As Brock writes, white participation online is really seen as constitutive of white identity—"we are trained to understand their online activities as stuff 'people' do."[247] Indeed, the performance

of whiteness has less to do with the color of one's skin and more to do with the power to automatically other.[248] As communication scholar Whitney Phillips notes in her book on trolling, the performance of whiteness is not about offline skin color; it is about acts of radicalized boundary policing.[249] And, as danah boyd suggests, social media magnifies many aspects of everyday life, including racism and bigotry.[250]

These enclaves where whiteness is performed serve as staging areas for power, discipline, and hegemony. In her book on Reddit, communication scholar Adrienne Massanari notes the contagious power of these performances of white masculinity, suggesting that users and content from racist subreddits frequently seep into the rest of the site.[251] These choices, she argues, aren't just user-based; they're embedded in the affordances of the site. When content that doesn't reflect "a particular kind of (white) geek masculinity" become visible on the site's front page, a vocal minority of users can hijack the content, engaging in coordinated downvoting and harassment. Conversely, material that does align with Reddit's dominant "(white) geek community" faces little resistance, even when exploitative or problematic.[252]

These performances of whiteness reinscribe a hierarchy—they are about exerting power. As Nakamura writes in her study of racist memes, "it is not really the digital network that has produced a new racist aesthetic system … [these users] create these photographs to document their power over another, abject body."[253] A critical study of memes, Nakamura suggests, is vital because their frequently humorous and whimsical nature belies deeper implications as performances of racial and/or gender identity.[254] Such scholarship, Nakamura writes, "permits a critique of the digital that is badly needed in our so-called post-racial moment."[255]

Advice Animals

Unpopular Opinion Puffin is one of many variations of the popular "advice animal" meme genre. Easily identified by their use of Impact font over specific static images, advice animals trace their lineage back to a single common ancestor known as "advice dog."

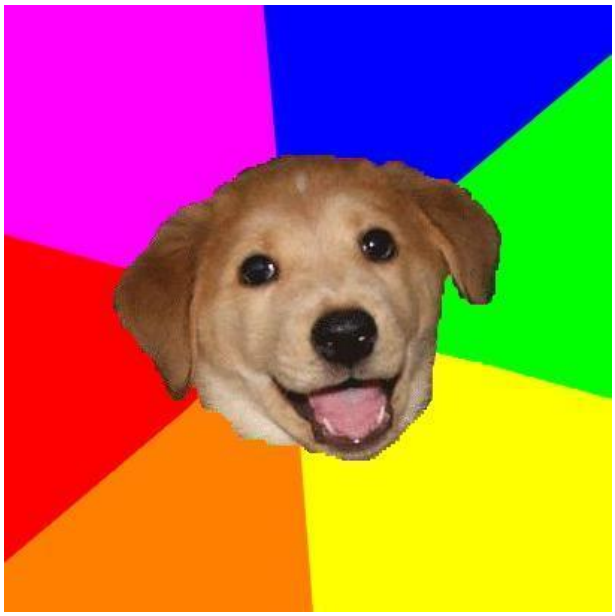

Figure 12 - The original "advice dog" image.

In September 2006, a user on a Nintendo fan site created a thread asking other users if he should try out for a school play.[256] Several users responded with encouragement, including one who posted a photoshopped image of a puppy on a rainbow background (Figure 12) and assured the original poster, "Just do it, man." Other users were enamored with the image, posting comments like "This is the single greatest picture ever posted on this site. Ever. And I can't even explain why." The image remained popular on the board and was ultimately voted the top post of 2006 by other forum users.[257]

In light of this popularity, users began sharing this image on other websites, such as the pop culture remix and parody site YTMND and the anonymous imageboard 4Chan. On 4Chan users began to appropriate the image by adding text to it, furthering generic expectations for this

image in two major ways. First, users started photoshopping text onto the image. This text tended to offer crude or malicious advice, playfully contrasted to the joyful puppy/rainbow background (Figure 13). Second, the text was kept brief and placed both above and below the center of the image, leaving the dog's face uncovered. This top/bottom text emerged in a similar way to most simple jokes, encouraging a setup/punchline format that rendered the joke obvious to those who understood the practice of creating and sharing these image macros.

Figure 13 - A recreated example of a malicious advice dog image macro. "System32" is a necessary file on personal computers and deceiving other users into deleting it is a common way to troll on 4Chan.

This establishment of generic expectations facilitated the creation of several variant memes that played with the static image top/bottom text format. Initially, these took the form of other animal heads over different backgrounds, designed with more specific purposes than giving (bad) advice. Some of the more popular variations included "courage wolf" (offering extreme advice) "socially awkward penguin" (sharing awkward social situations) and "philosoraptor" (musing on the nature of existence) (Figure 14).

Figure 14 - (left to right) Courage Wolf, Socially Awkward Penguin, and Philosoraptor represent some of the more popular early advice dog variants, collectively called "advice animals."

The success of these memetic practices came from their high level of variability and capacity for personalization. These qualities relied on individual volition but were facilitated by the affordances of digital communication. Early usages of advice dog required users to manipulate the template image using image editing software, such as Photoshop. This barrier to engaging with the practice was lowered significantly in early 2009 by the creation of memegenerator.net (and many subsequent imitators). Such websites stored a catalog of static memetic images and allowed users to easily choose an image, enter their own text, and share or link their creation using a straightforward web-based interface. As media and communications scholars Kate Brideau and Charles Berret observe, it also served to standardize certain memetic practices, such as making Impact the default font style for memetic image macros.[258] Because of the more accessible affordances and standardization offered by this new web platform, advice animals as a genre of practice saw a spike in proliferation and mainstream popularity from 2009 onward.

As a result of this proliferation, advice animals became a common memetic practice in more high-profile digital locations, such as micro-blogging website Tumblr and news and entertainment aggregator Reddit. The subforums of Reddit (known as "subreddits" and written in the shorthand as [r/name of subforum]) are often dedicated to a single interest or topic. By 2010,

an entire subreddit had emerged dedicated to advice animals. Within a year r/adviceanimals had tens of thousands of subscribers and its content regularly made the front page of Reddit.

As r/adviceanimals gained popularity on Reddit, users were empowered to innovate the practice's generic boundaries by leveraging certain traits that had become deeply associated with the form. By placing impact font at the top and bottom of a static image, users could showcase a high level of variability and personalization while making obvious the genre of practice with which they were engaging. On r/adviceanimals this process lead to many new animals—such as advice dog's more forthright cousin "actual advice mallard"—which forewent the colorful, abstract backgrounds in favor of using a static photograph. In addition to animals, users started to include images of people that embodied certain ideas and ideals, such as "bad luck brian" (stories of unfortunate circumstance), "good guy Greg" (a model for sociable behavior), and "scumbag Steve" (the Goofus to Greg's Gallant) (Figure 15).

Figure 15 - (left to right) Bad Luck Brian, Good Guy Greg, and Scumbag Steve use the familiar impact font above and below the center of a static image, revealing them as taking part in the advice animals memetic genre.

Despite this multiplicity, some basic generic expectations of memetic practice began to emerge in the commonalities between these advice animal artifacts. Playful behaviors, like joking or trolling are common, as are giving advice or sharing personal experiences.[259] Impact font is deeply associated with this expression of the memetic vernacular.[260] This text is placed over a static image, usually with a portion at the top as well as on the bottom. This break

between text tends to create a natural cadence that lends itself to a setup/punchline format. Because of these qualities, the images and sentiments may be readily changed as long as the aspects that render the meme recognizable remain static. These affordances and practices co-create a protean set of memetic practices that, as Brideau and Berret suggest, are, at the same time, especially stable and recognizable. Although it may seem paradoxical, understanding this tension between stability and change represents the continual negotiation (and breaking) of generic expectations and is fundamental to observing how ever-changing memetic practices create vernacular authenticity and, subsequently, how they may be used as resources for empowerment.

Figure 16 - Confession Bear (left) expresses a personal viewpoint while Terrible Tiger (right) mocks the often uncomfortable opinions expressed by the Confession Bear meme.

Over many iterations, memetic practices on r/adviceanimals led to the creation of "Confession Bear" in June 2012—the memetic practice that served as the direct antecedent to Unpopular Opinion Puffin. Confession Bear, as media scholar Jacqueline Ryan Vickery explains, initially started as a playful practice where users would post confessions over an image of a Malayan sun bear (Figure 16). Once this genre became established, however, many users began to use the practice as an occasion to publicly share deep, heartfelt or serious confessions online. This broke generic expectations for the meme, but, as Vickery suggests, also enabled users to

transgress social norms and bring publicity to otherwise silenced victimization by speaking in the memetic vernacular.[261] However, many other users began to question the authenticity of these confessions and accused others of fabricating or sensationalizing their speech in the memetic vernacular to gain attention or Reddit's web currency 'karma.'[262] This ongoing tension over authenticity and proper meme use proved generative, facilitating the creation of a parody meme ("Terrible Tiger" [Figure 16]) and a memetic alternative—"Unpopular Opinion Puffin."

Creating a New Meme

On July 24, 2013, Reddit user "unique_like_the_rest" created Unpopular Opinion Puffin to serve as an alternative to the "misuse" of Confession Bear.[263] The introduction of this meme—as well as the resulting discussions surrounding it—represents a microcosm of the collaborative and resistive potential of this memetic practice. By looking at how these users drew upon, extended, and broke generic expectations for practice, we may begin to develop an understanding of how users construct authenticity through their arguments about the development of the memetic vernacular.

In the year that followed the introduction of Confession Bear on r/adviceanimals, the practice of sharing memetic confessions had proved quite popular among Reddit's user base. Problematically, this influx of popularity and greater uptake of use also led to what some users saw as a dilution of the intended purpose of the practice—instead of using Confession Bear to confess, many users' "confessions" simply involved expressing their own opinions, usually about disliking something positioned as popular. Like a grammar enthusiast overwhelmed by the frequent misuse of a word, unique_like_the_rest offered a correction to stem this inexact use of the memetic vernacular. The proposed solution was to alleviate the misuse of Confession Bear by neologizing a new memetic practice that more accurately and ostensibly called for the

expression of unpopular opinions. Unique_like_the_rest called this solution Unpopular Opinion Puffin (Figure 17).

Figure 17 - "With all the misuse of confession bear memes, I propose a new meme. Unpopular opinion puffin." Posted July 24, 2013 by Reddit user unique_like_the_rest.

This initial post builds authenticity for unique_like_the_rest's suggestion through both tacit and overt acknowledgment of existing memetic practice. Like other advice animal memes, unique_like_the_rest offers an example that uses Impact font above and below the center of a static image of an animal. The meme is also given a short name in the form of "[objective] [character]," matching the naming conventions for other similar memes. If these facets all convey unique_like_the_rest's competency with the basic form, then the user's initial post is constructed in a way that reflects competency with the norms for practice in this community. "With all the misuse of confession bear memes," unique_like_the_rest writes, "I propose a new meme. Unpopular opinion puffin." This simple and straightforward language conforms to many expectations about making an effective thread title on Reddit, and unique_like_the_rest positions this intervention as appropriate based ongoing observation of this subforum and problems with a specific existing memetic practice. Taken together, these choices show an ongoing competency

in the communal norms of memetic practice in this web location. This user is expressing non-institutional knowledge of this non-institutional form. By drawing on informal norms of memetic and communal practice, unique_like_the_rest's argument for extending the memetic vernacular seeks credibility via an appeal to the vernacular authority of the group.

User reactions were mixed.

Some users appreciated unique_like_the_rest's suggestion and embraced Unpopular Opinion Puffin. These initial interactions were simple and collaborative—such as one user asking for textless version of the image and another user providing a ready-to-use Unpopular Opinion Puffin template.[264] Using this template, several users responded with their own versions of the meme, tacitly endorsing it by integrating the form into their personal memetic vernacular.[265] Many suggested tweaks to the meme, like making it an owl for alliteration[266] or using a less cute image[267] because, as user tealparadise put it, "I couldn't possible risk the poor baby being downvoted due to my shitty opinion,"[268] but such tweaks to the basic form of the suggested meme received little traction. Others simply remarked appreciatively, from suggesting nicknames (such as the "Oppuffin")[269] to thanking unique_like_the_rest for this act of memetic pedantry. User peoplesuck357, for example, praised this intervention by drawing on personal annoyance with misused Confession Bears, posting "Yes! I'm sick of seeing things like 'I don't like Arrested Development' as a confession."[270] Another user agreed, commenting that "Most of the problem with confession bear is how people use it to post their opinions that they know are popular."[271] A third user elucidated how these tactics could lead to frustration, adding "i swear people know they're misusing confession bear, but it seems that misusing it gets your the sweet karma somehow."[272] This sentiment suggests that the misuse of Confession Bear is not only

purposeful but also exploits the website's system of points given to users who make popular posts (an account-bound score called "karma").

Implicit in these views is a sense that a current aspect of the memetic vernacular is not working properly and needs to be altered to maintain the integrity of the practice. By supporting the addition of this new memetic practice, these users are drawing on norms of communal practice in order to exert rhetorical force to dissuade misuse of an existing practice. The tactics may differ—from appreciation, to suggestion, to engaging with the new practice itself—but the same open-source mentality that enables memetic practices to exist and proliferate also enables these acts of control or resistance by hailing communal action. This communal action, in turn, represents the first of many steps that work together to standardize the rules for interacting with this new memetic practice. That is not to say, however, that generic expectations are formed solely by positive reactions and collaborative engagement.

Many other users reacted negatively to Unpopular Opinion Puffin, criticizing unique_like_the_rest for trying to exert individual authority over a communal practice. Although memetic practices are constantly in motion, they resist direct, overt acts that seek to change or harness them. In this way, the memetic vernacular shares a key aspect with language itself, which, as linguist Ferdinanad de Saussure famously observed, is inherently conservative, resisting individual acts of change even as it constantly shifts and adapts to the needs of the society that uses it.[273] Since memetic practices are widely perceived as public (and don't belong to any individual), this leads to a perception that memes created by an individual and sold as "the new meme" feel inauthentic and forced, lacking the generic expectations for authenticity derived from growing and changing organically through widespread interaction.

As a result, many users were unconvinced by unique_like_the_rest's appeal via vernacular authority and rebutted by drawing on their own ongoing knowledge of memetic practices and communal norms. As user jjness bluntly put it, "Very few proposed memes make it to day 2. Don't bother."[274] Citing his or her own experience with seeing proposed memes fail, this user feels comfortable dismissing unique_like_the_rest's attempt to exert singular control over the memetic vernacular outright. Many users also questioned the need to extend existing practices, often suggesting that other memes were more apt for this type of communication. As user irrelevant_redditor put it:

> People have already tried making shitloads of opinion memes, none of them have properly taken off, chances are this one won't either. Even if it did become popular, people would still misuse Confession Bear, this would just be another meme for people to misuse.
>
> **TL;DR - An opinion meme is never going to happen, and people will always misuse Confession Bear**[275]

Other users were quick to point out that currently used memes such as "Angry Walter" were more apt to convey personal opinions.[276] In this view, introducing a new competing practice is not only unnecessary but would also lead to further fragmentation and confusion—exasperating the very problem Unpopular Opinion Puffin was designed to solve.

As the following exchange elucidates, this ever-expanding plethora of practice constituted a problem that anyone with a history on this board would be familiar with:

> **Nayr_toccs**: Don't we already have an Unpopular Opinion Bear?
>
> **Youshouldhaveabeer**: Hell I've seen at least 12 "Unpopular Opinion" amimals [sic] in the last month.

Nayr_toccs: Exactly. We don't need another.[277]

Nayr_toccs use of "we" in the above excerpt rhetorically aligns these comments with a body of practice shared by a larger group and simultaneously excludes unique_like_the_rest from that group. Youshouldhaveabeer's comment works in a similar way, by citing the extreme commonality of this suggestion, this user undercuts unique_like_the_rest's assertion of vernacular authority by suggesting that if the user had any long-term experience on r/adviceanimals, then they would know the futility of this suggestion. Finally, some users used the memetic vernacular itself to speak against Unpopular Opinion Puffin (Figure 18).[278]

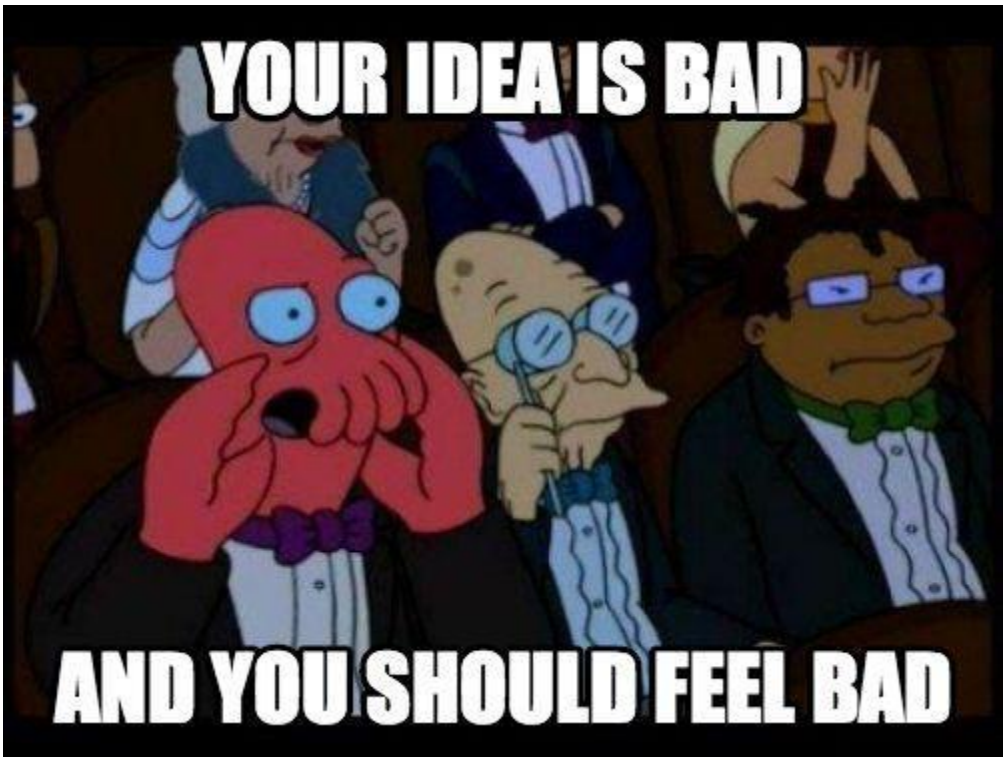

Figure 18 - Posted by a user who later deleted his or her account, this image macro uses the popular "Your Music's Bad and You Should Feel Bad" meme to criticize Unpopular Opinion Puffin.

By drawing on (and using) the memetic vernacular to disparage unique_like_the_rest's idea, these users strive to use the same sort of vernacular authority that unique_like_the_rest drew upon in his original post. The implication is that these users are establishing that they speak the same memetic language as unique_like_the_rest, but with more experience and skill. This allows

them to use similar resources to undercut, and subsequently reject, unique_like_the_rest's play toward vernacular authority, enabling these individuals to resist change to the memetic vernacular in favor of the status quo.

In light of this polarized response, the subsequent popularity of Unpopular Opinion Puffin—a memetic practice designed to express *un*popular ideas—may seem somewhat surprising. To understand this phenomenon, one has to understand the underlying systems at play guiding what gets seen on Reddit. Any content posted to Reddit can be upvoted or downvoted by users (who may also comment on that content). Comments may also be upvoted or downvoted. The idea is that users will upvote good content (or content they agree with) and ignore or downvote bad or low-effort content. Having a high proportion of upvotes compared to downvotes correlates to more visibility,[279] as that content is ranked higher on the subforum where it was posted. In addition, if that subforum is a default subreddit (as r/adviceanimals was in 2013), then that content may also reach the front page of Reddit. In addition to adding visibility, a post that receives a high proportion of upvotes also garners "karma" for the poster. This karma value is attached to the user's account and ostensibly reflects how much valued content they have posted across their time on Reddit. Karma is greatly valued by some users (although many claim indifference). The problem with Unpopular Opinion Puffin is, as user kikoboy put it, "the fact that it is called unpopular opinion puffin means that if used correctly, it would get downvoted to oblivion."[280] Meaning that if this new practice worked as intended, no one would ever see it.

This tension would follow the memetic practice for much of its lifetime—if people seem to hate it, then why is it so popular and visible? The answer is that Unpopular Opinion Puffin succeeded because of the same misuse problems that plagued Confession Bear—problems it was

intended to circumvent. Instead of posting unpopular opinions, many users began posting popular or hegemonic opinions couched in a veneer of marginalization. Other users who agreed with such simple, broad sentiments as "Doctor Who is fucking stupid"[281] or "Americans are not assholes"[282] would then upvote those threads, providing visibility, karma for the poster, and creating a positive feedback loop for others to imitate.

These early interactions demonstrate not only how a single user may leverage and interject into the memetic vernacular but also the difficulty of doing so. In addition to the resistance from other users, the nebulous public-ness of memetic practice makes messages and specific intentions fade into the ether as they propagate. In other words, the memetic vernacular retakes control from moments of individual volition and complexity almost immediately.

As generic expectations for the practice shifted, this "misuse" often resulted significant positive feedback for mainstream opinions that were framed as unpopular. By August, Unpopular Opinion Puffin frequently hit not only the front page of r/adviceanimals but also of Reddit itself. This popularity annoyed many users but was not unanticipated, especially to those already familiar with similar forms of memetic practice on Reddit (like Confession Bear). In fact, many critical users in the initial thread predicted the problem immediately. One user even predicted the first of the meme's many derisive nicknames, warning that "THIS WILL TURN INTO POPULAR OPINION PUFFIN."[283]

The Perks and Perils of Popularity

One month after unique_like_the_rest introduced Unpopular Opinion Puffin, the meme made it to the front page of Reddit for the first time. On August 23, 2013, many users were reacting negatively to news that actor Ben Affleck would be portraying Batman in an upcoming film. Feelings of dejection and frustration about this casting choice were palpable across the

Internet, including on Reddit and r/adviceanimals. In a thread (titled, simply "Unpopular Opinion Puffin") user Likes2PaintShit used the memetic vernacular to express frustration at these pop culture naysayers (Figure 19).[284]

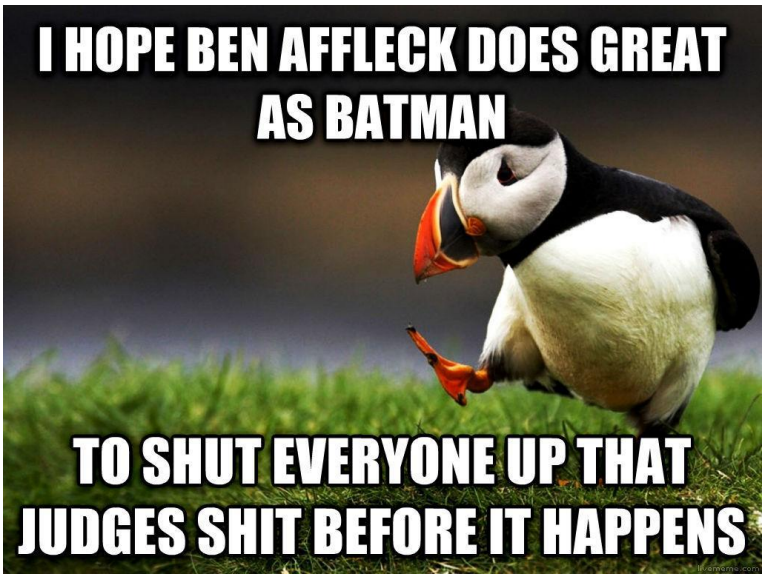

Figure 19 - This post reacting to the news Ben Affleck would be starring in the film Batman vs. Superman *was the first Unpopular Opinion Puffin to reach the front page of Reddit.*

This thread attracted over 2,000 votes (90 percent of them positive) and nearly 900 comments from other users. The majority of these comments echoed Likes2PaintShit's opinion and argued for open mindedness about the film. This positive feedback translated into visibility—not only for this sentiment, but also for the memetic practice itself.

The novelty of the meme is apparent in several user comments that expressed confusion or unfamiliarity with the genre of practice and its conventions, such as user Itroll4love writing "so why the fuck is this there a puffin on this picture,"[285] user EchoReborn24 posting "Pls post more pictures of this Puffin. Too damn cute."[286] or user zheddor's confused "What the hell does a puffin have to do with unpopular opinions??"[287] As these comments illustrate, this thread represented the first exposure many users had to Unpopular Opinion Puffin. Other users were less kind in their initial approximations, with one user writing, "I hope this meme becomes full

of extremely popular, painfully common opinions" and another replying that "We've got a good start here."[288] These users were quick to point out that the prevalence of Likes2PaintShit's opinion made it far from unpopular. User wowbrow, for instance, noted that "Every second Ben Affleck post [on r/adviceanimals] was 'come on give him a break'."[289]

This second group of users was identifying what those already familiar with the practice on r/adviceanimals had come to know over the last several weeks. As more users began to engage with Unpopular Opinion Puffin, the expectations for engagement shifted greatly from unique_like_the_rest's original intent. Those already familiar with the memetic practice intervened in Likes2PaintShit's thread to express their disdain with how it had been taken up. Replying to the users above who suggested the meme comes off as a popular opinion in sheep's clothing, user Not_KGB wrote:

> It comes off as it already is. There's not much unpopular about this opinion or meme. It's that fucking dumb, I'm suprised it hasn't imploded on its own stupidity and event horizon'd /r/adviceanimals[1] with it. The only reason this "unpopular opinion puffin" meme would make it to the frontpage is just because it's not that fucking unpopular of an opinion.
>
> It should be called paradox puffin instead and wouldn't be used and everything else between opinions and "confession" bears should be renamed to "opinions" and be done with it.[290]

As this post demonstrates, this practice had become a way to express popular opinions under the guise of being unpopular. Likes2PaintShit's original post represents a natural extension of the way in which generic expectations for engaging with this practice had developed in r/adviceanimals over the last several weeks since the meme's introduction, and this gulf between

espoused and enacted purpose frustrated many. In effect, this wide scale introduction of Unpopular Opinion Puffin to the larger Reddit community was notable not because it radically departed from existing generic expectations but because it codified them.

Figure 20 - Unpopular Opinion Puffins tackles the hard issues

The first Unpopular Opinion Puffin to reach Reddit's front page codified many expectations for engaging with this memetic practice, and many subsequent threads were constructed in a similar way, taking hardline stances against issues like drinking while pregnant and government marijuana regulation (Figure 20).[291] These memetic images tended convey broad opinions about well-known political or pop culture issues.[292] Although they were rarely controversial, they consistently played up their unpopular nature. Users actively cultivated this sense of marginalization not only through using the memetic practice, but also by framing their threads with titles like "A fairly unpopular opinion,"[293] "How about an actual unpopular opinion for a change?"[294] or "Actual Unpopular Opinion Puffin."[295] These posts (and many others like them) reflect a growing recognition that the memetic practice was being widely misused. By positioning these communications as authentic (i.e., using "real" or "actual") unpopular opinions, these users display knowledge of the expectations surrounding this deployment of the memetic vernacular and seek to reassert their vernacular authenticity through constructed marginalization. As user Lolbience trenchantly observed in a thread opposing climate change, "It's almost as if

the majority of reddit posts take a popular opinion and introduce it as a minority in attempt to get karma."[296]

Figure 21 - "The conceit in this meme is that there is an underlying social responsibility." Posted to r/adviceanimals by user modulus0 on August 28, 2013.

The thread in which Lolbience was participating provides a fairly typical example of the popular variant of Unpopular Opinion Puffin and, as a result, showcases how users construct appeals using the memetic vernacular. Started by user modulus0, the thread's initial post asserted that "It doesn't matter if climate change is human generated or not" emission controls are still necessary (Figure 21).[297] When another user called out this opinion for being not only popular but also "nice and fluffy" modulus0 acknowledged it was "hard to be deep and philosophical in so few characters" and wrote a more detailed response defending his or her intentions and use of the meme. This response provides valuable insight into how users speaking the memetic vernacular construct their appeals. Modulus0 began by articulating the implied oppositional force often present when speaking the memetic vernacular:

> What "the politicians" are trying to do is either support the establishment they represent by preventing expensive legislation (which isn't bad by the way) *or* they are on the other side trying to legislate good behavior.[298]

This sentiment makes clear that the intent behind this post is to provide other users with an opinion positioned as outside institutional systems and structures. “Politicians” and “the establishment” are suggested to be out of touch, acting selfishly, or forcing policy. By contrast, this assertion sees itself as empowered because it draws on a crowd-sourced form that emerges separately from typical forms created and used by institutional agents. In doing so, modulus0 asserts his alterity from institutions in both form and stance, creating a play toward credibility by invoking vernacular authority. And, as modulus0 continued, since institutional forces are untrustworthy and unreliable, the impotence for change must come from a large, nebulous association vernacular actors:

> So underneath all this, I'm trying to point out that the systems which we are born into and live with like so many snowflakes plowing down hill are not so inexorable. Naturally, we all live with the idea "make the world a better place" but rarely do any of us try and act on that. It's because it's like a snowflake trying to stop an avalanche.
>
> [...]
>
> So how do we change things without hurting anyone? If we let a green technology succeed it will destroy an economic sector. If we don't we are continuing a practice that will eventually fail anyway. Which is kinder?[299]

This passage demonstrates synergy between memetic artifact and practice. Change, as modulus0 has suggested, cannot come from institutional actors. Instead, modulus0 locates the potential for

transformation in the emergence of a grassroots movement. In effect, this user is appropriating a crowd-sourced practice in order to call for crowd-sourced change.

By using Unpopular Opinion Puffin, modulus0 creates a vernacular alternative that positions this opinion as both marginalized and common sense. This constructed marginalization relies on placing the opinion in implied contrast to some larger social force (institutions, governments, the media, etc.). It is a way of saying "the mainstream media won't say this, but…" or "politicians won't tell you, but…" that reflects a legitimacy of vernacular over institutional knowledge. As the preceding quote by modulus0 suggests, recognition of the flawed institutional system and of the potential vernacular alternative should lead other users to the same common sense conclusion. This quality is made explicit in modulus0's remarks but it is also present in the assumptions conveyed by the memetic image itself. By couching these appeals in a wider "common knowledge" not reflected by out-of-touch institutions, users are enabled to leverage a vernacular practice in pursuit of vernacular authority. Put another way, each example of this memetic practice may be construed as tacitly asserting, "I don't care if this is an unpopular viewpoint in [what is positioned as] mainstream discourse, this opinion is the result of common sense and deserves serious consideration by other everyday users."

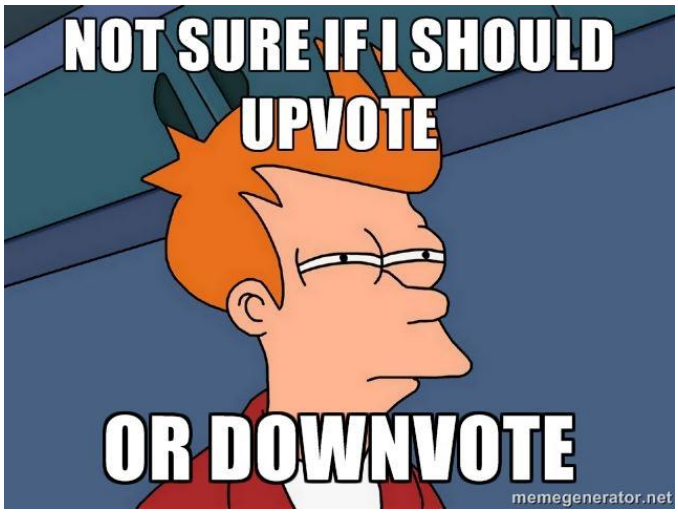

Figure 22 - "Finally saw a puffin I disagree with" Posted by bromancartholic to r/adviceanimals on Nov 6, 2013.

Taken on its own, the rise of the popular variants of Unpopular Opinion Puffin wasn't particularly harmful, though the resulting conversations tended to be less than productive. Most comments on any such Unpopular Opinion Puffin thread tended to either agree with the original poster or mock the thread's play toward originality and marginalization. In response to modulus0, user YouPickMyName provided a helpful comment progression outline for the climate change thread:

> I do love the slow progression of hostility as you scroll down the post.
>
> 1. That opinion isn't really unpopular...
> 2. You call that unpopular?
> 3. How the fuck is this unpopular?
> 4. GO fuck yourself OP.[300]

Much of this frustration and confusion over the memetic practice's enduring popularity seems to stem from confusion over generic expectations. Many users couldn't agree on what criteria should be considered when judging whether or not an opinion counts as popular. Others were confused about whether to upvote threads they agreed with or threads they disagreed with that

used the unpopular meme correctly (Figure 22).[301] Many users blamed this confusion for why the meme consistently maintained a high profile on r/adviceanimals throughout the remainder of 2013, insisting that many people did use the meme correctly, but no one ever saw it because users tended to upvote for sentiment over correct meme use. This tension created an ongoing feedback loop where memes that expressed popular sentiments remained the most visible. This visibility, in turn, exerted more force on the generic expectations for participation than the myriad of less well-known examples. This propagated an expectation for expressing common sense ideas and constructed marginalization via the memetic vernacular—an expectation that other users with more hateful viewpoints began to capitalize on.

Popular Practice, Racist Arguments

Circuitously, the popular opinion variant of Unpopular Opinion Puffin facilitated the circulation and publicity of some very unpopular opinions. As Unpopular Opinion Puffin became a more visible memetic form, many users began sharing actual unpopular opinions using the memetic vernacular. By November of 2013 generic expectations for the practice had begun to shift. Although "popular opinion" variants would remain common until the ban in May of the following year, more controversial variants began gaining visibility in the winter of 2013. Although diametrically different from the practice that enabled them, these unpopular variations exhibited many similar characteristics to the popular variants. Much like the popular opinion variants of the meme, these users also invoked a sense of unfair institutional marginalization and used assertions of common sense and personal experience to support their opinions. The result was an upsurge in racism and sexism, both casual and overt. Although these posts represented that the meme was working as intended, users became even more divided over the memetic practice. As a result, many users began to refer to the meme by a new more fitting nickname—

"Stormfront Puffin," after the infamous white supremacist website. This nickname was not undeserved.

Figure 23 - "An uncomfortable 'Unpopular Opinion Puffin' on race in America." Posted to r/adviceanimals on March 25, 2014 by therevenger09.

Advocating against interracial dating, marriage, adoption, and even friendship, several users co-opted the memetic practice to make truth claims about the nature of race in America.[302] Other users suggested forced assimilation programs for new immigrants or that forced sterilization was "a common line of thinking" until Adolf Hitler gave it a bad name.[303] A March 25, 2014, post to r/adviceanimals by user therevenger09 provides a fairly typical example of how this type of extreme appeal is constructed. In a post titled "An uncomfortable 'Unpopular Opinion Puffin' on race in America," therevenger09 advocates against any cross-racial interaction (Figure 23).[304] This user bases this claim (contained in the under-image text) on evidence provided above the image. Here, a hierarchy of races is presented as universal,

something underlying all humanity and so matter-of-fact that it can stand on its own axiomatically. Because of this hierarchy, it is constructed as a commonsense, immutable conclusion that different groups shouldn't interact. Although any specific institutional force goes unnamed, the use of the memetic form constructs this as a truth not covered in mainstream discourse while also positioning that truth as the natural result of vernacular analytical thinking about race.

While therevenger09's thread is a typical example of an extreme, many of these extreme forms of sexism and racism didn't find much traction or gain much publicity. Instead of starting debates or creating enclaves, these threads went mostly ignored by other users. Far more prevalent (and visible) was using the practice to express more casual forms of racism and sexism (Figure 24). Responding to this casual racism, user daimposter offered an interpretation of the memetic practice and its enclaving effects on discourse:

> That really bothers me. For anyone that thinks that reddit is liberal, pay attention to all the racial stuff that gets highly upvoted. It's usually not directly an overly obvious racist shit but the more subtle racist shit like "black people are more racist" or "European blacks are better than American blacks" or "reverse racism".[305]

As this comment makes clear, there is an art to being persuasively privileged. Threads that couched their unpopular opinions beneath a more broadly acceptable veneer tended to gain many more upvotes and, as a result, drew much more attention from other users.

Figure 24 - An April 16, 2014 thread that suggested black people were responsible for racism garnered 243 comments and over 1,000 user votes—71% of those votes were upvotes.

Taken as a whole, the casual racism threads function similarly to extremely racist ones, but with one important difference—the common knowledge it is assuming is much less immediately divisive. An April 16, 2014 thread, for example, claimed that black people were responsible for perpetuating racist attitudes (Figure 24).[306] This user (who has since deleted their account) offers evidence to support this claim, saying that "They reinforce their own stereotypes as jokes and then get angry at anyone who makes the same joke and label it 'racist'."[307] The wording of this evidence suggests this scenario was experienced by the original poster. It also hails other users to identify with the meme's racist assertions based on that ostensibly common experience.

Hence the play to the common here is based on an assertion of common experience. By appealing to others who feel like their speech is being policed (and, as a result, cannot tell any joke they want), this memetic communication creates a sense of unity through the perceived marginalization of public censorship of free speech. In his discussion of anti-McCain vloggers, Aaron Hess noted this capacity for vernacular digital rhetoric, writing that "[these users] utilize

tools of participatory media and culture to construct spectacles, masked in the language and visuals of everydayness, as polarized representatives of political otherness and demonization."[308] Similarly, vernacular authority in this memetic communication emerges by contrast to a sense of mainstream censorship and political correctness. And, as a result, hegemonic ideas of colorblindness are reinstantiated through the guise of counter-hegemonic vernacular speech.

Although these appeals tended to vary somewhat from thread to thread, the resulting conversations tended to become perceived as echo chambers. Often other users would take the assertions of unpopularity and marginalization as a challenge, and the thread would revolve around mocking the original poster. In other instances, threads became roundtables for why racism was not an "actual problem" or if violence against women could be justified.[309] There was very little engagement between users with divergent viewpoints and few threads did much to solicit outside input.

Here we see both potential and reality. The memetic vernacular, emerging from a crowd with which it is always in conversation, has great potential to build community and strengthen affective ties because, by its very nature, it is enabled by and demonstrates those ties. Conversely, vernacular speech may also do this communal work too well, limiting outside input by undercutting dissenters as institutionally influenced or lacking in common sense. As a result, the memetic vernacular also facilitates the creation of echo chambers and digital enclaves.

And, by May of 2014, Unpopular Opinion Puffin had developed a reputation on Reddit for doing just that. As user ALoudMouthBaby put it:

> I don't doubt for a second that a whole lot of the people upvoting this post are misguided teenagers.[310] What is worrisome is that there are so many of them, and they have formed a fairly large community where racist opinions like this are not just totally acceptable and

> common, but frequently approved of and celebrated by being made highly visible. If that does anything other than reinforce opinions like this I would be surprised.
>
> I think a lot of these people really aren't going to grow up to learn to be more tolerant because they have constructed their own little echo chamber they rarely leave.[311]

Written in mid-April 2014, this post by ALoudMouthBaby expresses an ever-growing wariness about Unpopular Opinion Puffin and its effect on discourse. By early May, r/adviceanimals had been removed from the list of default subreddits where it had been for over three years. This meant that content from the subforum would no longer show up on the website's frontpage. Many attributed this decision to the popularity of Unpopular Opinion Puffin and its frequent racist or sexist overtones. From there, it was only a matter of time before subforum moderators acted to reign in activity on r/adviceanimals. Although users had initially mocked the popular opinion variants for not conforming to the generic expectations of this memetic practice, in all likelihood it was unpopular opinions that got the puffin banned from Reddit.

Vernacular Responses to the Puffin Ban

Within weeks of the removal of r/adviceanimals from the list of default subreddits, moderators moved to ban Unpopular Opinion Puffin. Posting on May 25, 2014, subforum moderator "colocito" posted the following announcement:

> *Unpopular Opinion Puffins are now permanently banned*
>
> The mods have been discussing this internally for quite some time, and have finally come to a general consensus that the meme should be banned from the sub.
>
> Starting now, all Unpopular Opinion Puffin submissons will be removed.
>
> If you see any posted after this announcement thread, just click on report and we will take care of it.

Thanks.[312]

Colocito posted no other information and did not reveal the discursive process between moderators that led to this decision. Users were quite predictably mixed in their reactions to this decision. The announcement thread attracted over 3,000 user comments and hundreds of user votes.[313] Many users were grateful that moderators finally stepped in to limit an ongoing practice that was enabling marginalized constructions of privileged viewpoints and creating discursive enclaves. Many other users, however, were irate at what they saw as an institutional move to police free speech in the memetic vernacular.

Figure 25 - User sparks277 places the hat from the "Scumbag Steve" meme on Reddit's mascot in order to use the memetic vernacular to criticize the puffin ban. Posted to r/adviceanimals on May 25, 2014.[314]

The lack of rationale presented by colocito's original post led users to fill in the gaps with their own conclusions and many users took that opportunity to reassert themselves against institutions. Several suggested that this was part of a plot by Reddit moderators to limit

viewpoints that weren't politically correct[315] or that this was a form of institutional revenge for r/adviceanimals being removed from the list of default subreddits.[316] Some users expressed their frustration through the memetic vernacular (Figure 25)[317] while others posted comments that opposed the ban via appeals to vernacular authority.

> **No_Stairway_Denied**: Did I enjoy the puffin? Fuck no. But I dislike the mods deciding to ban memes. If this community-driven site likes something and upvotes it, why should it not be allowed? It seems we are a little over-policed here.[318]
>
> **BeckBristow89**: I agree, stop banning shit let the community decide what they want to see by upvoting/downvoting posts.[319]
>
> **IMA_Catholic**: If it was so unpopular why did it receive so many upvotes?[320]

Here informal community is positioned in contrast to site moderators acting as institutional agents. These common reactions position the ban as an example of institutional authority unfairly influencing vernacular authority, and, as a result, impugn the validity of this action. In this view, the authority to police a vernacular practice can only come from the aggregate volition of the community. The consistent popularity of the meme is posed as evidence enough that it is a legitimate form of vernacular expression. This institutional disciplining of the vernacular is seen as the will of the few being exerted over the will of the many—an inherently undemocratic act.

Some users defended the ban by claiming the memetic practice violated generic expectations for engagement in the community. In doing so, these users undercut claims like those above by suggesting that the practice itself violated vernacularly created expectations for interaction on the subforum. As user "Fazzeh" wrote:

> I think the problem was the people forgot the spirit of the subreddit. It's meant to be a fun place, and people started making puffins about their dumb opinions on serious issues. No

> one complains when someone makes a puffin that says "I DON'T LIKE GAME OF THRONES" because we can all have a bit of fun pretending to be horribly outraged by the idea of someone disagreeing with us.[321]

In this comment, Fazzeh reveals that the memetic practice could work in theory but, in practice, violates generic expectations for engagement on r/advicenanimals. This reaction attempts to defend the puffin ban by claiming it as a manifestation of vernacular authority instead of as a violation of it. By attempting to mobilize the idea of vernacular authority to support his interpretation of proper behavior in this web space, Fazzeh is engaging in similar tactics to the ban's critics but for opposite purposes.

Reactions to the puffin ban reveal the plurality of vernacular authority. The ban supporters and opponents both claimed vernacular authority as their own and make arguments about the proper course of action based in that authority. This illustrates how appeals to vernacular authority must struggle continually with not only their opposite (the institutional) but also with the vernacular discourse of other everyday users. This phenomenon is not unique to the case of Unpopular Opinion Puffin; instead, it occurs whenever generic expectations for vernacular practice are violated. As I will explain in the next chapter, when multiple vernacular authorities come into conflict, users frequently deploy vernacular practice as a form of counter-discourse to reassert their primacy over vernacular speech.

Speaking in the Memetic Vernacular

In this chapter, I've cataloged the emergence and evolution of a specific memetic practice in a specific web location. The case of Unpopular Opinion Puffin elucidates many common tactics users engage in when speaking in the memetic vernacular. In addition to the memetic form itself conveying a sense of vernacular due to emerging from aggregated volition, these

communications also frequently work to further kindle this sense of vernacularity through messages and sentiments constructed in opposition to institutional forces. In this way, form and stance work together to create generic expectations of vernacularity when speaking in the memetic vernacular. Memes create authority by drawing on common knowledge and common experience using a common form. And it is by this function, drawing on and appealing to the will of a nebulous group of loosely connected everyday individuals, that memetic communications find themselves empowered by a sense of vernacular authority.

This case also suggests that the vernacular empowerment enabled by the memetic vernacular is not inherently positive. Although the ability to speak back to institutions using easily recognizable and spreadable forms may seem powerful, it is also likely that users may simply use those forms to reinscribe hegemony, create echo chambers, or argue with other everyday users. Indeed, if memetic communications are the result of aggregate volition, and if hegemony relies on widely accepted belief, then it seems reasonable that many memetic communications construct themselves as vernacular, marginalized, or counter-hegemonic without actually being so.

Finally, this case shows us the variety of reasons why users may engage with memetic communications to make serious or controversial points. Many users maintained generic expectations for playfulness and humor in memetic communication, suggesting that communicating a point via a meme may have a lower barrier to entry—the ability to be played off as "just a joke" if not widely accepted. Memetic communications also display a sort of in-group knowledge, which users often build on in other ways in their posts or responses. This shows an ongoing relationship with an imagined web community and serves as yet another facet of how memetic communications seek vernacular authority.

In the next chapter, I broaden my scope from empowerment to resistance and from community to spreadability. In moving to observe how one feminist meme is mobilized, circulated, and embraced, and resisted across a variety of web locations, I observe common patterns of behavior in how the memetic vernacular may be resisted, appropriated, transformed and adapted by users as memetic practices circulate across different web communities.

Chapter 4: Holding up Feminism: Appropriating the Memetic Vernacular

In early April 2012, a group of 16 young women created a meme.

Figure 26 - One of the first posts to the "Who Needs Feminism?" Tumblr. [322]

The project had grown out of a course the group was taking at Duke University on the subject of women in the public sphere. Carrying a camera around their campus, the group asked several passersby to write on a small dry erase board about why they felt they needed feminism in their everyday lives. Pictures of these individuals posing with their answers were subsequently uploaded to various social media accounts created by the group all revolving around the question "who needs feminism?" (Figure 26). In these posts, other users were encouraged to consider, document, and share their own answers.[323]

This memetic practice was meant to function as a sort of vernacular PR campaign, countering what the group saw as unfair and inaccurate depictions of feminists and feminism in vernacular and institutional discourse.[324] Despite emerging out of an institutional context (a university course), these communications positioned themselves as vernacular by drawing on existing memetic practices and using acts of everyday speech to express alterity toward structural

sexism. By encouraging other users to engage in similar acts of vernacular expression, the group hoped to begin a movement to demystify and reclaim more positive connotations for "feminism." Within a few weeks the group's social media page on Facebook had over 11,000 likes and their account on micro-blogging website Tumblr had over 80,000 views from 144 different countries.[325] The idea spread quickly to several other universities,[326] with many campuses engaging in their own versions of the project—taking pictures, hanging posters in public spaces, and uploading answers to social media.

The resulting memetic practice circulated widely across a variety of web spaces, enabling vernacular expression and discussion—though not always in the way the group intended. In many instances, the nuances of this vernacular PR campaign became lost in appropriation (Figure 27).[327]

Figure 27 - (Left) A young woman perceives feminism as being opposed to equality; (right) A young man appropriates the meme to promote "meninism" and is frustrated by a shirtless Channing Tatum.

Or outright ridiculed (Figure 28).[328]

Figure 28 - (Left) A photoshop of George Zimmerman, best known for shooting an unarmed black teenager (Trayvon Martin) in his neighborhood, suggests he needs feminism to feel safe in his neighborhood; (right) A meerkat questions its need for feminism and (by proxy) for this memetic practice.

Across the Internet, users ranging from feminists to anti-feminists[329] began to argue about the everyday utility of "feminism" using the memetic vernacular. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the mechanisms and expectations that facilitate the successful propagation of memetic practices necessitate the loss of singular control, ceding voice and intention to a crowdsourced process. As a result, Who Needs Feminism? was wildly successful in using the memetic vernacular to encourage vernacular discourse about feminism across the web—just, not always in the feminist way the originators intended.

The responses to Who Needs Feminism? (both supportive and oppositional) raise several questions about the nature of memetic circulation and vernacular authority. How do memetic practices circulate? As they circulate, how are memetic practices appropriated by different web communities with different affordances and behavioral norms? What happens when differing ideas of vernacular authority come into contact and contention? Why respond to a meme by using a meme?

In this chapter, I argue that the fluid nature of networked communication facilitates the existence of ongoing, competing assertions of vernacular authority. The memetic vernacular is especially attuned to circulating these multiple authorities due to its highly spreadable and

customizable nature. Although we don't normally think of the singular "authority" as multiple or conflicting, the vernacular is inherently multiple, and, as such, creates the possibility for multiple authorities. Vernacular discourse continually struggles not only with its opposite (the institutional) but also with itself, a process laid bare by the affordances of the digital age. Networks make it increasingly commonplace for competing notions of vernacular authority to not only develop but also to collide. In these moments of collision, when expectations for vernacular practice and authority are breached, users respond to the vernacular with the vernacular. Similarly, users respond to the memetic vernacular with the memetic vernacular—engaging in acts of memetic appropriation to reaffirm their own vernacular authority while undercutting the vernacular authority of others. These occasions hail users to reassert their vernacular authority and, in doing so, exert control over vernacular speech and identity.[330]

I begin with a discussion of gender theory and the Internet to suggest how the latter enables hegemonic masculinity and the harassment of everyday feminist speech. Next, I look at the origins of Who Needs Feminism? on Tumblr, Facebook, and Twitter in order to demonstrate how these initial communications constructed themselves as vernacular and encouraged users to engage in further acts of vernacular expression. I then look at how anti-feminists on Facebook responded to these feminist communications by engaging in acts of appropriation. These acts appropriated Who Needs Feminism?'s memetic form and redirected it back against feminist discourse, reasserting anti-feminist control over vernacular speech and common knowledge. As these feminist and anti-feminist images circulated across the web, users in other web locations began to directly appropriate these acts of resistance into their own communities. Such acts of appropriation served as occasions for users to reaffirm their own sense of vernacular authority while also rejecting the claim to authority of the other. Although this transformative potential

may be somewhat empowering, it may also serve as a way for users to invoke the power of vernacular authority in an effort to suppress divergent arguments and reinforce discursive enclaves.

Feminism Online and Hegemonic Masculinity

In her 2016 study of feminist blogging, communication scholar Jessalynn Keller explains that the dominance of postfeminist attitudes in hegemonic cultural discourse[331] presents several challenges for individuals seeking to engage in forms of feminist expression online. Keller conceptualizes postfeminism as a type of cultural sensibility that acknowledges feminism but sees it as no longer relevant. At the same time, those adopting this sensibility refuse to associate with feminism, characterizing it as "harsh, punitive, and inauthentic."[332] Keller cautions that although it might be tempting for scholars to write-off these postfeminist sentiments as ignorance, it is important to understand how both postfeminism and feminist stereotypes[333] present very real challenges for feminists seeking to articulate their own feminist identities in their everyday communication online.[334] Several of Keller's interview subjects said they were aware of "the feminist stereotype," propagated by both popular culture and everyday communication, which paints feminists as masculine, lesbians, and man-hating.[335] Much like Who Needs Feminism? many of Keller's respondents were concerned with challenging this stereotype in their everyday digital communication.[336]

Digital communication might offer the potential for empowerment but it also creates new avenues for already marginalized users to be disempowered, harassed, and silenced.[337] As media scholars Mia Consalvo and Susanna Paasonen discuss in the introduction to their edited collection *Women & Everyday Uses of the Internet: Agency and Identity*, early scholarship about gender online tended to focus on the disembodied aspects of digital communication as well as

the related potential for fluid gender performance in digital contexts.[338] But, as Consalvo and Paasonen note, these early utopian claims about the web as a place where identity and the body could be experimented with or discarded (and, as an implication, offer the potential for discursive parity) were highly flawed.[339]

For example, as Paasonen observes, users with female screen names are much more likely to encounter intimation and harassment. To avoid this, many women take up gender neutral user names.[340] Hence, the potential to be disembodied is not liberating; it is the choice of fitting into hegemonic masculinity or exposing oneself to various forms of online (and frequently offline) harassment. This is not some grand failing of the Internet to deliver on these utopian promises, but instead, as media scholar Adrienne Shaw writes, "Like all racism and sexism, it comes out of a position of privilege that has been created via the same historical events that made 'tech culture' a particular form of masculine culture."[341]

Furthermore, offline identity often plays a significant role in shaping online communication. Despite the aforementioned claims by early digital utopists, the web has instead become a place where identity is a driving force for engagement that few users wish to leave behind.[342] However, as media scholars Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh caution, scholars of feminism online should avoid the trap of hailing women simply because they are women (or, for the purposes of this chapter, because they purport to be).[343] Instead, Gajjala and Oh recommend that scholars look at how women participate online. Since many different expressions of feminism exist on the web (and they are constantly changing and updating),[344] looking at how women participate helps scholars to better understand the myriad forms of digital practice as well as the contradicting and inconsistent voices therein.[345] While these individual expressions emerge under existing institutional structures, they are neither overshadowed nor determined by

them; instead, Gajjala and Oh suggest that understanding those institutions should come from an examination of decentered, multiple, and participatory user practices.[346]

Conversely, we can view hegemonic masculinity in a similar way—as a practice. In her 2015 book, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit,* communication scholar Adrienne Massanari uses the concept of hegemonic masculinity to describe how power and gender intersect under the dominant "geek culture" on Reddit.[347] Massanari draws on work by R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt[348] to define hegemonic masculinity as a pattern of practice that allows men's dominance over women. Hegemonic masculinity, Massanari argues, is an emergent set of practices that privileges white masculinity[349] while also silencing its critics. In her study of the LOLcats meme, communication scholar Kate M. Miltner offers a similar conclusion about the significant role of hegemonic masculinity in memetic practice, writing that "When women and people of color start participating on platforms that are the province of white, technically literate early adopters, they are often met with hostility. ... In content–oriented communities, this type of blowback can be particularly intense when a beloved text or set of texts is seen to be corrupted by 'outside'—often feminizing—forces."[350]

The consequences of this "blowback" aren't always publicly visible, but, for many users who threaten hegemonic masculinity, they are prevalent and frequently severe. As Gray et al. write in their discussion of #Gamergate—a 2014 controversy in "gamer culture" that led to the widespread, coordinated harassment of women and feminists online—"Women who speak up are often met with even more resistance from the 'boys club,' and these hypermasculine responses range from the explicit creation of teams to oppose female voices, to the reduction or removal of safe spaces for women to participate in the dominant public."[351] In the case of #Gamergate, several women were targeted by the movement simply for being feminists publicly online.

Women like Anita Sarkeesian, Brianna Wu, and Zoe Quinn were harassed, threatened with rape and death, and had their personal information published online.[352] As Lisa Nakamura notes, these actions go beyond mere "trolling," and the term only minimizes the severity of these actions.[353] Shaw and media scholar Shira Chess learned this lesson when they were targeted by the #Gamergate movement after notes from a conference discussion about feminism in games were leaked onto 4Chan. Reflecting on the experience, they write, "It has become apparent how quickly academia can be misunderstood, and more specifically how feminist academic research can be misappropriated for non-feminist purposes."[354] These acts of harassment and appropriation create a feedback loop that actively discourages non-hegemonic participation, not only among those who've been harassed but also among potential participators.[355]

These phenomena—feminist stereotypes and hegemonic masculinity—are not exclusive to (nor borne form) the Internet, but they are enabled by it.[356] As Shaw puts it, "people are jerks not only when they are in anonymous Internet spaces, but also when they are in spaces where they can get away with being jerks."[357] Events like Gamergate are well-known moments in an ongoing, ever-present process of harassment and discrimination against women who are perceived as threatening to hegemonic masculinity.[358] Although this section is not a full engagement of the expansive and important scholarship on gender and sexuality, it does provide a starting point to contextualize both Who Needs Feminism? and the resistance toward the memetic practice.

Feminist Appropriation: Challenging Vernacular Discourse

On April 10 and 11, 2012, a group of 16 Duke University students launched a social media campaign to retake feminism. The term, they lamented, had become "seen as too radical, too uncomfortable, or simply unnecessary" by many individuals.[359] To fight back against these

dominant misconceptions, the group decided to create a social media awareness campaign dedicated to encouraging vernacular discourse and everyday action in order to counter negative connotations of feminism in mainstream discourse. They started by approaching other students on their campus, encouraging them to consider why they felt feminism was relevant or important to their everyday lives. Dozens of students wrote their answers on small whiteboards and posed with them for photographs. These photographs were turned into posters that the group spread around campus and uploaded to social media (Figure 29).[360]

To promote their campaign, the group created pages on Tumblr and Facebook, a Twitter account,[361] and, subsequently, whoneedsfeminism.com. Initial posts not only shared the images the group had created but also encouraged other users to create, document, and share their own

reasons using the hashtag #whoneedsfeminism.[362]

Figure 29 - Four of the dozens of images uploaded in the initial stage of the Who Needs Feminism? campaign. These images served as models, encouraging other users to upload their own reasons for supporting feminism.[363]

These tactics appropriated several popular memetic practices that had circulated online in years prior, positioning Who Needs Feminism? in a trajectory of enacted memetic practices. An enacted meme involves observing a memetic practice online, enacting and documenting that memetic practice offline, and then circulating the results of that enactment online. These enacted memetic antecedents include behaviors like Planking (holding one's body stiff like a board while balancing between objects), Tebowing (mimicking football player Tim Tebow's iconic post-touchdown take-a-knee pose), or We are the 99% (inspired by the Occupy movement, users would photograph themselves holding a piece of paper on which they had written their frustrations with economic inequality), all of which gained notable popularity at various points in

2011.[364] Like Who Needs Feminism? many of these enacted memes originated on or centered around single-topic Tumblr blogs.

The popularity of enacted memes in 2011 provided a familiar framework for Who Needs Feminism? to pattern itself after. Many of these antecedents had generic expectations for vernacularity. Planking, for example, often catalogued users flaunting social norms or laws, such as plankers choosing to balance on public or police property (Figure 30).[365] We are the 99% had similar expectations, encouraging users to create a space on social media—via enacted participation—for everyday discourse on the subject of income inequality and class (Figure 30).[366] As a result, Who Needs Feminism? emerged quickly with a perception of vernacularity enabled by the prevalence of these other forms (and of memetic communication) in the months prior.

Figure 30 - (left) A young man "planks" on a police cruiser; (right) A young woman expresses her class-related frustration and proclaims that she is the 99 percent. Both of these enacted memes pre-date Who Needs Feminism? but maintain similar expectations as forms of vernacular expression.

In this way, Who Needs Feminism? appropriated existing memetic practices to challenge misconceptions in vernacular discourse. Memetic appropriation refers to the act of creating something new based on an existing memetic form, genre, or practice, and represents the natural progression for a shared, decentralized practice. Although it has connotations suggesting

exploitation, I prefer the term appropriation (over the similar "variation" or "adaptation") because it centralizes human agency. The other terms are relatively passive, more suited for the biological metaphors of Dawkins' meme than this practice-driven element of digital culture.[367] The meme does not change as it travels; people change the meme to suit their needs and then continue to circulate it. As a result, memetic appropriation describes how users take up and change an existing practice, integrating it into a web community based on the technological affordances and community norms present in that community. Because of this process, a single memetic practice may vary significantly between websites and even between different communities on a single website.

Initial posts on the Who Needs Feminism? Tumblr blog appropriated the visual conventions of the "We are the 99%" meme. These images (all uploaded by the Duke campaign, which also moderated the blog) featured dozens of photographs of individuals holding up hand-written signs explaining—in first-person—why they needed feminism (Figure 29). However, since memetic communication often frustrates authorial intent, this appropriated form did not immediately catch on after the blog was opened to user submissions. Of the first 300 user submissions to Who Needs Feminism?'s Tumblr page, only 37 percent included images of any kind. This proportion fell precipitously over the first few days.[368] By April 14 the vast majority of responses to the question "Who Needs Feminism?" were textual,[369] with users expressing sentiments like:

> I need feminism because of the phrase "Tits or GTFO".[sic][370]
>
> I need feminism because the oppression of women is [sic] multicultural and wide spread.[371]
>
> Because I still have to "admit" to being a feminist."[372]

> Because I have the power to say I need it. Who will speak for the countless women who don't have a voice?[373]

Many of these early posts dealt with issues of social justice, reproductive rights, sexual assault, LGBTQ rights, and the intersectionality of oppression. Although the content of these posts matched the Duke campaign's original intention, generic expectations for the memetic form had diverged significantly.

In order to realign the generic expectations with the appropriated memetic practice, the blog moderators decided to more actively curate user submissions. In a May 29 post blog moderators informed users that they would now be prioritizing submissions that adhered to the original memetic format—a photograph of someone holding up a piece of paper or white board proclaiming why one needs feminism. For reference, users were pointed toward several examples of how to perform this enacted memetic practice (Figure 29). The moderators then offered the following rationale for this decision:

> We have decided to do this in order to channel the original power exuded by individuals' courage to post pictures of themselves online indicating their alignment with feminism, a movement that is widely denigrated. Our project's original intent was to minimize the negativity surrounding feminism in order to make more people feel comfortable coming forward and proclaiming themselves feminist. The images of people holding up signs explaining the necessity for feminism fosters an environment in which people can feel connected to others who share similar views and thus feel more comfortable to post their own pictures and thereby align with the feminist movement. Unless the denigration surrounding feminism is significantly minimized, further improvement in women's

> societal standing will be difficult to achieve. For further clarity on our group's mission please read our about section on facebook.[374]

In this comment the moderators position the enacted element of this memetic practice as essential to connection and, subsequently, to proliferation. In other words, if people are not performing the appropriated form in a recognizable way, then the resulting communication will not be recognizable as a meme and, subsequently, will not be circulated as a meme. This view suggests the difficulty in creating a new meme from nothing and the utility of extending an existing and recognizable memetic form via appropriation.

Figure 31 - Four typical examples of memetic images submitted to WhoNeedsFeminisim.Tumblr.com in the week following the May 29 post.

Following the May 29 post, nearly all submissions shared by the Who Needs Feminism Tumblr conformed to these recognizable visual memetic conventions (Figure 31).[375] The action of the moderators created a feedback loop. The photographic version of the meme became the most visible form, which—as the meme became more popular through the rest of 2012—continued to set the tone (in form and message) for new memetic communications.

Figure 32 - I NEED FEMINISM BECAUSE: They told me a "woman's place was in the kitchen". But when I became a chef it was "NO GIRLS ALLOWED"

A June 7, 2012 submission to the Who Needs Feminism? Tumblr provides a typical example of how Who Needs Feminism enabled users on Tumblr to combine vernacular aesthetics and messages to cultivate a sense of vernacular authority (Figure 32).[376] The post

features a young woman, shot from a low angle, holding up a handwritten sign. Black sharpie on white A4 paper reads:

I NEED FEMINISM

BECAUSE:

They told me a "woman's

place was in the kitchen".

but when I became a

chef it was "NO GIRLS

"ALLOWED"

No further comments were supplied, and the user's name was not given. The image received 533 notes (including 297 likes and 222 reblogs), a significant but not unusual amount.

Aesthetically, this image expresses its institutional alterity by embracing an amateur aesthetic. In this way, this memetic practice grew from the generic expectations surrounding the We are the 99% meme the Duke campaign originally appropriated. Although the original Who Needs Feminism? images were all captured outdoors and in public spaces, this photo is taken against a non-descript interior wall. Many other images use private spaces like bedrooms, living rooms, or hallways as backdrops. In these Tumblr examples, the user is almost always solitary, substituting the bustling background of a university quad for private, lived in spaces.

Shots tend to be taken from angles associated with amateur photography. These low angle (looking into the camera of a laptop) and high angle shots (the smartphone "selfie" angle) remind the viewer of the highly individual nature of this social practice. Just as this user is partially obscured by both frame and sign, many users use stylistic choices that obscure parts of

their faces or bodies in their pictures. This blurs public and private while also demonstrating the messy self-posed, self-taken nature of the photos.

Lighting tends to be a function of nature and convenience, with open windows, laptop glows, and nearby desk lamps doing most of the heavy lifting. As a result, many images are backlit or lacking white balance. Unlike the whiteboards used in the original Duke Campaign, messages are almost always handwritten on paper (though they are not always legible). This demonstrates that users were either more likely to engage with technology and spaces that were already available—like laptop cameras, legal pads, and dimly lit bedrooms—or made efforts to pursue this amateur aesthetic.

These lower production values worked together to give these images a greater sense of vernacular authenticity. The way the meme was appropriated by the Tumblr community seemed more everyday compared to the well-composed, semi-professional look of the original Who Needs Feminism? images. Such concerns likely also influenced the generic conventions of prior enacted memetic practices (like We are the 99%) and the adoption of this amateur aesthetic for Who Needs Feminism? served to align this new practice with an existing one—rendering it eminently comprehensible and spreadable to a wider audience already familiar with seeing a similar memetic practice in their social media feed.

On the textual level, this image asserts its vernacularity in several ways. Like many other examples of this memetic practice, the message begins with a singular first-person pronoun. This basic generic expectation to begin with an "I" statement encourages appeals that place the user as an individual vernacular voice standing in alterity to a hegemonic system. The specific target of this alterity changes (and, in many cases, may only be implied in contrast). In this image "They" is used as a metonym, standing in for society at large and systemic gender bias.

This image also uses lived experience to dispute common knowledge. She places two common vernacular phrases against each other, noting that "[a] 'woman's place was in the kitchen'" and "when I became a chef it was 'NO GIRLS ALLOWED'." This contradiction, evidenced by her appeal to lived experience, suggests a double-bind scenario and uses hypocrisy to channel hegemonic power against itself. This tactic is similar to many other examples of Who Needs Feminism? that expressed their vernacularity through appeals via lived, everyday experience and embodied identity. These identities aren't just written or referenced, they are joined by visual signifiers during the enactment and sharing of the practice when users include their faces, bodies, and handwritten messages as part of the documentation. In this way, Who Needs Feminism? combines both text and image to create a space for marginalized vernacular discourse meant to address the perceived misconception of "feminism" in common knowledge.

It is significant to note, however, that the type of feminism these images advocated tended to be a very specific type of feminism. Started by university students, participants tended to skew young and shared mostly upper-middle class concerns, such as eliminating the gender wage gap, providing better access to contraception, ensuring equal potential for success, and seeing women as strong. A notable minority do acknowledge issues like queerness, the intersectionality of oppression, and race, and issues like sexual assault and rape culture maintained a strong presence on more social justice-oriented websites, like Tumblr. Concerns of impoverished and non-western women came up only sparingly, and when they did, they were usually presented in sentiments that presented human rights as universal. As one frustrated user put it, "I need feminism because white, upper class women shouldn't have a monopoly on speaking about women's experiences."[377] Going forward, it is necessary to acknowledge that this

is the dominant form of feminism represented here because these communications set the tone for the ensuing responses from other users.

Although my discussion so far has centered mostly on how the memetic practice was appropriated on Tumblr, this directed attempt to interject into common knowledge and assert vernacular authority using the memetic vernacular proved wildly successful in many web communities. At the same time, it also drew a fair share of ire from users resistant to this exertion of control over vernacular discourse. To these users, what they perceived as everyday knowledge was under attack. These feelings of resentment and inauthenticity regarding Who Needs Feminism? led to resistance among several groups in a variety of different web spaces. In order to reassert their control over vernacular authority, these groups began turning to their own memetic practices to appropriate and resist the message of Who Needs Feminism?

Anti-Feminist Appropriation: Resisting Challenges to Vernacular Discourse

As Who Needs Feminism? grew in popularity it began to attract attention from users who vehemently disagreed with its pro-feminism message. When faced with a breach of expectations of their common knowledge and vernacular authority, these users responded by deploying the memetic vernacular to reassert control over vernacular discourse. In many circumstances, this meant appropriating the enacted memetic practice represented by Who Needs Feminism? to enable modes of resistance. This resistance frequently occurred in spaces where Who Needs Feminism? had found the most traction—such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter. Users rallied around competing hashtags, Tumblr blogs, and Facebook pages, in order to express why they didn't need feminism. Other users rejected Who Needs Feminism? by creating their own campaigns under labels like "meninism" or "egalitarianism" and their own websites like dontneedfeminism.com.[378] All the ways in which users resisted feminist enacted memetic

practice in web communities are too numerous to recount here, but a microcosm of these appropriative and resistive trends can be observed on one of the most popular Facebook pages created in opposition to Who Needs Feminism?.

Created a little over a year after Who Needs Feminism?, the I don't need Feminism Facebook community represents a response to the enacted memetic practice at the height of its popularity.[379] Both groups were still active well into 2015, with I don't need Feminism boasting 10,000 likes versus 38,000 for the Who Needs Feminism? community. Both groups engage in similar tactics, encouraging users to share everyday experiences to inspire vernacular discourse and address a perceived problem in common knowledge represented by the other community. While Who Needs Feminism? advocates for equality, I don't need Feminism positions feminists as radical and angry misandrists—the exact stereotype Who Needs Feminism? was created to fight.[380] As may be expected, interactions between pro- and anti-feminists in both spaces are especially common and fierce. The group's argumentative practices, however, give significant insight into how users attempt to exert control over vernacular expression for their own empowerment by using the memetic vernacular to create a veneer of marginalization.

The I don't need Feminism Facebook page makes its politics immediately clear (Figure 33).[381] Their page is bannered with an image extolling unity and opposing feminism's "ideological rhetoric." The moderators' profile picture is a pink circle overlaid on top of the female gender symbol; the prohibitive slash through the circle repeats the group's name. Their newsfeed is media heavy, containing links to anti-feminist news stories, videos, and blogs.

The group also frequently posts a variety of anti-feminist memes. These memes engage in a variety of appropriative tactics designed to undercut feminist vernacular authority. By creating anti-feminist versions of Who Needs Feminism?, reposting feminist memes as fodder for

community ridicule, and creating their own memetic forms, these anti-feminist users seek to use the memetic vernacular in order to assert control over vernacular discourse.

Figure 33 - The Facebook page for I don't need Feminism.

In addition to positioning itself against feminists, the I don't need Feminism community also constructed vernacular authority by creating a sense of institutional marginalization and alterity. In an early post, one of the moderators shared a screen capture of a comment she made

on the original I don't need Feminism page (Figure 34). Based on the screenshot, the moderator claimed, Facebook refused to publish the page—even after she appealed—and claimed it violated their terms of service. Of this, she writes, "and feminists think THEIR feminist pages are being deleted for no reason all the time. What a joke."[382] In this post, the moderator is expressing not only her alterity to feminism, but also how the group has emerged in alterity to (and is marginalized by) the institutional power represented by Facebook. This also suggests that feminists are not put under the same level of scrutiny by institutional actors because these institutions are already subservient to feminist ideology. As a result, this is not only emblematic of how anti-feminists construct a sense of mainstream marginalization (positioned against 'politically correct' institutions), but it also aligns both the institutional and feminism, further suggesting the latter's lack of vernacular authenticity by association.

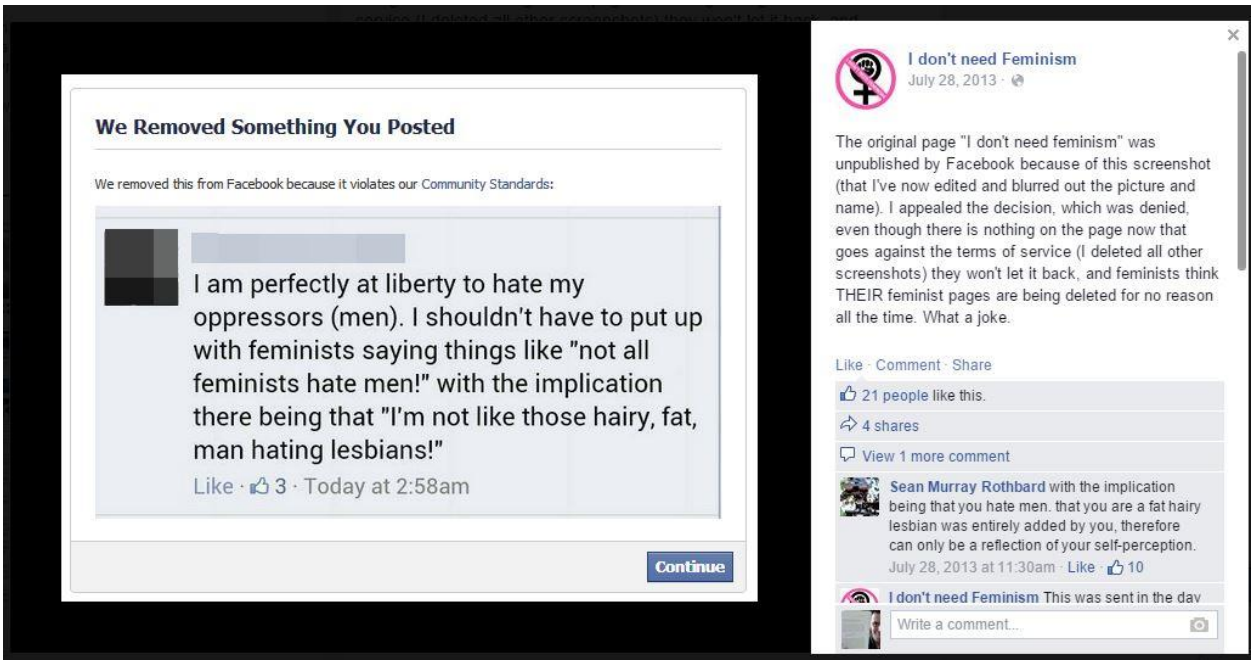

Figure 34 - In an early post, one of the moderators suggest that institutional actors at Facebook were responsible for censoring anti-feminist speech.

Much like Who Needs Feminism?, everyday experience and embodied identity form key aspects of this group's construction of vernacular authenticity. The prominently displayed

"About" section of the page actively works to establish a sense of identity. It reads, "Anti-feminist page created and managed by women. Yes, really. Why do YOU not need feminism? Make your own sign and post to the wall or inbox."[383] Additionally, these creators and moderators all interact with the group from the same account, often signing their posts as "Jessica" or "Alicia." This moderator account is not linked to any one person's Facebook profile and—despite actively asserting female identity—lacks any other markers of verifiable identity. Although it is indeed possible that these mostly anonymous creators were trolling (men posing as women), these assertions of identity had a powerful legitimating effect. By actively demarcating their identities as women, the group's creators attempt to delegitimize the claims of Who Needs Feminism? by suggesting that they do not authentically represent the lived experience of women.

This move creates a gap which calls for further vernacular speech in order to address and reconcile a perceived disparity of authenticity. Since this vernacular communication is encouraged by women, it legitimates itself as not about misogyny (although it most certainly is) but about opposing feminism's "radical" and unrepresentative ideology. Furthermore, since this ideology is framed as hurting and dividing both genders, these communications hail individuals from both genders to engage in vernacular discourse against feminism. Taken as a whole, these tactics serve as a basis to further question the authenticity of Who Needs Feminism? by inviting many other vernacular users to actively circulate their own anti-feminist versions of the enacted

memetic practice. Even if the creators were trolling, it is difficult to ignore how many users took it seriously and how many women (as well as men) responded to their call (Figure 35).[384]

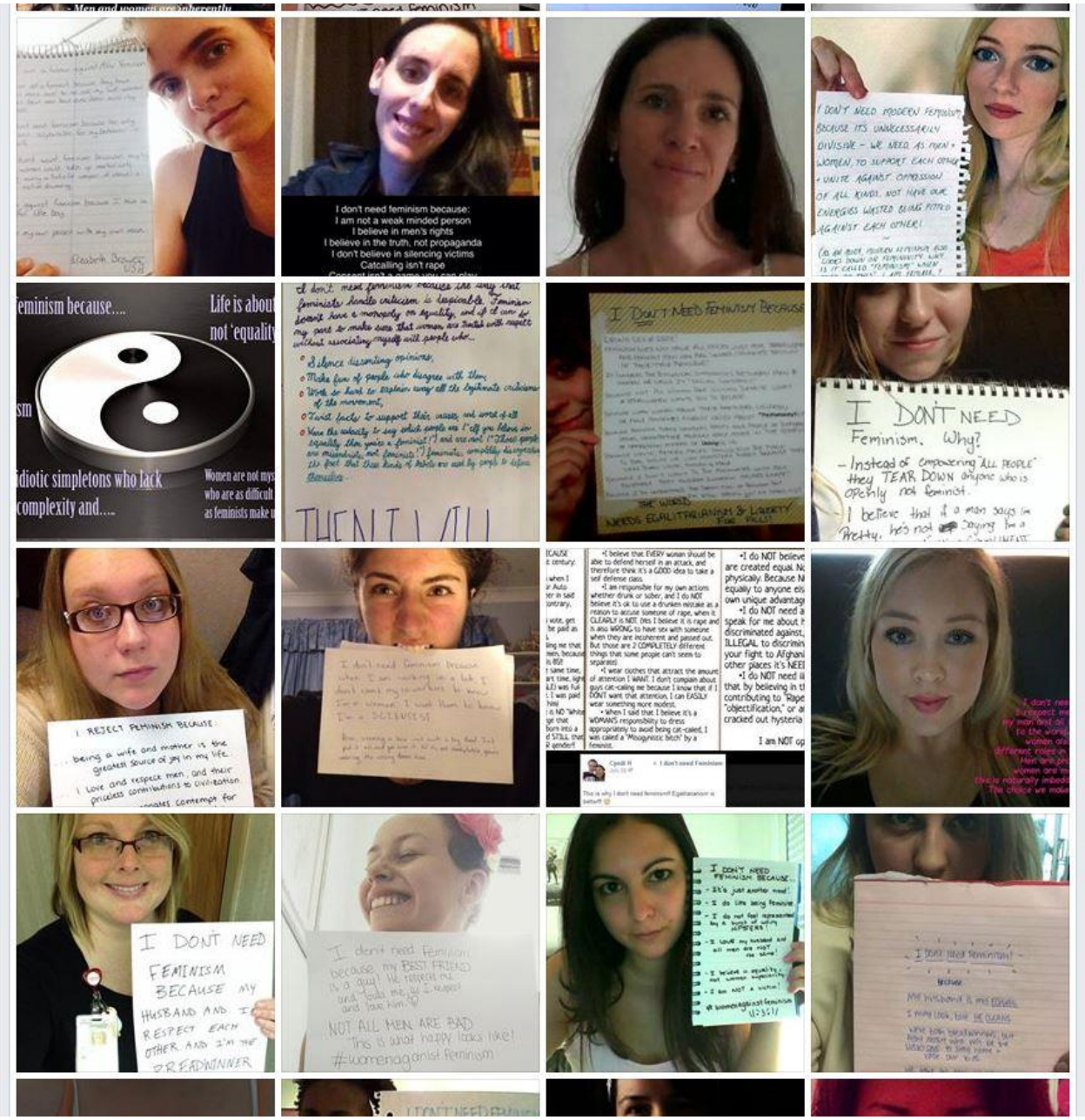

Figure 35 - While some users submitted anti-feminist examples of this enacted memetic practice, most users photoshopped existing examples to make it seem as if real women were making these arguments.[385]

These user-submitted images represent resistance via appropriation. By encouraging users to make and post their own signs explaining why they didn't need feminism, the

community empowered users to create and circulate anti-feminist messages by taking an existing memetic practice and leveraging certain generic expectations while inverting others. The resulting communication events weren't just a response to the Who Needs Feminism? campaign; they were enabled by it. Instead of having to create a movement from scratch, I don't need Feminism was able to take the widely known memetic form and popularity of Who Needs Feminism? and subvert it in order to redeploy it against itself. In effect, the crowdsourced, protean, and customizable nature of the memetic vernacular allowed this group to launch their own version of the Who Needs Feminism? campaign with an oppositional message. By doing so, these anti-feminists appropriated the memetic vernacular to reassert their hegemony over vernacular discourse.

The anti-feminist community also appropriated specific feminist memetic images as objects to show hypocrisy or inauthenticity. These reshared or tweaked feminist memes function as centers for community derision or ridicule, further cementing the group's vernacular authority by contrast. One of the community's most popular tactics was to take feminist memetic images and photoshop their messages to reverse the genders (Figure 36).[386] The goal, the moderators wrote, was to expose double standards and highlight sexism in feminist rhetoric.[387] Although these posts discounted the systemic and social factors behind sexism (while also supporting claims of reverse sexism), this ploy played well with users. As one commenter wrote, "Sad to say this one really has a grain of truth. A lot of women these days even who don't consider themselves feminists think they have an inherent right to control men. Of course, one would still need to blame some form of feminist dogma for most of it."[388] Although these images and comments represent a different form of appropriation than the I don't need Feminism memes discussed above, they are working toward very similar ends. Both types use the words and

practices of feminists against them in order to suggest inauthentic or hypocritical viewpoints. Since hypocrisy constitutes a violation of common sense, these communications seek to legitimate anti-feminist viewpoints by positioning anti-feminists as more in-touch with the sense of the common and, as a result, more suited to speak with vernacular authority.

Figure 36 - The original image (posted on the Facebook group Women's Rights News) and the gender-swapped appropriation posted by the I don't need Feminism community.

In addition to appropriating feminist memes and memetic practices to make anti-feminist arguments, these users also appropriated memetic practices more generally to reassert their control over vernacular discourse. These users not only appropriated existing image macros (centered around characters like Dos Equis' Most Interesting Man in the World or Heath Ledger's Joker) to create anti-feminist messages but also tried to create new ones (Figure 37).[389] These anti-feminist image macros, like the appropriation of memetic practices discussed above, leveraged existing expectations for vernacular practice into a form supporting anti-feminist rhetoric. These tactics are familiar and find significant resonance with other forms of memetic resistance to Who Needs Feminism?—pointing toward hypocrisy, suggesting how other users can engage in everyday anti-feminist discourse, and expressing that feminism violates their interpretation of common sense. Much like the example of Unpopular Opinion Puffin discussed

in the previous chapter, this deployment of anti-feminist memes suggests users see the memetic practices of Who Needs Feminism? as a misuse of the vernacular. Since the anti-feminists see feminist vernacular communication as a violation of their generic expectations for vernacular practice, they counter feminist vernacular discourse by offering a variety of their own memetic communication as a correction to this misappropriation.

By integrating other forms of memetic practice into their efforts to resist Who Needs Feminism? more users are enabled to express their anti-feminist viewpoints. Much like Who Needs Feminism? these image macros speak in the vernacular—enabling one vernacular discourse to directly counter the other. These users had already appropriated the form of Who Needs Feminism? against itself (both via direct messages and gender reversals), but appropriating image macros allowed these users to extend their vernacular credibility. Anti-feminist image macros tapped into a wider body of memetic practice, enabling vernacular counter-arguments via a more recognizable form. It also lowered the barrier to entry for non-women wishing to participate and share anti-feminist views by removing the embodied component of Who Needs Feminism? while at the same time gaining vernacular authority from using the crowdsourced image macro genre. This appropriative tactic supplements the I don't need Feminism and gender reversal memetic practices by reframing the central role of embodied identity and lived experience as secondary aspects while further foregrounding the anti-feminists' constructions of vernacular authority and common knowledge.

Figure 37 - Users create anti-feminist memetic images using the popular "College Liberal" (left) and "Everybody loses their minds" (right) image macro genres. The center example, featuring comedian Janeane Garofalo, is a new memetic form patterned after the popular "advice animal" genre.

The resonance of this reframing tactic is evident in a variety of user comments and discussions surrounding posts to the group's page. Enabled by appropriations of enacted memes, feminist memes, and image macros, this group created a space that legitimated and encouraged an anti-feminist discourse. Contrary to the group's written purpose ("created and managed by women") and appropriated memetic practices, the vast majority of contributing users had male names and profile pictures—further suggesting the constructed nature of the group's vernacular authenticity. Despite the anti-feminists' frequent assertions that feminists were anti-discourse and irrational, many feminists attempted to actively engage anti-feminists in this space. These users were generally met with glib dismissals (or moderator-enacted bans) that, over time, wore down even the most adamant feminist posters.

Taken as a whole, these implementations of the memetic vernacular created a digital enclave for anti-feminist discourse. Feminists trying to interact with the group are repeatedly told their opinions are wrong and asked to back up their assertions with data. These data or citations are inevitably dismissed as feminist propaganda, reverse sexism, or uneducated reiteration of feminist talking points. One feminist user, pressed multiple times to support her assertions with data and to educate herself by reading the "correct" data posted to the group by the anti-feminists

pushed back against this double standard, writing “Meme's [sic] and crap you copy and paste off the internet is not ‘data’.”[390] Another user dismissed feminists’ attempts to interact with the group outright, posting that “I don't believe anything feminists say anyway. They proved countless times that their ‘facts and statistics’ are false.”[391] When several feminists point out that the anti-feminists’ pro-equality stance is simply the goal of feminism, another user dismisses their argument by posting a memetic image (Figure 38).[392] These interactions demonstrate how feminists’ attempts to engage discursively are summarily dismissed as inauthentic. Feminist data, facts, and statistics are seen as constructions based on a worldview that violates the anti-feminists’ sense of the common. Conversely, anti-feminist arguments are positioned as inherently correct, standing on their own as truth without the need for further explanation. This disparity reinforces the centrality of common knowledge in this conflict and illustrates the role of the memetic vernacular and vernacular authority in exerting control over such knowledge.

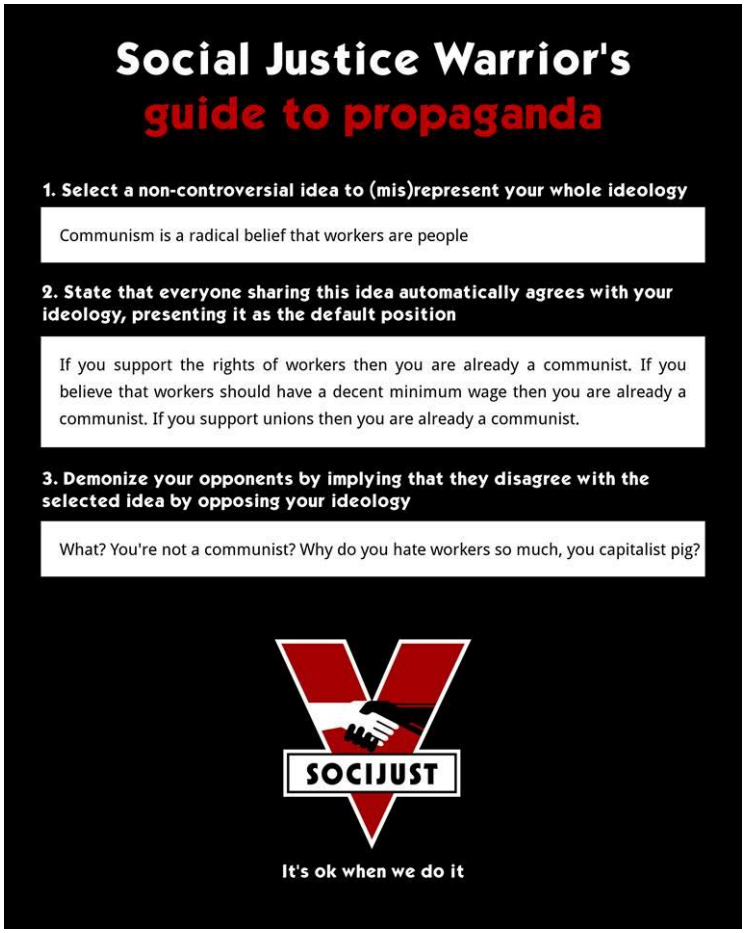

Figure 38 - "I see I'm kind of late to the party, I mean, comment war, but still. 'So you are all saying you do not need equality between men and women, seeing as that is what feminism is..' - this is the argument used by feminists all the time. It's so overused that I've even made a little picture:" Posted to the I don't need Feminism Facebook group on Feb 24, 2014.

Although the tactics used by the anti-feminists in the I don't need Feminism Facebook community demonstrate how users may resist the memetic vernacular via various forms of appropriation, this was far from the only location that resisted. A variety of appropriative tactics were used on several different websites to both support and oppose feminist vernacular discourse. But, despite the variety of tactics used, they are all united by appeals to common knowledge and vernacular authority. None of the oppositional implementations really stop Who Needs Feminism?, but, then again, they are not really meant to. Instead, they are meant to undermine the vernacular authority of the group, providing alternative spaces to resist feminist

vernacular discourse. However, such acts of resistance using the memetic vernacular aren't limited to anti-feminist appropriations. In the next section, I turn to the r/feminism subreddit to show how Who Needs Feminism? also enables acts of supportive appropriation and resistance.

Direct Appropriation and Discursive Enclaves

As Who Needs Feminism? circulated across web communities, so did vernacular discourse. Like the memes that inspired it, the discourse that followed Who Needs Feminism? was both supportive and oppositional. In both cases, these expressions were enabled by the disparate ways in which the memetic practice was appropriated by feminist and anti-feminist groups. Unlike the web communities discussed in the previous sections—which centered around Tumblr blogs, Twitter hashtags, and Facebook pages—the r/Feminism subreddit was not created by or centered on reactions to Who Needs Feminism? Instead, the r/Feminism subreddit predates the creation of Who Needs Feminism? by several years. As a result, r/Feminism represents a space where the enacted memetic practice appears and is appropriated into a larger set of pre-existing discursive practices. The resulting memetic practices and vernacular discourse in this community were defined not only by Who Needs Feminism? but also by resisting the memetic practices of anti-feminists via direct appropriation of their memetic images.

One of the earliest examples of this type of resistance to anti-feminist appropriation centered around an image posted to the subreddit on April 12, 2012. Posted only hours after the start of the Who Needs Feminism? campaign, the original poster supplied a photograph taken on his or her campus and wrote "My university started an 'I need feminism because...' campaign only to have people edit them. I think the edits make the point more poignant."[393] These edits refer to a sign taped over a Who Needs Feminism? poster that alters the original message ("I need feminism because I believe in care and ethical living.") to read "I need feminism because

Sandwiches won't Make Themselves" (Figure 39). By capturing and uploading this anti-feminist appropriation, the original poster provided a space for vernacular discourse against the appropriation. Many users ridiculed the anonymous editor for their lame attempt at humor, which users derided as either nonsensical or unoriginal. [394] Other users saw this as an occasion to share their own stories about anti-feminist appropriations. These users discussed their own experiences with vandalism and torn down signs as well as dealing with anti-feminist responses to Who Needs Feminism? on a variety of other social media platforms (such as Facebook). [395]

Here we see influence of a variety of appropriative tactics and memetic practices converging in a single place to support resistant acts of vernacular discourse. This discourse paints these repeated anti-feminist appropriations as unoriginal, derivative, and singular moments. These qualities position anti-feminists as lacking vernacular legitimacy because they do not carry a sense of the common. Instead, the vandals are spoken of as anonymous trolls standing against a much bigger and more authentic movement that they have fundamentally misinterpreted. Here anti-feminist appropriation is itself appropriated in order to serve as an occasion for feminists to question anti-feminist attempts at policing vernacular discourse. It also enables feminists to connect with each other during their rejection of these tactics, further strengthening community ties and reaffirming the legitimacy of their own vernacular expression.

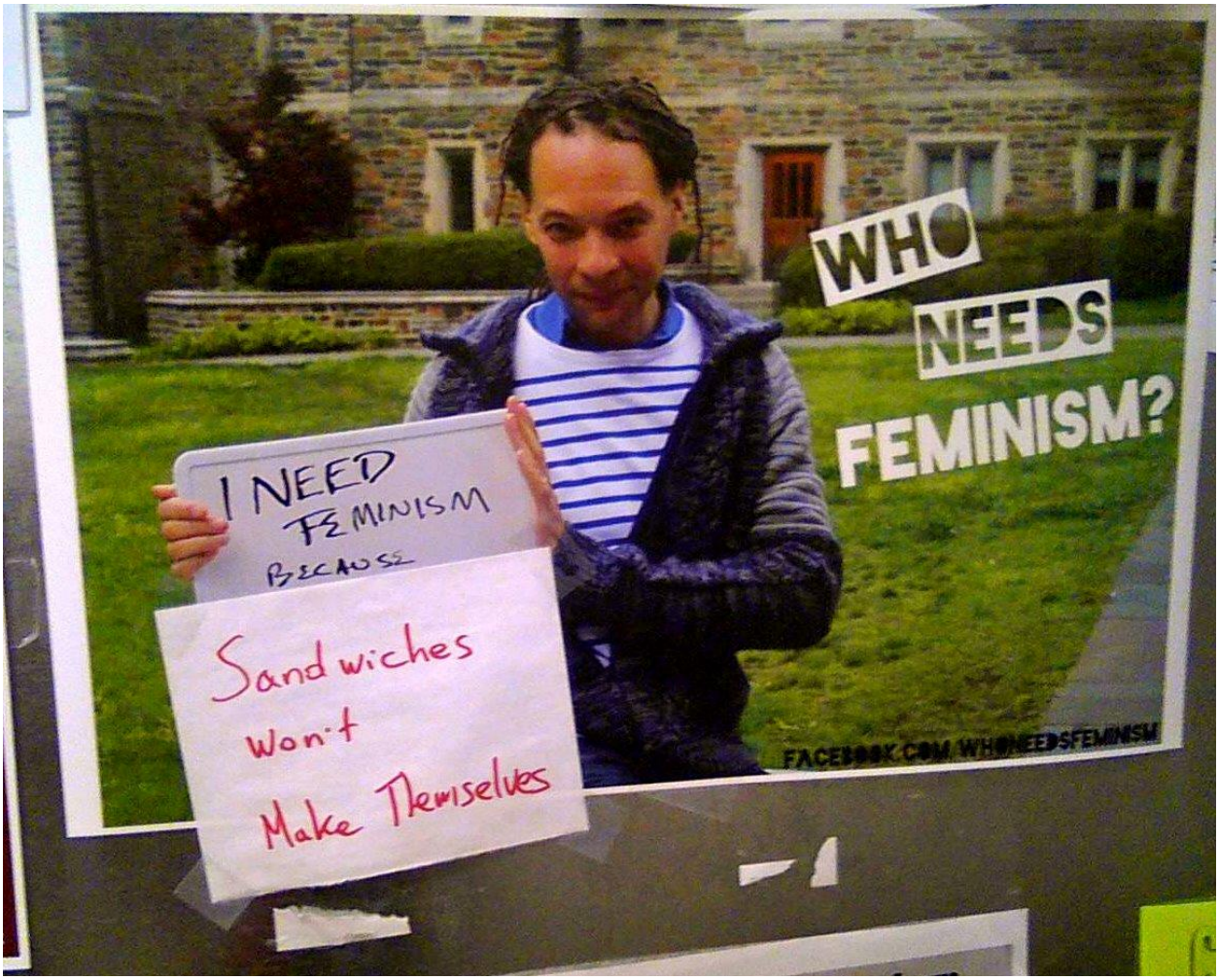

Figure 39 - A photograph of an anti-feminist appropriation of Who Needs Feminism? serves as an occasion for vernacular discourse on r/Feminism.

In addition to responding to appropriated versions of feminist enacted memetic practices, r/Feminism also served as a space to resist anti-feminist enacted memetic practices. For example, on January 10, 2014, user "calderons" posted an "I don't need Feminism" image to r/Feminism. The image, which featured a young women holding a sign claiming she didn't need feminism because she is "an adult" who is "not a target for violence" and "respect[s] men" was meant as an object of ridicule and derision (Figure 40).[396] This interpretation was made obvious by calderons' framing of the communication—supplementing the image with several dismissive comments from other subreddits. User responses mostly echoed the tone of the comments shared

in calderons' original post. As one poster wrote, "So her point is 'Things are fine for me so I don't care about other women'."[397] Another user pointed out the hypocrisy in the image's arguments, writing "I saw it as: I don't need feminism because...holds up sign listing values feminism promotes…"[398] This collective frustration was directed at the perceived self-centeredness of the woman in the image as well as her fundamental misunderstanding of feminism, feminist history, and sexism. In short, this critique makes the image about the individual and her misrepresentation of common knowledge.

Feminist pushback was also directed toward other web communities, with the image standing in for a larger body of practice. A user who recognized the image from another community posted, "I saw this on MensRights. For a group that's about gender equality they spend an awful lot of time trying to put down Feminism."[399] Calderons's original post also cited many users in other subreddits who accused the young woman of creating the image as bait to garner positive feedback from the dominant 18 to 25-year-old white male demographic on Reddit.[400] Although no one calls out the image as fake or photoshopped (which many anti-feminist appropriations were), the critique of authenticity here is similar. By suggesting that the image is bait, the feminists also suggest that the memetic practice that anti-feminists are rallying around is an insincere one. Hence, a delegitimizing dichotomy is constructed. The success of this appropriated enacted memetic practice in anti-feminist communities lacks vernacular authority because the poster is either sincere (but lacking in a sense of the common) or insincere (and simply posting to troll or gain positive feedback on Reddit). This direct appropriation of anti-feminist memes, then, enables feminist users to push back against anti-feminist constructions of vernacular authority by suggesting that they are either out of touch with vernacular knowledge or attempting to leverage institutional affordances to their singular benefit.

Figure 40 - Direct appropriation of an anti-feminist enacted memetic practice enabled space for vernacular discourse on r/Feminism that pushed back against anti-feminist appropriations of Who Needs Feminism?.

These examples from r/Feminism constitute acts of direct appropriation. In acts of direct appropriation, the memetic images remain the same while the practices surrounding them vary, giving rise to different context. In acts of direct appropriation transformation stems from practice. This transformation is less image-based and more discursive, and focusing solely on the memetic images obfuscates the emergent nature of this change. Although there are no alterations in content, form, or stance, the communication event emerges differently due to variations in the surrounding memetic practices.

These examples show how the same logics of memetic creation, variation, and circulation that enabled anti-feminist memetic practices to emerge from feminist memetic practices can also enable further acts of transformation and resistance in other digital spaces. However, this capacity for resistance and transformation via direct appropriation of memetic images was not limited to feminist spaces. Many anti-feminists on Reddit engaged in similar action—directly appropriating Who Needs Feminism? images to enable anti-feminist practices. These practices, like the parallel direct appropriations by feminists, attempted to undercut opposing viewpoints by positioning them as extreme and so contrary to common knowledge as to be worthy of mass ridicule.

The iconic catchphrase spawned by the Who Needs Feminism? campaign has an entire subreddit dedicated to it. Googling "I need feminism because" returns r/INeedFeminismBecause in the top five results, above any web location discussed so far (excepting official sites created by the Who Needs Feminism? campaign). As a result, visitors to r/INeedFeminismBecause could be forgiven for initial confusion over the purpose of the subreddit. Initially, it appears to be a place for users to share and discuss Who Needs Feminism? memes. The front page contains thumbnailed images of people holding signs alongside recent topics such as "INFB [I need feminism because] dress codes are oppressive"[401] or "INFB I was called a feminist bitch."[402] In short, posts on r/INeedFeminismBecause initially look a lot like the entries on the r/Feminism subreddit discussed above.

Reading the comments section of any given post quickly reveals that r/INeedFeminismBecause is not meant for discussion or support. Instead, it is meant to ridicule feminist memetic practice via direct appropriation. The page's FAQ, located in an easily glossed-

over sidebar on the right-hand side of the page, concisely reveals the expressed purpose of the subreddit. It begins by imagining a large group of everyday actors, "We've all seen those absurd, insane, funny, cringe-worthy or just plain sad 'I Need Feminism Because...' photos." Here the moderators identify the phenomenon as not only worthy of ridicule but also placed in opposition to the everyday communicative norms imaged by the phrase "We've all seen…" These images so betray this group's sense of the common that further explanation of *why* they are worthy of ridicule is never articulated. The fact they are "absurd, insane, funny, cringe-worthy or just plain sad" is axiomatic. This positions ridicule as a logical reaction in light of this breach of common sense. And, as the description continues, the problem is reaching epidemic proportions, "A quick Google image search brings up thousands. This sub[reddit] will serve as a showcase for the best of these photos." Here the moderators have identified a problem in vernacular communication and positioned it as in need of immediate action, creating an exigency of sorts. To address this imperfection marked by urgency, they invite other everyday users to resist feminist vernacular speech by appropriating feminist images as objects of ridicule. This description is supplemented with rules like "Real or photoshopped, it doesn't matter," and "Don't post any photos that deal with rape. … Rape culture is fine since it's one of feminism's more hysterical talking points" as well as a list of good websites to find images worthy of community ridicule.[403]

The resulting direct appropriations of feminist enacted memetic practice were surrounded by a mix of misogynistic comedy and anti-feminist discourse. When user ATouchOfTheTism posted a thread titled "INFB it's unfair that I have to make the same choice between career and family that a man does"[404] (Figure 41), other users responded by making similar jokes at the expense of the perceived double-standard represented by the feminist image. These jokes, in turn, led to more serious conversations where users discussed the flaws of feminism.[405] When

another user tried to speak up on behalf of the feminist in the image (by suggesting that giving birth and being socially expected to take care of a child for two years may, in fact, hurt one's career prospects),[406] users like the original poster scoffed, "At least two years? My wife worked up until about two weeks before the birth, was off work for two months, and then went back to work. Two fucking years is a lazy, worthless bitch."[407] Here the target of ridicule extends beyond the subject of the image to not only include the feminist poster but also women in general that don't conform to this user's established worldview. In this way, anti-feminist direct appropriation of enacted memetic practice mirrors similar direct appropriations by feminists (such as several examples from r/Feminism discussed in the previous section). In both cases, the appropriated image serves as a starting point, acting as a synecdoche for a larger oppositional discourse and body of ideas. These acts of direct appropriation enable ridicule of those ideas by suggesting hypocrisy through a contrast to assumed, common knowledge.

Figure 41 - Anti-feminist direct appropriation of Who Needs Feminism? led to both ridicule and serious anti-feminist discussions. Users who posted sincere examples, however, were mocked into silence.

However, unlike the feminist direct appropriations, many users on r/INeedFeminismBecause were confused about the generic expectations for participating in the community. At first blush, the community seemed feminist and users commonly submitted sincere reasons why they needed feminism to the group. When users did so, they were met with not only ridicule for their sentiments but also for their misunderstanding of norms of practice in the community. One such example was even stickied, appearing at the top of the first page, despite repeated requests from users to take it down.[408] Comments in the thread suggested that the post had become so infamous, it had garnered the status of an inside joke in the community. One user even created a thread mocking the prevalence of this phenomenon, writing "INFB I'm too dumb to realize this sub is making fun of me."[409]

These anti-feminist sentiments and actions placed the blame on feminist users for posting in the wrong community and with incorrect expectations of practice. However, because of the nature of direct appropriation,[410] such a mistake hardly seems egregious. Indeed, it was common enough that it itself became cause for parody among community members. This lack of reflection on the part of the community shows just how deeply entrenched their assumptions of truth and common knowledge are. To these users, it is difficult to imagine anyone could post such content seriously, and they mock users for such acts of sincerity. This reinforces the self-evident nature of their claim to ridicule—that feminist views are so abhorrent to common sense that they don't merit discussion, only derision. The implication here is that these direct appropriations of feminist memetic images by anti-feminists participate in a larger practice of group construction and maintenance. The result is an enclave where dissent is dismissed and ridiculed while hegemonic discourse is tautologically reinforced under a constructed veneer of marginalization and vernacular speech.

Appropriating the Memetic Vernacular

The case of Who Needs Feminism? demonstrates how the power of communicating in the memetic vernacular can be transformed and reimagined by users through various acts of appropriation. These appropriations localize existing memetic practices to community norms and technological affordances of specific web locations. Even a single website is likely to contain different communities. As a result, even similar types of appropriation on the same website (such as Reddit) may emerge significantly differently. Because of the networked nature of the Internet, these emergent practices are likely extend beyond the specific community. Such cross-community contact may lead to a breach of implied knowledge and generic expectations, sparking confusion, dismissal, or hostility. Often this disparity in expectations and knowledge is banal; in this case it was not. While not all cases are as charged as Who Needs Feminism?, this chapter suggests that when users' generic expectations for vernacular expression are challenged, they feel compelled to engage in acts that reassert the primacy of their vernacular authority. Such resistive acts frequently engage in appropriative tactics, allowing users to speak back against the memetic vernacular by deploying their own memetic vernacular. The result is a widespread negotiation over control of vernacular discourse and common knowledge.

These acts of appropriation go beyond the memetic images themselves and extend into the realm of memetic practice. This means that memes change as they are appropriated onto different websites and into different web communities on those sites. As a result, even a static image may be transformed simply by being directly appropriated into a new discursive space. This is a fundamental aspect of memetic communication, with creators ceding singular control over an image as soon as it crosses community boundaries and becomes appropriated by other users.

This quotidian process of memetic practice and appropriation functions as part of a larger scheme of action that enables the construction and maintenance of group identity and sense of the common. This same function, however, runs the risk of creating or perpetuating self-reinforcing discursive enclaves. In the case of Who Needs Feminism? this fight over common knowledge is especially problematic because of the frequently deceitful, underhanded, and insincere tactics the anti-feminist side used to construct a sense of vernacular authority and marginalization. While the anti-feminists positioned themselves as pro-discourse and freedom of opinion, they were much more likely to be outright dismissive of feminist rebuttals in favor of their own memetic practices, penchant for ridicule, and constructions of common knowledge. In effect, this anti-feminist discourse is flawed because it fundamentally violates its own central tenet and critique of feminism. This problematic aspect becomes readily apparent when viewing these acts of appropriation through the lens of memetic practice.

In the previous chapters, I demonstrated how communicating using the memetic vernacular may function as a route toward everyday empowerment. In this chapter, I expanded that claim by showing how—when ideas and identities come into conflict—users can appropriate existing memetic practices for new purposes. In the next chapter, I expand on these attempts to leverage vernacular authority by looking at how acts of appropriation by institutional agents attempt to seek empowerment via speaking in the memetic vernacular.

Chapter 5: The Death of Doge: Institutional Appropriations of the Memetic Vernacular

In October 2015, President Barack Obama found himself speaking at the Democratic National Committee Women's Leadership Forum. During the talk, meant to rally his party's base, Obama touched on the often negative rhetoric put forth by the opposing party. "It does make you wonder," Obama said, addressing his audience directly, "why is that Republican politicians are so down on America? Have you noticed that? I mean they are..." Obama paused, briefly considering his words, "they are *gloomy*." Obama paused again and, suppressing a smirk, added "They're like grumpy cat." This reference to the popular Internet meme was met with cheers and applause from his audience. To drive the point home, Obama contorted his face into an exaggerated frown, replicating the popular grumpy cat meme (Figure 42).[411] Cheers and applause from the audience crescendoed as Obama milked the moment for all it was worth. This moment brought an otherwise unremarkable speech into the limelight. Videos of the speech went viral and stories about Obama's appropriation of the memetic vernacular appeared in ABC News, Time, CNN, BBC News, and The Guardian.[412]

Figure 42 - The image that formed the basis for the popular Grumpy Cat meme (left) and President Barack Obama's reference of the meme during a 2015 speech (right).

However, not all institutional attempts to appropriate the memetic vernacular are this successful. In late 2013, Texas state representative Steve Stockman was locked in a tough, uphill

race for the party's 2014 senatorial nomination against incumbent Senator John Cornyn. Looking to gain any edge they could for their candidate, Stockman's team decided to turn to social media. On the morning of Dec. 23, 2013, Stockman's campaign posted a memetic image on Twitter (Figure 43).[413]

Figure 43 - A Stockman congressional campaign image appropriates the popular "doge" meme to attack his opponent. Stockman would ultimately lose the Republican primary, coming in second (behind Cornyn) with 20 percent of the vote.

The image, which represents Cornyn's inner-monologue using a multi-color Comic Sans font, fractured sentence structure, and a simple exclamation of "wow" was accompanied by a tweeted message from the Stockman campaign, "wow. such obamacare funding. oppose ted cruz." The tweet, like the image, was a riff on the popular "doge" Internet meme, written using the same style of speech.

In contrast to the Obama example, Stockman's attempt to appropriate the memetic vernacular failed. The tweet received coverage from many of the same news organizations that would also report on the Obama event in 2015. Coverage of Stockman, however, was decidedly

more negative and focused on the extensive negative reactions by Internet users. Internet users mocked the ad for reeking of a room full of PR professionals trying to help a middle-aged member of the GOP seem hip. These users lamented that their once beloved meme—a large-scale inside joke in many web communities—had been co-opted and ruined by institutional forces. This mainstream institutional appropriation led many to declare "doge" a dead meme. As one blogger for *The Daily Dot* concluded in a post reacting to the Stockman tweet, "RIP, doge. And thank you for your short—but never forgotten—brilliance."[414]

Figure 44 - (left to right) Olympian McKayla Maroney poses with President Barack Obama, the expressions on their faces reference the popular "McKayla is not impressed" meme circulated following the 2012 London Olympics; A sandwich shop uses popular memetic characters "Y U NO guy" and "Trollface" in an advertisement; A doge-inspired stock car, backed by cryptocurrency Dogecoin and Reddit users, competed in a May 4, 2014, NASCAR race in Talladega and placed in the top 20.

The success of Obama and the failure of Stockman represent divergent outcomes of an increasingly prevalent phenomenon: institutional use of Internet memes to seek empowerment through vernacular authority (Figure 44). This trend has become so prevalent that Stockman's ill-advised campaign ad wasn't even the only doge-appropriating advertisement put out by a House Republican *that day* (Figure 45).[415]

Figure 45 - Thomas Massie (R-KY) discusses campaign spending in a tweet that predates Stockman's by only 45 minutes. Massie's conversion of the doge meme to an image macro violates generic expectations and reveals the image's distance from the vernacular practice.

On the surface, these attempts seem quite similar—each involves a politician using a popular pet-based memetic practice to cultivate a sense of vernacular authority in service of making a political argument. But, whereas Barack Obama succeeded in appropriating the memetic vernacular, Stockman and Massie became targets of widespread derision. Why, then, do some institutional attempts to speak in the memetic vernacular fail while others succeed? Why do institutions choose to speak in the vernacular when attempts to do so are so frequently derided by users? What are the limits of vernacular appropriation and empowerment? As Robert Glenn Howard suggests, to answer these questions, we must understand not only how these images seek to speak in the memetic vernacular but also how users speak back.[416]

As my previous chapters demonstrated, vernacular expression and appropriation serve as a route toward empowerment. By speaking in the memetic vernacular, everyday users are empowered to construct vernacular identities, authority, and marginalization—even when

upholding institutional knowledge or hegemonic ideas. By appropriating the memetic vernacular, users adapt genres of vernacular expression and redeploy them to suit their own community norms and identities. Whether speaking in or appropriating the memetic vernacular, these communication events demonstrate that vernacular expression—despite its potential to assert itself (and seek empowerment) against institutions—very often finds itself leveraged against other everyday users. Such interactions thrive under a veneer of institutional marginalization while also imagining an institutional positionality for those in opposition to their sense of the common. In short, thus far this study been concerned with vernacular interactions between everyday users and has suggested the potential for empowerment in those interactions. However, as the examples which began this chapter suggest, the perceived power of speaking in the memetic vernacular is alluring not only to everyday users but also to institutions themselves.

In this chapter, I seek to understand how institutions attempt to gain empowerment by appropriating the memetic vernacular and how users respond to such attempts. As Howard notes in his study of the official Kerry/Edwards campaign blog, institutional attempts to leverage vernacular practice create a sense of vernacular/institutional hybridity and open those institutions to vernacular criticism.[417] I extend this view by arguing that the problem for institutions is that their attempts to leverage the memetic vernacular frequently express a contradictory sense of hybridity—neither fully institutional nor fully vernacular, but trying to be both. This understanding illuminates why some institutional appropriations of the memetic vernacular are more effective at constructing vernacular authority than others. As these conflicting qualities emerge in the memetic communication, they create a breach in users' generic expectation for vernacular memetic practice. This breach of generic expectations hails users to not only reassert their primacy over vernacular communication, but also to engage in acts that critique institutional

authority in order to reconcile the vernacular/institutional contradiction with which they are presented.

To make this case, I begin by outlining a brief history of doge and its ascent as a popular memetic form. Establishing that doge-based advertising goes well beyond a few campaign ads on Twitter, I then move to an analysis of a Facebook post made by the United States Department of Health and Human Services that used doge to advertise HealthCare.gov. Unlike the Stockman and Massie ads (which missed the mark significantly), the doge image posted by Health and Human Services initially appears as a much more typical example of the memetic practice. However, it still met with harsh scrutiny from users. Even though the institution correctly copied the form, they were unable to fully commit to the sense of alterity that enables vernacular practice. The resulting contradictory sense of hybridity created a breach in user expectations that hailed users to reassert their primacy over vernacular communication—both by challenging the institution's construction of vernacular authority and by reaffirming their own vernacular authority through performances of vernacular knowledge. It also created perceived cracks in Health and Human Services's institutional authority, hailing users to engage in everyday acts of institutional critique. Ultimately, the failure of this communication event offers valuable insight into vernacular discourse that goes beyond Obama, Stockman, and doge. Whereas institutional messages thrive on centralized control and careful construction, the memetic vernacular succeeds by ceding control to a nebulous digital crowd. These two goals are at odds with each other, demonstrating that the memetic vernacular may be good for creating awareness or publicity but at the cost of centralized control and specific messages.

A Brief History of Doge

The doge meme arose from the combination of several unrelated digital trends. When Japanese schoolteacher Atsuko Sato adopted a shiba inu puppy in 2008, she named it Kabosu. Like many pet owners, Sato took pictures of her dog and two cats and posted them to social media. In February of 2010, Sato posted several images of Kabosu on her blog.[418] Digital passersby found the image and delighted in the animal's unique apprehensive expression. Some of Sato's photos started going viral. By the following October, these photos made it to Reddit, where one amused user shared a picture of Kabosu in a thread titled "LMBO[419] LOOK @ THIS FUKKIN DOGE" (Figure 46).[420]

Figure 46 - Images of Kabosu would later serve as the basis for the doge meme.

Using the word "doge" to refer to a dog is frequently traced back to a popular web-based flash cartoon called "Homestar Runner."[421] In a June 2005 episode of the series, one of the main

characters refers to another as his "d-o-g-e," (misspelling the word "dog").[422] In the intervening years, the term gained traction in a number of niche parts of the web as a way to refer to dogs. A 2012 blog post on the Daily Doge Tumblr, for example, pays homage to text-based videogames of the late '80s by telling users they have encountered a doge, asking them for their next action ("PET DOGE" "SNUGGLE DOGE" or "FEED DOGE"), and telling them that "THE DOGE IS PLEASED" (Figure 47).[423] Although the term had been used on several websites over the last several years, the popularity of this post led to a sharp increase and proliferation of the word "doge" starting in the summer of 2012 and continuing into 2013. Both the post and the odd terminology became memes in their own rights on Tumblr, with many users creating their own versions of this post or referring to a dog as "doge". The latter practice was eventually introduced and more widely appropriated into other web communities, such as 4Chan and Reddit.

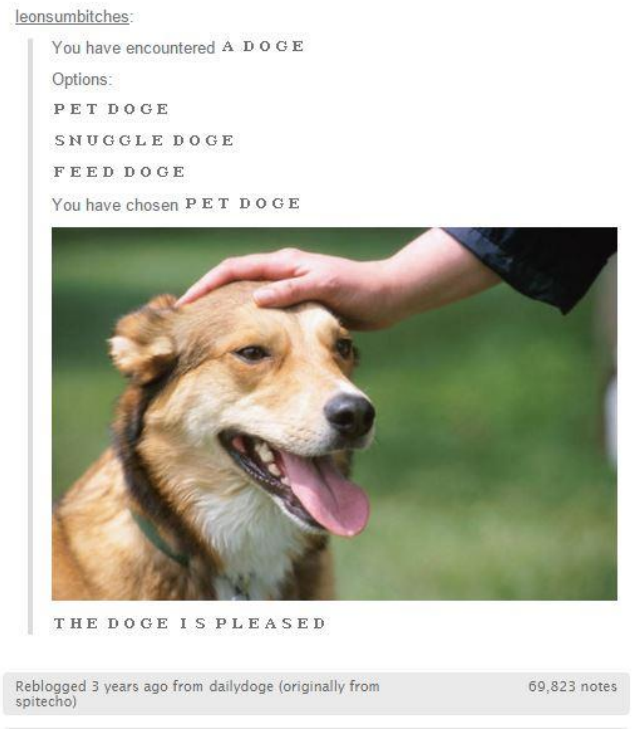

Figure 47 - The Daily Dog Tumblr spreads the term "doge" for dogs.

Around the same time the word "doge" was seeing a surge of popularity in the summer of 2012, another Tumblr user started a blog called "Shiba Confessions."[424] This Tumblr blog placed text (using colorful Comic Sans font) over the image of a dog, meant to represent the animal's internal monologue. Early examples included a shiba inu wearing shutter shades with the caption "2 shiba 4 u," a shiba inu sniffing grass thinking "haha… 720 smoke quality," and a shiba inu wearing a fedora and thinking about men's rights. This memetic practice developed in parallel to the proliferation of the word doge and users referred to these inner-monologue captions not as "doge" but as "shibe." The blog proved popular and several months later the Shiba Confession blog added a Comic Sans internal monologue to one of the viral photographs of Kabosu, creating what would become the quintessential "doge" image (Figure 48).[425]

Figure 48 - The Shiba Confessions blog brings together several digital trends, inadvertently creating the first doge meme image.

The Kabosu image went viral in a way that none of its predecessors had. Although Tumblr users had been referring to it as "shibe," when the practice was appropriated by other

web communities, users began to use the more widespread "doge" to refer to the Shiba Confessions/Kabosu image and its derivatives. Hence, through a combination of several digital vernacular practices, the doge meme was born.

The Shiba Confessions/Kabosu image codified many of the expectations for this memetic practice. The creation of a doge meme involves adding text to a picture of a shiba inu dog. This text represents the dog's internal monologue and is almost always written in the Comic Sans font and generally displayed in multiple colors. The text is also written in a specific dialect known as "doge speak". Doge speak generally involves short phrases that are grammatically dubious, such as "much fear," "very fashion" and "so scare."[426] Forms of Internet shorthand (i.e., writing "plz" instead of "please") are also common. These images almost always include the character's trademark exclamation—"Wow." The image itself has more leeway in performance, necessitating only being a picture of a dog—ideally a shiba inu making an interesting expression or in an interesting situation. Because of these generic expectations being related more to text than image, users are often able to engage in this memetic practice without actually using any images, instead choosing to communicate in "doge speak" (much like lolcats and lolspeak[427] before it).

The memetic practice expanded beyond Tumblr throughout the middle of 2013. It found significant traction on 4Chan, which, in turn, used the image to raid[428] Reddit's r/murica subforum. Following this late August 2013 raid, the popularity of doge continued to rise on Reddit, ultimately exposing many more casual Internet users to the memetic practice. Google search trends also show a significant uptick of doge-related searches starting in the late summer and early fall of 2013. Popular meme-database Know Your Meme would go on to vote Doge as their top meme of 2013.[429] The rise of doge was so meteoric that in only a few months, by the

winter of 2013, everybody from politicians, to corporations, to campus organizations, to the United States government were trying to use doge as a way to gain publicity.

The Stockman and Massie campaigns are high-profile examples of institutional meme doge use, but they are far from the only ones. In early 2014, a London-based business ran a doge-based advertisement in The Guardian, a national newspaper.[430] Local restaurants used it in their advertisements (Figure 49).[431] In June 2014, the official Twitter account for the Republican National Committee tweeted an image mocking Bill and Hillary Clinton using doge speak.[432]

In the sections that follow, I analyze one particularly rich example of doge-based advertising in order to illustrate the failure of institutional agents to appropriate the memetic vernacular. This much-chagrined attempt by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to use doge to advertise Healthcare.gov provides valuable insight into not only how institutions may attempt (and fail) to appropriate vernacular speech but also how the memetic vernacular enables users to speak back against such attempts at institutional appropriation.

Figure 49 - Campus organizations (left) and local restaurants (right) demonstrate the surge in popularity of doge-based advertising. Photos by Nicky Kurtzweil.

HealthCare.doge

Nearly two months after the massive memetic missteps of the Massie and Stockman campaigns, the United States Department of Health and Human Services turned to doge to advertise HealthCare.gov. On February 20, 2014, the organization posted an image to their Facebook page that used the doge meme to advertise enrolling for health coverage under the Affordable Care Act (Figure 50).[433] The image garnered over 6,000 shares, over 2,000 likes (although it is unclear how many of these were ironic), and over 1,000 comments. Although it was neither the first nor the last high-profile example of attempts by institutions to appropriate the memetic vernacular (as well as doge), the results were typical, with many users responding negatively to Health and Human Services's appeal.

Figure 50 - The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services advertises for HealthCare.gov by posting its own variation of the doge meme to its Facebook page.

Although it would be easy to simply write that this appeal failed because the institutional tried to appropriate the vernacular, such a view elides the complex and hybrid relationship between institutional and vernacular in the digital age. To fully understand this appeal and the many responses to it, we must remember that the vernacular is not based in agent or identity, but in practice. It would be easy to summarily dismiss this case (and others like it) as a failure because of the identities of the agents involved and say that this communication failed because

an institution tried to use vernacular speech. This may be partially true, but such a view problematically conflates vernacularity with identity. Remembering, however, that the vernacular is not a material identity and, instead, a way of expressing institutional alterity that emerges in practice,[434] suggests that the truth of the matter is more complex than such a facile conclusion.

This perspective asks us to consider two main facets in our observation of the ways in which vernacularity may be constructed and/or rebuked. First, we must consider how the institution is attempting to appeal by appropriating the memetic vernacular. Second, we must look at how users respond to such attempts at appropriating the memetic vernacular. The case of doge and HealthCare.gov helps us understand both of these major facets, and a critical reading of both in the sections that follow will help us understand not only this specific case, but also why the Stockman and Massie ads failed while appropriation of the memetic vernacular by President Barack Obama found significant traction.

Advertising in the Memetic Vernacular

In many ways, the image posted to Facebook by Health and Human Services accurately replicates and adheres to the form of a typical a doge meme. Unlike the Stockman image, a picture of a cute shiba inu puppy is used for the background. Unlike the Massie image, colorful Comic Sans text is used to convey the dog's internal monologue. The messages are kept simple, with doge's trademark "wow" appearing in large text on the top left side of the image. The image post is accompanied by a short hashtag (#GetCovered) and the url for HealthCare.gov. Although seemingly insignificant details, these small choices tap into an existing matrix of knowledge much more effectively than many other institutional attempts at appropriating the memetic vernacular. Including these elements of memetic practice displays a sort of competency which

serves to tap into an ongoing vernacular practice to create a sense of vernacular authority. In addition to using a meme, several other choices (such as adding a hashtag or sharing via Facebook) strive to show awareness of vernacular digital practices, inviting users to aid in the construction of crowdsourced authority for this communication.

However, while the form of this image adheres to the generic conventions for this memetic practice, the message conveyed by the text frustrates this communication's construction of vernacular authority. The text overlaying the image combines doge-speak with advertising buzzwords, creating sentiments like "Very benefits" and "Much affordable." With the exception of doge's trademark "Wow", all these short phrases involve directing people to HealthCare.gov. The failure here is that this communication comes off as prescriptive, not interactive. It doesn't hail users to create their own versions or collaborate (unlike, say, Unpopular Opinion Puffin which asked other users to share their own opinions). It encourages sharing, but only exactly as it is. It also hails a different form of action from users, one that is in service to the institution. More successful institutional attempts at appropriating the memetic vernacular tend to avoid this problem by acknowledging the meme in a more tongue-in-cheek fashion instead of using the meme to directly ask for institutional action or engagement. The result is that this communication mixes institutional authority (and a call for institutional action) with an appeal to vernacular authority and crowdsourced circulation, undercutting both forms of authority. In other words, the form of the meme is at odds with the message, and the message is at odds with itself.

In this image, we see form and content working together to appeal to vernacular authority, and, at the same time, we also see how that appeal confounds itself. If invoking separation from the institutional is what defines the vernacular, then this communication emerges in hybridity, deeply at odds with itself. Hence, an unreconciled tension between vernacular and

institutional exists in this image. In responding to it, users—by and large—pick up on this tension. As one user put it, "this makes no sense with doge meme. There is not even relation from the pic and text."[435] It is the reconciliation and navigation of this contradiction between vernacular and institutional that users seek to navigate in their responses.

Vernacular Responses to Institutional Appropriation

For many users, this contradiction served as an opportunity to reject the institution's authority (both institutional and vernacular). Users accomplished this by engaging in one of three related strategies: 1) challenging the institution's construction of vernacular authority; 2) performing vernacular knowledge (thereby reinforcing their own sense of vernacular authority as superior to that of the institution); and 3) engaging in acts of institutional critique (challenging the organization's institutional authority and knowledge). Although the specific tactics varied by user, most responses tended to emerge from some combination of these three major strategies. As I explore each of these strategies in the sections that follow, please keep in mind that they are neither discrete factors, idiosyncratic to this case, nor a checklist. Instead, understanding how users mobilize ideas like authority, knowledge, and critique will offer further insight into everyday constructions and rejections of vernacular discourse online.

Challenging Vernacular Authority

The form of the Health and Human Services doge image was so typical that, to some users, its institutional roots weren't readily apparent. Many users who stumbled across the image because it popped up in their Facebook news feed initially thought the image was a vernacular joke meant to humorously mock the very institution that, in reality, had been the one to post it. One user discussed this realization, expressing how amusement quickly gave way to disappointment:

> So, when this first popped up in my feed, I laughed because I thought it was a picture making fun of healthcare.gov.
>
> Then I realized it was made to support healthcare.gov, by my own government.
>
> Now I am just sad.[436]

Responses and comments by other users suggest this was not an isolated reaction to the image. Such reactions denote a shift in decoding the image based on changing perceptions of vernacularity. Initially, these users recognize the image as belonging to a vernacular memetic practice with which they are familiar. As a result, they make certain assumptions that tacitly support the image's vernacular authority. Under this interpretation, users appreciate the image because of its alterity—it works as an effective piece of humor because it mocks institutions as well as institutional attempts to appropriate the memetic vernacular. Here the hybrid institutional/vernacular contradiction presented by the image is reconciled into a punchline that is almost antithetical to Health and Human Services's intent.

As users came to understanding the image as it was intended—as an advertisement for HealthCare.gov—this sense of alterity shifted, creating the occasion for users to challenge these constructions of vernacular authority. As an advertisement, the image no longer represents a playful self-awareness nor a vernacular critique of the state. The contradiction between vernacular and institutional is revealed not as part of a joke but as an attempt by the institution to appeal via a constructed sense of alterity using the memetic vernacular. Hence, instead of being in on the joke, Health and Human Services *becomes* the joke. This ridicule represents an awareness among users that generic expectations for engaging with the memetic vernacular have been violated. Much of the resulting discourse attempts to navigate this violation and reclaim vernacular authority from institutional agents. In other words, moments where vernacular and

institutional come together in messy ways serve as occasions that hail users to reassert their primacy over vernacular authority. In this case, users challenged the attempts of the institution to appropriate the memetic vernacular by disputing institutional efforts to construct a sense of vernacular authority.

Many users accused Health and Human Services's attempt at appropriating the memetic vernacular as trying (and failing) to be "hip." This post may demonstrate an awareness of vernacular practice, but it lacks an understanding of it. As one user put his critique, "doge is fun when it's used correctly. When pages try to use memes like this, however, it comes off the same way as parents trying to 'be hip' towards their kids."[437] This sentiment is quick to distance the greater vernacular memetic practice from this specific instance, suggesting that doge still has merit and authenticity, even if this specific communication does not. The reason that this communication isn't used "correctly" is never expressly stated, but the implication of the adult/child metaphor suggests it is due to a mix of identity and usage. In other words, Health and Human Services may be using a vernacular form (and doing so somewhat correctly), but the way in which it uses the memetic vernacular comes off as more referential than authentic. Such a view suggests that although this communication strives to create a sense of vernacular authority, that authority is more of a mirror than it is the real thing. Differentiating this as a facsimile allows users to reject institutional appeals to vernacular authority while still maintaining authority and value for the greater vernacular memetic practice.

Whereas some users rejected this institutional appeal as a clumsy attempt to leverage vernacular authority, others challenged it as an intentionally constructed attempt at deception by the state—likening this institutional use of vernacular authority to a form of propaganda. In this view, the institutional appropriation of the memetic vernacular is no mere accident or

miscalculation; instead, it represents a calculated and purposeful attempt at deceit via misrepresentation. One of the strongest proponents of this view put it this way:

> **William Stone III**: Believe it or not, there were MEETINGS about these things. The propagandists got their best people: they call them Marketing, Graphic Artists, and Management. They're just propagandists. […] They went back and forth on the crappy color scheme. They argued about the Comic Sans font. There were probably emotional battles about what dog to use. […] All told, this mess probably took 500 man-hours and $50K to produce.[438]

Although this comment ends in what is likely exasperated hyperbole, it reveals common duality in the "propaganda" comments. Although this communication is suggested to result from calculated inauthenticity, these users still recognize it as a clumsy attempt at vernacular speech. Much like the "trying to be hip" critique, these users identify a gap between intention and effect—although the former is clearly calculated, the result fails to spark the desired reaction.

This comment is emblematic of a frequent critique levied by dozens of other users, suggesting the institution has invested significant time and resources on constructing a sense of vernacular authority. Instead of emerging naturally (as it would from everyday speech), the institution is said to have expended large amounts of its own power and resources (conducting meeting, hiring marketers) to make this attempt at vernacular speech possible. Here, users position this communication as coming from an institutional chimera—the result of focus groups, and marketing meetings, and notes from management. The resulting communication is positioned as "propaganda" because it attempts to leverage emotional ties and goodwill toward a popular memetic form in order to lower argumentative scrutiny and re-channel that emotional appeal toward institutional action on behalf of the state. The resulting vernacular speech is

positioned as sounding unnatural and insincere. Despite the significant institutional resources invested, the resulting communication is perceived as little more than a simulacrum of authentic vernacular discourse. What these users are suggesting is that in creating this "propaganda" Health and Human Services get the form right, but they miss the heart. In effect, the ways in which users decried this communication as "propaganda" are very similar to the challenges to vernacular authority levied by the "trying to be hip" group. Both sets of users are challenging this institutional attempt to appropriate the memetic vernacular by suggesting that even though Health and Human Services may get the memetic form right, this communication fails because it lacks a deeper or more genuine understanding of the memetic practice.

While most users denied Health and Human Services the vernacular authority it sought, several users challenged the institution to follow-through on its appeals to vernacularity and called on it to prove its sincerity by embracing wider vernacular practice. The implication is that vernacular authority is available to the institution, but this communication was insufficient to garner it. Many users, for example, challenged the institution to continue building its vernacular authority by accepting a doge-based cryptocurrency as payment known as dogecoin.

> **Andrew Piper**: Thanks, US government, you have completely ruined Doge for me. Doge would never stand for this kind of statist propaganda. There's a reason they're called DogeCoins and not Dollars.[439]
>
> **Spencer Mead**: The only way I would EVER get Obamacare is if Dogecoin is a method of payment.[440]
>
> **Brendan Tatman**: I hope this means you'll accept Dogecoin.
>
> But I know you won't. Scumbags.[441]
>
> **Cal Filkin**: Can I pay for healthcare in dogecoin?[442]

By suggesting that the United States government could attain vernacular authority by accepting an established, user-created digital currency, these claims (made with varying levels of sincerity) enact a double-bind scenario that redirects the impetus for further action back on the institution. Either the institution ignores this suggestion, proving correct the assertions that they were merely appropriating (instead of engaging with) vernacular authority for short-term gains, or the institution engages further with the vernacular in a more comprehensive way that threatens its own institutional authority. This rhetorically constructs a situation in which these users remain in a position to deny Health and Human Services vernacular authority—either the organization admits defeat or it continues to play while lacking its home field advantage.

More pertinently, when viewed in such a light, a pattern begins to emerge. The dogecoin enthusiasts, as well as those users making the "propaganda" or "un-hip" comments, are all reasserting their primacy over vernacular speech by undercutting the attempts of the institution to establish a sense of vernacular authority. To do this, users repeatedly suggest that the institution has failed to understand the vernacular because it has seen only the trees and not the forest. The specific nature of the challenge may vary by individual, but a sense by which the institution lacks vernacular authority because it confuses vernacular artifact for vernacular practice remains consistent across all efforts. These challenges to the institution's vernacular authority suggest that institutions *can* successfully use the memetic vernacular, but they need to demonstrate a more comprehensive awareness of memetic practice—an understanding that vernacularity emerges from ongoing and communal (not singular) action.

Performing Vernacular Knowledge

While some users handled this contradiction between vernacular and institutional speech by challenging the institution's claims to vernacular authority, others responded with

performances of their own vernacular knowledge. These performances do more than repeat irreverent memes or bemoan the death of doge, they reinforce a sense of shared identity and knowledge that the institutional attempt at appropriation has challenged. Much like users that rejected Unpopular Opinion Puffin, the comments that perform vernacular knowledge suggest that users not only speak the same memetic language, they do so with more eloquence and skill than Health and Human Services could dream of. In other words, if the previous section was about users deconstructing an institutional attempt at creating vernacular authority, this section is about users responding to that attempt by reinforcing their own sense of vernacular authority.

Many of the initial responses to Health and Human services bemoaned that the institution's appropriation of the memetic vernacular had rendered doge a dead meme.

> **Meg McLain:** how long will it take for you to realize this was a terrible idea, person in charge of US Health facebook page? the healthcare plan is bad enough without having to ruin perfectly good memes in the process.[443]
>
> **Adam Wong:** You just killed doge, in a similar manner to how you killed many people's health insurance plans.[444]
>
> **Emi Kuc:** rip doge[445]
>
> **Wyatt Alan Swezea:** i liked the doge. but now it's dead. thanks obama[446]

To these users, this instance of institutional appropriation has destroyed any future potential for doge as vernacular expression. In this view, the Health and Human Services post (as well as other recent attempts at using doge for viral advertisement) not only failed to provide the institution with the vernacular authority it sought but also rattled expectations of vernacularity users held for engaging in the larger memetic practice. Whereas the practice had been seen as a

legitimate form of vernacular expression, users saw this moment of institutional appropriation as effectively the death of the doge meme.

Other users, however, were adamant that this moment changed nothing—doge was dead long before this incident. When user Griffin Greenberg commented that "Rarely do you get to actually pinpoint the moment when something stops being funny, but now is that moment for doge."[447] several other users were quick to point out that the memetic practice was already well past its prime.

> **Douglas Warren Peer:** it stopped being funny like almost a year ago
>
> **John Davis:** Douglas, Doge wasn't even a meme in its current form a year ago.
>
> **Oni Deus:** You know a meme is dead when it starts being picked up for viral marketing campaigns... well, that and Doge is so 2014…
>
> **Matt Dougherty:** Doge died when it was born 2 and a half years ago[448]

Unlike the "dead" posts (which saw this moment as the pivot point in doge's lifespan), these "outdated" posts suggest that the meme's pivot point was much earlier. In fact, users disagree on exactly how much earlier the meme started to fade, positing earlier and earlier dates. This act of deliberative hipsterism serves as an occasion for these users to establish that they were aware of the meme before it garnered mainstream popularity (and, subsequently, institutional attention). In effect, an institution like Health and Human Services was only able to find and appropriate doge because the meme had long-since surged past an implied saturation point. This mainstream popularity threatens the cool factor of memetic practice and, as a result is positioned in opposition to vernacular authority.

This disparity on doge's expiration date represents a struggle between users trying to outdo each other in deploying their knowledge of vernacular memetic practice. Hence, these

arguments serve as moments in which users rhetorically reassert their primacy over vernacular authority. Take the following exchange for example:

> **Reed Langer:** once a 4chan joke becomes popular it immediately stops being funny
>
> **Adam Tuck:** ^Doge was originally a tumblr meme.
>
> **Joseph Jeanes:** No, Adam. All Tumblr stuff is either made up or comes from 4chan.
>
> **Stuart Lewis:** yeah but doge actually originated from Tumblr[449]

Here four users are arguing as part of a larger comment chain. Each is invested in correcting another user as to the exact origin of doge. Such arguments regarding ideas like origin and evolution of the memetic practice were common responses to the Health and Human Services image. Strictly speaking, because of the confluent origin noted previously, none of these users are exactly right or wrong, but the exact truth here is secondary to what these performances are doing. These moments serve less as critiques of the institution and more as occasions for users to perform their competency and understanding of the memetic vernacular. In the exchange above, for instance, each user is invested in showing the practice originated from a specific web community (likely one they are invested in). Such a defense suggests that they are reasserting control of the meme as belonging to their community.[450] In such acts of performance, these users reject the institution through assertions of vernacular knowledge that establish both legitimacy and superiority for their own sense of vernacular authority over the institution's.

Such performances of vernacular knowledge frequently invoked the memetic vernacular itself to assert vernacular authority and reject Health and Human Services. For many users, this meant reappropriating doge speak back against the institution, writing things like "Such failure. Much desperation. Very cognitive dissonance. Wow."[451] Other users responded to Health and Human Services by referencing other memetic practices, sarcastically thanking Barack Obama,

commenting that they no longer wanted to live on this planet, or claiming that this post was so bad it had given them cancer. Several users peppered their comments with memetic language (like ermagherd speech) or terminology (anon, kek, dank, m8) that displayed an ongoing knowledge of a larger body of vernacular practice. Such tactics redirect memetic vernacular back against the institution, reasserting the sense of alterity missing from Health and Human Services's attempt. These performances of the memetic vernacular build ethos into this act of rejection, establishing a sense of vernacular knowledge and credibility by which users are enabled to dismiss Health and Human Services as less knowledgeable and less authentic. This creates a rhetoric distinction that allows these users to discount this attempt at using doge as too institutional while still reaffirming the vernacular legitimacy of the larger body of memetic practice.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the same mechanisms that enable the memetic vernacular also enable appropriating it as a form of resistance. Here users engage in such acts of appropriation by displaying their knowledge and competency with vernacular memetic practice. By launching these critiques through displays of vernacular knowledge, these users are hailing the fundamentally crowdsourced nature of memetic practice which the Health and Human Services image ignores and reasserting their control over vernacular speech. Whether arguing over the origin of the memetic practice or invoking the memetic practice to resist the attempt at institutional appropriation, these performances of vernacular knowledge enable users to resist Health and Human Services's appeal by reasserting and reaffirming their primacy over vernacular authority.

Engaging in Institutional Critique

While the unresolved tension between vernacular and institutional in Health and Human Services's post caused many users to respond with challenges or defenses of vernacular authority, it also exposed cracks in the organization's institutional authority. Many users perceived this communicative event as an indication that the institution's authority was not functioning as it should. If the government's institutional authority was strong, users suggested, it wouldn't be trying to appropriate vernacular authority. One user put it more bluntly, writing, "This is the least professional thing I have ever seen."[452] In this way, Health and Human Services's attempt to leverage the memetic vernacular served not only as an opening for users to engage with ideas of vernacular authority but also as an invitation for users to engage in critiques of institutional authority. These responses illustrate how institutional attempts to leverage the memetic vernacular can serve as openings for users to engage in broader forms of institutional critique.

It is important to realize here that even though there is ostensibly a specific institution behind this communication (Health and Human Services), user responses tend to see "institution" as a more malleable concept. In other words, the Department of Health and Human Services (as well as their Facebook post) frequently acts as an institutional synecdoche, representing many broader institutions and ideas, such as the United States government, bureaucracy, the Obama administration, advertisers, and major political parties. As a result, this breach of generic expectations for vernacular practice hailed users from across the political spectrum to express their grievances with institutional authority.

Much like the vernacular critiques discussed previously, the resulting institutional critiques built their credibility by challenging institutional authority and performing institutional

knowledge. One user, for example, began her critique by establishing her experience speaking on behalf of institutions, "Being in marketing myself, I must ask the obvious. Is this meme designed to tell me that only the young (as pictured by the puppy) and the extremely uneducated and moronic are signing up for government health care?"[453] Another user responded by suggesting they owned partial copyright of doge, and—in a lengthy post that took an formal legal tone—he demanded that the Internet Service Provider take down this image for violation of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act.[454] Although using different tactics, both comments seek to critique institutional authority by superseding it. In the first comment, the user draws on her experience in institutional communication to suggest the inefficaciousness of Health and Human Services's post. In the second comment, the user redirects power back at the institution by establishing a legal identity as copyright holder and suggesting the institution has violated its own laws and authority. By making these comments, users seek to out-institution the institution, like an adult talking down to a child. To these users, appropriating the memetic vernacular has placed the institution in a position of easy subordination, opening it to critique via lecturing (in the former case) and ridicule (in the latter).

This effect was so prevalent that even users lacking familiarity with doge (or memetic practice in general) were still hailed by this image to engage in institutional critique. As one user wrote, "The inability to use proper intelligible English sums up our current government and administration as a whole."[455] This comment identifies the image's form as vernacular (it does not look or read like a typical institutionally produced communication), but this user's critique of doge speak suggests that she does not seem to understand the underlying memetic practice. However, despite not fully understanding the memetic practice, this user still reacts to the vernacular hybridity of the image by challenging the authority of the institution. Here memetic

speech serves as an entry point to discussing the flaws of the institution. This user begins with the premise that the institution should serve as vanguard for proper English (embracing neither colloquial nor vernacular speech). Its dysfunctional "inability" to do so illustrates its inability to effectively use its authority to maintain the linguistic status quo. Such inability and incompetence is then more broadly positioned as defining the current government and administration—allowing this user to offer a critique based not on failing to be vernacular but on failing to uphold a sense of institutional authority.

For many other users who responded to this image by engaging in acts of institutional critique, the image, memetic practice, or violation of generic expectations seemed irrelevant. A significant number of responses to the doge image just entailed individuals who wanted to express their displeasure with the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare"). Although it may be tempting to lump such individuals in the same category as people who comment on news articles without reading them, these institutional critiques are not random, and to say they have no relation to the memetic vernacular would be a mistake. The relation of such anti-ACA and anti-Obama sentiments to the original post suggest that the image had at least some agenda-setting effect, even if users don't always engage with it (or its message) directly. It was also successful in creating political conversations and debates in normally non-political social media spaces, even if the tone of those debates varied significantly from what Health and Human Services originally intended. Regardless of Health and Human Services's original intention, these critiques emerged in response to a memetic image—even when only tangentially related or when mediated through the comments of others. In short, the key lesson from these institutional critiques mirrors the lessons from not only the preceding sections but also the preceding

chapters: Internet memes are good for circulating awareness and publicity but poor at retaining specificity and intention.

Institutional Appropriations of the Memetic Vernacular

This case illustrates the difficulties institutions face in appropriating the memetic vernacular. Although Health and Human Services accurately mimicked the form of the meme, the institutionality of their message revealed the image as apart from the greater vernacular practice. And, whereas advertising thrives on the circulation of messages, the memetic vernacular is about the circulation of practice. As a result of crossing institutional messages with vernacular practice, users' generic expectations were breached. This resulted in a sense of hybridity that made the image appear uncanny. This breach hailed users to respond in ways that reasserted their own authority while also diminishing the authority of the institution.

The failures of this specific case also shed light on the failures and successes of other attempts by institutions to speak in the memetic vernacular. In light of Health and Human Services, we can understand the failures of both Stockman and Massie as emerging from a similar sense of contradictory hybridity, creating a breach and hailing a vernacular response. Like Health and Human Services, both candidates used the memetic vernacular as a mode of one-to-many communication meant to convey institutional messages. Already at odds with user expectations for communicating in the memetic vernacular, both Stockman and Massie also violated expectations for the form of the meme. Stockman used the wrong image and Massie used the wrong font; both failed to display a basic familiarity with memetic practice in form and message. The breach in these cases is larger and the failure at appropriation is more egregious. This suggests why the Stockman and Massie examples may have received more widespread derision across the web compared to the more localized response to Health and Human Services.

Understanding negative user reactions to memetic appropriation as a result hailed by unresolved perceptions of institutional/vernacular hybridity suggests two related implications for institutional and vernacular speech. First, as Howard reminds us, vernacular authority emerges in discourse.[456] We saw this aspect in previous chapters, when attempts to speak in the memetic vernacular by everyday individuals were criticized by other users for failing to adequately construct a sense of vernacular authority or for being too institutionally aligned. Institutional attempts at vernacular speech expose themselves to these same dynamics. Institutions have difficulty overcoming these dynamics because their own institutional practices often necessitate that more markers of their institutionality are present in their communications.

This difficulty for institutions to give up their institutionality when speaking in the vernacular brings us to our second major implication: communicating in the memetic vernacular is good for creating awareness but bad for specific messages. Since institutional messages thrive on centralized control and careful construction, institutional agents are often reticent to embrace the crowdsourced nature of the memetic vernacular. By sharing control with everyday users—as is necessary when engaging with a memetic practice—much of the power involved is diffused through networks. And if the institutional attempt is not perceived as authentic enough,[457] the diffuse process that enables the memetic vernacular may also enable users to channel the power of the memetic vernacular back against the institution itself. As a result, successful attempts by institutions to appropriate the memetic vernacular tend to be referential and concerned with affect; contentious attempts tend to encourage specific action in service of the institution. The former engages *with* the practice, the latter attempts to appropriate it for institutional goals.

Therefore, from the case of these institutional appropriations of doge, we can understand the memetic vernacular as a way for both everyday users and institutional agents to pursue

empowerment via constructions of vernacular authority and common knowledge. Because of the crowdsourced nature of memetic practice, constructions of vernacular authority will always emerge in conversation (and contention) with the aggregated violation of a larger, more nebulous group. Individual volition is locked in a perpetual negotiation with practice. As a result, Internet memes are more than simple artifacts, they are deceptively complicated practices. In the conclusion that follows, I offer a synthesis and summary of these findings in order to understand the conditions under which we may see this process as emancipatory as well as the conditions through which the memetic vernacular may simply serve to reproduce hegemony.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Demystifying "Meme Magic"

On November 8, 2016, the United States of America elected Donald J. Trump as its 45th President. Like many Americans, I was caught off-guard by this turn of events. Although Trump's base felt vindicated, nearly all pre-election forecasts favored Trump's opponent, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, to win the election.[458] I woke up at 3 a.m. on the morning of November 9. I was still processing the news an hour later when my wife dropped me off at our local airport to catch an early flight. I sat alone in the terminal while people around me sobbed and CNN played softly in the background. Feeling a deep sense of defeat, I put in my headphones, opened my laptop, and turned to the Internet to help me make sense of it all. I was looking for answers and for comfort, and I quickly realized I was not alone. From discussions on Reddit to threads on 4Chan, it seemed like everyone was trying to make sense of what had just happened. The resulting discourse was a mix of gloating, hope, Monday-morning quarterbacking, shock, denial, anger, and disbelief. Amid all these sentiments, I stumbled across something on Reddit that resonated with me. On Reddit's News subforum, one user offered their simple thesis for the campaign: "You can meme a man into the white house."[459]

This was not an isolated reaction. Several other posters on the News subreddit came to a similar conclusion about the role of memes in the 2016 presidential campaign:

> **DoctorN0gloff**: This outcome would totally have been impossible without internet memery, honestly.[460]
>
> **goh13**: 4chan memes -> reddit memes -> 9gag memes -> facebook memes -> facebook memes reaches the common man and becomes facts[461]

As did users on the World News subreddit:

> **Oskaznoqetsocj**: Mark my words. Years from now there will be a chapter devoted to "memes" under factors meme that led to the trump disaster of '19. How the actual fuck is a /pol/ meme president of the united states.[462]
>
> **BRE5LAU**: "/pol/ [4Chan's "Politically Incorrect" message board] basically memed him into the office"[463]

On the Politics subreddit:

> **Racorse**: The first president to get memed into office[464]
>
> **bayerleverkusen**: He has literally memed his way into the White House. Holy shit.[465]

And in more niche locations beyond the default subreddits, such as on the Donald Trump subreddit:

> **BasketOfPepes**: WE DID IT- WE MEME'D THE GOD EMPEROR INTO THE PRESIDENCY[466]
>
> **-Catpubes-**: AP just called it 276 Trump. Memes have won![467]

Although these comments tended to be neither the most common nor the most popular, their prevalence across web locations is difficult to ignore. In fact, this user reaction was so widespread that coverage appeared in *The Washington Post*.

In an article titled "'We actually elected a meme as president': How 4chan celebrated Trump's victory," *Washington Post* reporter Abby Ohlheiser catalogs how users on 4Chan's /pol/ board (many of whom supported Trump) spent election night. Although early returns favored Clinton, the tide began to change around 8 p.m. when results in Florida, a "must-win" state for the Trump campaign, were too close to call. As anxiety gave way to optimism, Trump supporters turned to "meme magic" to help push their candidate over the edge, "One thread filled up with hundreds of [Pepe the Frog memes] to help meme Florida over to Trump, as if their

energy could help Florida stay red." As Trump continued to pull ahead in Florida, users began expanding their efforts to conjure "meme magic," encouraging other users in states where the polls had not yet closed to "Use EVERY weapon in our meme arsenal to turn Blacks & Hispanics away from Hillary." Users responded, Ohlheiser notes, by re-uploading memetic "vote by text" hoax images as well as various other anti-Clinton memes for others to circulate. As the hours ticked by and a Trump victory seemed increasingly certain, the board become "a typically chaotic mess of celebrations." Of course, 4Chan did not swing the election in favor of Trump that night. But, nevertheless, a feeling among 4Chan users that they had somehow contributed to the results was palpable. These users reveled in the election of their candidate, a victory made possible through the power of "meme magic."[468]

"Meme magic" is when Internet memes influence offline behavior, and the term is how pro-Trump users describe the role of Internet memes in the 2016 presidential campaign. These users claim it to be a mysterious and powerful force, incomprehensible to "normies" (mainstream culture).[469] "Meme magic" is almost always used facetiously, in a tongue-in-cheek manner. Still, while it is doubtful that anybody literally believes that repeatedly posting images of Pepe the Frog tilted the results in Florida in favor of Trump, the joke does contain a ring of truth. The mysterious and powerful process these users are describing should be familiar to anyone who has read this dissertation. In the 2016 election, users and institutions alike leveraged memetic communication practices to make their campaigns seem more authentically populist. In other words, Donald Trump campaigned in the memetic vernacular.

In the sections that follow, I apply my theory of the memetic vernacular to the case of "meme magic" to demonstrate how such an approach might help communication scholars understand emergent trends in digital communication. I begin by returning to my central

argument and discussing the significance of my findings for everyday argument in the digital age. I then bring these threads together to demonstrate how the memetic vernacular explains communication trends in the 2016 presidential election and beyond. Finally, I conclude by highlighting possible trends going forward and discussing avenues for future research.

Everyday Argument in the Digital Age

I began this dissertation by asking a seemingly straightforward question—"why post a meme?"—and wondering how memes functioned as a form of everyday argument enabled by the affordances of the digital age. In *Chapter 2*, I argued that to answer this question we must look at Internet memes as a form of practice, and I defined Internet memes as recurring generic practices in networked communication exhibiting variation and play as they are circulated informally between users. Defining Internet memes as an everyday vernacular practice illuminates the relationship between individual communication events and the generic expectations of memetic practice. The crowdsourced nature of memetic practice gives individual memetic artifacts a sense of the common, which can be leveraged by users to make specific arguments via vernacular authority. As a result, Internet memes represent a genre of practice in digital communication that is particularly good at circulating and legitimating non-expert forms of knowledge and authority.

Chapter 3 argued that memetic communication practices gain vernacular authority as the result of aggregate volition. Although memes resist individual attempts at control, these genres of practice only exist because people are constantly performing them. Hence, memetic practices are both normative and generative. Although vernacular communication may have resistive potential, it is frequently invoked to support hegemonic norms. This becomes problematic when users use memetic practices to create a veneer of marginalization. This veneer of marginalization occurs when users deploy Internet memes to frame their privileged or hegemonic viewpoints as

exploited, silenced, or victimized in "mainstream" discourse. This has a legitimating effect on such viewpoints while also suppressing dissent and creating discursive enclaves.

Chapter 4 argued that memetic communication practices circulate competing notions of vernacular authority. When these competing authorities come into conflict, users seek to reassert their control over vernacular speech and common knowledge. These competing assertions frequently deploy or appropriate memetic practices as a form of counter-argument. The result of this process is that the crowdsourced, decentralized logic of memetic communication enables its own resistance. And, as a corollary of this process, because memes are practices that participate in larger bodies of discourse, meaning is contingent and contextual. A single image can lead to wildly different communication events as it circulates across networked locations.

Chapter 5 argued that the vernacular authority made possible by memetic communication is available not only to everyday users but also to institutions. But, although institutions have the potential to use memetic communication practices effectively, it is often difficult for them to appear authentic because goals of memetic communication are often at odds with the goals of strategic communication. Memes resist individual control, and anti-institutional user reactions can easily snowball and overshadow the original message. The implication is that Internet memes are good for circulating broad ideas and for creating publicity, but they are poor at retaining individual specificity and intentionality.

Demystifying "Meme Magic"

Internet memes played a part in both the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns, but 2016 was different. As Brad Kim, editor of the popular meme database website Know Your Meme, explains in an October 2016 interview with *The New York Times*, "From what we've observed so far, memes are no longer treated as nuisances, although they still can be. We've seen memes play

a vital role in crafting a powerful cult of personalities for Bernie Sanders and Donald J. Trump."[470] Kim also notes that 2016 marked the year when Internet memes lost their left-leaning edge, which he attributes to coordinated activity on Reddit's Donald Trump subreddit (r/The_Donald) and on 4Chan's Politically Incorrect board (/pol/). Memetic communication practices played a significant role in the everyday discourse of these pro-Trump and alt-right[471] communities. The memetic vernacular enabled these users to create and circulate artifacts that constructed Trump as an authentically populist candidate while portraying Clinton as a corrupt and out-of-touch elite.

Pepe the Frog was the most notable meme to emerge from these communities. Pepe the Frog originated in 2005 as a character in the comic *Boy's Club* by artist Matt Furie. In 2008, a page from Furie's comic started circulating on 4Chan's /b/ ("random") board. Users began posting a still from that comic to react positively to other users ("Feels good man"). By 2009, Pepe the Frog had its own page on Know Your Meme. Over the next several years, Pepe gained popularity in more mainstream web communities, such as Reddit, Imgur, Tumblr.[472] As it gained popularity the memetic genre continued to shift and expand to include other reactions, including sad, smug, and angry Pepe. In late 2014, users on 4Chan began creating threads to trade unique images of Pepe (a joke that treated digital images as a real-life commodity, like trading cards). This phenomenon, known as "Rare Pepe" led to the meme becoming even more popular across the web.

Pepe the Frog's enormous popularity led alt-right users to engage in a massive act of memetic appropriation that turned a benign Internet icon into a symbol of hate. Efforts to align Pepe with the Trump campaign began in the summer of 2015 when 4Chan users began posting images of Pepe dressed as Trump. By the end of the year, efforts had expanded to associate Pepe

with Nazi imagery, and the trend was picked up by white nationalists and anti-Semites on Twitter.[473] These acts of memetic appropriation were a concerted effort by alt-right users to reclaim the meme from "normies."[474]

The idea was that appropriating the meme would alter its generic expectations. As these new expectations became more commonplace, they would poison the well, making the practice no longer suitable for other Internet users and leaving the alt-right in full control of the memetic genre. In other words, much like the case of Who Needs Feminism? discussed in Chapter 4, these users understand that the memetic vernacular enables its own resistance. These users are purposely engaging in appropriative tactics to exert control over this genre of everyday communication.[475] Their goal was not to circulate any specific argument, but instead to create controversy and publicity. Since the existing memetic practice was already widespread, if these users successfully altered the generic expectations, then they would have demonstrated their control over vernacular authority and practice. Such a victory would align the memetic practice with the alt-right's symbols and values while also serving to legitimate the group's perception of their own vernacular discourse and authority.

The major catalyst for this genre shift came in September 2016 when the meme received institutional acknowledgement. During a September 9, 2016, campaign speech, Clinton referred to Trump's alt-right voter base as a "basket of deplorables."[476] The following day, Donald Trump Jr. responded on social media with a photoshop a friend had sent him depicting Donald Trump, Pepe the Frog, and several other key figures in the Trump campaign as soldiers in a parody of the poster for the movie *The Expendables* (Figure 51).[477] The next day NBC News responded to Trump Jr.'s post with an article titled, "Trump Adviser, Son Post Image of Trump's 'Deplorables' Featuring White Nationalist Symbol."[478] Calling Pepe a "white nationalist

symbol" put the alt-right appropriation of the meme at the forefront, circulating the idea far beyond what the alt-right had accomplished in the previous year. Several other news organizations picked up the story[479] as did the Clinton campaign.[480] By the end of the month the Anti-Defamation League had declared Pepe the Frog a symbol of hate.[481]

Figure 51 - A photoshop posted to Instagram by Donald Trump Jr. features Donald Trump, Pepe the Frog and other key Republican figures as soldiers in a parody of the poster for The Expendables.

Reaction to the coverage among "mainstream" Internet users felt like a collective groan of frustration—that something they had previously enjoyed was now ruined. As one user on Reddit put it:

> **Mcfooce**: When you step back and really look at it, /pol/ basically managed to make the ADL, Hillary's internet campaign and all of the dozen or so news outlets that picked this up to look completely out of touch [with what this meme actually is] and incompetent. I'd say they got exactly what they wanted.[482]

Matt Furie, Pepe's creator, was mortified by the coverage. In an October 2016 article for *Time*, Furie argued that Pepe was never meant to be a hate symbol and that he intended to reclaim his creation. That same day Furie and the Anti-Defamation League launched the #SavePepe

Campaign, encouraging uses to share positive pictures of the frog in the hopes that it might save the meme from the alt-right. However, as we saw in Chapter 3, the memetic vernacular resists direct, individual attempts at change, and Furie's efforts were no match for a grassroots alt-right campaign emboldened by mainstream recognition. Furie himself noted this difficulty, writing that "Since the Internet has no centralized governing force, it's a complex web of interconnectedness that is always changing—and impossible to control. … The problem with Pepe is that he's been stamped a hate symbol by politicians, hate groups, institutions, the media and, because of them, your mom."[483]

Furie was right—these news articles brought Pepe into mainstream consciousness more than the previous memes (alt-right or otherwise) ever had. Many users reveled in the "lulz" of getting their acts of memetic appropriation all the way to national headlines.[484] This media coverage had a reciprocal effect, legitimating the alt-right's memetic practice while also circulating and codifying it for a public audience generally unfamiliar with meme culture. Pepe now served as a well-known identifier and a rallying cry for those looking to engage with other pro-Trump or alt-right users online. So, when Trump started pulling ahead in Florida on the night of November 8, 2016, users posted Pepe after Pepe to conjure the "meme magic" needed to win.

The importance of memetic communication during the election wasn't just a trend identified by users. Both the Clinton and Trump campaigns encouraged and acknowledged meme use as a way of spreading ideas and smearing opponents. Following the Republican convention in the summer of 2016, Clinton encouraged her supporters to "Trump Yourself" on Facebook, using an app to overlay their profile pictures with derogatory Donald Trump quotes about women and minorities.[485]

The Trump campaign realized the potential utility of memetic communication for creating, unifying, and harnessing populist movements much earlier. The campaign's methods tended to be more subtle and less prescriptive. For instance, in October 2015, when Trump was gaining traction in the upcoming Republican primaries, he tweeted an image of himself as Pepe the Frog, acknowledging the memetic practice that was growing in popularity among his followers (Figure 52).[486] As I suggested in Chapter 5, this instance of institutional meme use was well-received among its target audience because of its referential nature.[487] Additionally, because Trump had been branding himself as a non-institutional Washington outsider, he could effectively communicate in the memetic vernacular by participating in memetic practice without trying to directly control it. For Trump's followers, this acknowledgement likely served as a tacit encouragement to continue engaging in memetic practice. These users, in turn, would continue to circulate memes advocating for Trump across networks, providing the campaign with free autonomous advertising and a seemingly grassroots show of support. This support reinforced the image of Trump not as a New York billionaire but as a man of the people. In this way, the Trump campaign used the memetic vernacular to its advantage.

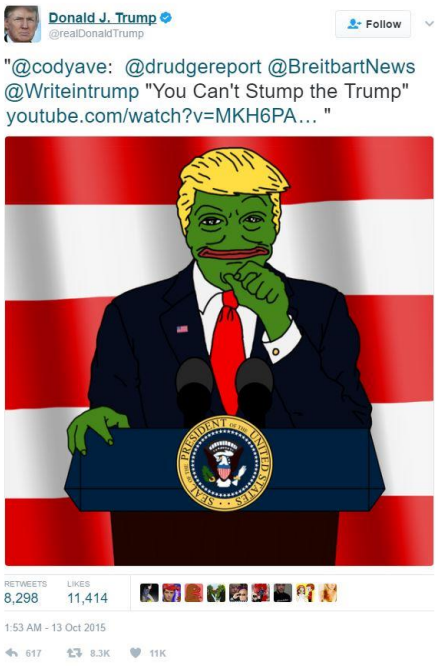

Figure 52 - Donald Trump tweets a common memetic image featuring a Trumpified Pepe the Frog.

While this connection may initially seem tenuous, it comes directly from the playbook of the alt-right. In a piece for alt-right news outlet *Breitbart* titled "Meme Magic: Donald Trump Is The Internet's Revenge On Lazy Elites," senior editor Milo Yiannopoulos writes that "The power of Trump's branding is … in large part due to his internet supporters, who have an uncanny ability to create and popularise cultural tropes. Or, as we on the internet have come to know them, memes."[488] Yiannopoulos goes on to praise Trump's army of Internet trolls, calling the relationship between the candidate and his meme-posting followers "symbiotic." He frames institutional acknowledgement of memetic practices as "the Holy Grail," and writes the "meme magic" happens "when previously-obscure web memes become so influential they start to affect real-world events."[489]

Understanding the memetic vernacular reveals how Yiannopoulos leverages memetic communication practices in support of the Trump campaign. First, Yiannopoulos uses this article to reinforce "establishment elites" as a target for the alt-right's institutional alterity. Although

this may seem like a broad category, it is well-suited for communication that has difficulty with retaining message specificity. At the same time, it understands that memetic communication is well-suited toward expressing institutional alterity and vernacular authority. Widely cultivating and circulating an attitude of anti-elitism and anti-expertise through memetic communication practices also has the benefit of helping Trump (by reinforcing his constructed anti-elite brand) while hurting his opponent. This strategy reinforces a veneer of marginalization among Yiannopoulos's audience—that they represent "everyday folks" who are being unfairly marginalized by the establishment—while also giving them a common, vague enemy. It also shuts down discourse, setting up those who disagree with this "common knowledge" premise as "shills," "sheep," or "elitists."

Second, Yiannopoulos assures his audience that memes are an effective form of communication to oppose "elites." Yiannopoulos builds this theme from his first premise, writing that "Establishment types no doubt think this [meme stuff] is all silly, schoolyard stuff. And it is. But it's also effective."[490] Here Yiannopoulos takes his first theme (that elites are out of touch and lack common sense) and uses it to argue for the effectiveness of memetic communication. Yiannopoulos suggests that "meme magic" is an effective way to short-circuit elites and gain mainstream publicity for the ("unfairly") marginalized discourse of the alt-right. As with the Trump tweet, he dangles mainstream acknowledgement as a carrot in front of his audience, "what begins on /pol/ and leaks out into Twitter has a way of colouring media coverage and, ultimately, public perception, even among people who don't frequent message boards."[491]

These institutional affirmations of the memetic vernacular circumvent many of the problems that plagued Health and Human Services's doge ad in Chapter 5. Yiannopolis's

article—much like Trump's tweet—is referential, not prescriptive. Yiannopolis name-drops and links to several pro-Trump memes and viral videos. His tone is celebratory, assuring his readers that "Meme propaganda is funny, memorable, persuasive—and it works."[492] In doing this, Yiannopolis gives his followers the same institutional acknowledgement he has framed as the ultimate goal of memetic communication practices. He never tells his followers to post pro-Trump memes. He doesn't have to. By positioning memetic communication as effective recourse against the very marginalization that he (and the alt-right at large) has constructed, Yiannopolis instructs his followers on how to further engage in memetic practice. He neither asks nor orders; instead, he provides acknowledgement that also serves as a model. This seemingly validates user autonomy over vernacular memetic practice; however, it is merely one institution channeling users' anti-institutional energy toward another.

And that's the point.

Donald Trump is an elite. His name is *literally* an institution—The Trump Organization. Yet vernacular and institutional forces were able to appropriate the memetic vernacular in his favor by directing anti-elitist sentiment and distrust toward his opponent. These players leveraged the types of communication the memetic vernacular is best suited for (publicity, amplification, lack of nuance) to continually frame Clinton as a corrupt and scandal-ridden Washington insider. When an FBI investigation into Clinton's use of a private e-mail server was reopened two weeks before election day, *Breitbart* ran a story highlighting the best memes to come out of the scandal.[493] Users on 4Chan and Reddit circulated rumors linking the Clinton campaign to a secret human trafficking and pedophilia organization. In December 2016, these rumors (collectively known a "Pizzagate") ultimately led 28-year-old Edgar Welch to enter and search a Washington D.C. restaurant linked to the conspiracy. He was armed with an assault

rifle, a revolver, and a knife. Shots were fired, no one was hurt, and Welch was arrested. Reflecting on Welch's 45-minutes of terror, one reporter wrote, "This is undoubtedly meme magic in action."[494]

While using the memetic vernacular to sow chaos and distrust of Clinton, pro-Trump users also circulated everyday digital communications that celebrated Trump as a problem-solver, a man of the people, and even an idealized "God Emperor." It all sounds ridiculous, but, by Trump's own metrics, it worked.[495] On November 8, apathy and antipathy won the day for Trump. Voters in key states thought Clinton was out of touch, didn't care about everyday folks, and wasn't on the side of the American worker. What's remarkable here is neither that Trump supporters and alt-right activists used memes nor that they used memes effectively; what's remarkable is how institutional and vernacular forces used memetic communication to make a billionaire with no political experience seem like an authentically populist, preferable candidate.[496] In Chapter 5, I worried that institutions were becoming increasingly savvy at subtly leveraging the memetic vernacular for their own gain. Looking back at the 2016 election, I'm beginning to fear I was right.

The Future of the Memetic Vernacular

While it is unlikely that any users literally believe in "meme magic," the underlying process it represents—the memetic vernacular—is significant. Although it would be overly simplistic to say that memes were responsible for the Trump presidency, it is difficult to deny that social media and everyday digital communication (e.g., tweets, memes) were a significant boon to his campaign and political outsider image. Internet memes didn't cause the populist surge of the 2010s, but they do provide an avenue for everyday individuals to deal with what they perceive as a lack of representation in institutional narratives and knowledge. The memetic

vernacular enables individual communicators to seek power and authority by imagining themselves as part of something nebulously bigger. But, although Internet memes are perceived as crowdsourced, both everyday users and institutions are increasingly identifying the memetic vernacular as a way to gain publicity, set agendas, frame controversies, constitute communities, short-circuit traditions, and make interventions in everyday discourse.

As I write this in early 2017, the Internet looks significantly different than it did 20, 10, or even 5 years ago. This rapid rate of change is an inherent difficulty in studying both digital and memetic communication. Future research must focus on the underlying social processes memetic practices represent and what those practices say about the users who engage with them. Such an approach is consistent with the practice-driven framework I have demonstrated in this study. This research would look at the relationship between Internet memes and institutional communication, asking questions like "how have institutions leveraged the memetic vernacular effectively?" and "how do users recognize the role of institutional influences in their memetic practices?" It would also focus on the factors the lead to the success and failure of memetic practices, seeking to explain how different social factors influence memetic circulation and lifespan. Finally, it would look at how memetic practices transfer into offline life. This could mean looking more deeply at "meme magic" or "enacted memes," but I also mean something more general here—asking everyday individuals to discuss and reflect on their own memetic practices would deepen our understanding of everyday argument in the digital age.

Ultimately, studying memes means studying the constantly evolving dynamics of everyday communication in the digital age. Memes are messy, decentralized, and often crass—but so is everyday communication. As everyday users negotiate genres of vernacular expression, they locate power and authority in their vernacular practices. In other words, studying the

memetic vernacular helps us learn more about who *we* are—as individuals, as a community, as a culture. Since memetic practices emerge from aggregate volition, they reflect common attitudes and norms while also offering space for everyday critique and counter-hegemonic communication. As with jokes, they often tell us more about the teller than the target. The memetic vernacular describes how everyday argument is extended by the affordances of the digital age and how ideas like common sense and vernacular authority might be used, and misused, in everyday communication.

So, why post a meme?

To express yourself as an individual while feeling connected to something bigger.

Notes

[1]Andrew Peck, "A Laugh Riot: Photoshopping as Vernacular Discursive Practice," *International Journal of Communication* 8 (2014).

[2] C. A. Rentschler and S. C. Thrift, "Doing Feminism in the Network: Networked Laughter and the 'Binders Full of Women' Meme," *Feminist Theory* 16, no. 3 (December 1, 2015); Suzi Parker, "Mitt Romney's 'binders Full of Women,'" *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2012/10/17/mitt-romneys-binders-full-of-women/; Helen A. S. Popkin, "'Binders Full of Women,' Other Internet Memes Trump Voter Issues," *NBC News*, October 17, 2012, http://www.today.com/money/binders-full-women-other-internet-memes-trump-voter-issues-1C6530724.

[3] As I shall explain in Chapter 2, this is merely the common perception. The relationship between everyday and institutional in the digital age is much more complex and hybrid than many initially assume.

[4] Sarah Florini. "This Week in Blackness, the George Zimmerman Acquittal, and the Production of a Networked Collective Identity." *New Media & Society*, October 7, 2015.

[5] Michael Koliska and Jessica Roberts. "Selfies: Witnessing and Participatory Journalism with a Point of View." *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015); K. Tiidenberg, "Boundaries and Conflict in a NSFW Community on Tumblr: The Meanings and Uses of Selfies." *New Media & Society*, January 14, 2015.

[6] Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, "'Decreasing World Suck' Harnessing Popular Culture for Fan Activism." In *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*, by Henry Jenkins. Connected Youth and Digital Futures. New York: New York University Press, 2016.

[7] Robert Glenn Howard, "Vernacular Authority: Critically Engaging 'Tradition,'" in *Tradition in the Twenty-First Century: Locating the Role of the Past in the Present*, ed. Trevor J Blank and Robert Glenn Howard (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2013).

[8] Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, Postmillennial Pop (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

[9] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, MIT Press Essential Knowledge (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014); Peck, "A Laugh Riot."

[10] Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 89.

[11] Brian Feldman, "'Be Like Bill' Is the Worst Thing on Facebook," *New York*, January 19, 2016, sec. Select/all, http://nymag.com/selectall/2016/01/like-bill-is-the-worst-thing-on-facebook.html.

[12] Sarah Sloat, "For the Love of God, Please Don't 'Be Like Bill': This Meme Is the Worst. Don't Join the Mob.," *Inverse*, January 25, 2016, https://www.inverse.com/article/10591-for-the-love-of-god-please-don-t-be-like-bill.

[13] Howard, "Vernacular Authority."

[14] In a classical rhetorical tradition, such practices could also be construed as ongoing acts of *sensus communis* or *doxa*.

[15] danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

[16] Jennifer Bay and Thomas Rickert, "New Media and the Fourfold," *JAC* 28, no. 1–2 (2008): 209.

[17] Andrew Perrin and Maeve Duggan, "Americans' Internet Access: 2000-2015," *Pew Research Center*, June 26, 2015, http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/06/26/americans-internet-access-2000-2015/.

[18] Andrew Perrin, "One-Fifth of Americans Report Going Online 'Almost Constantly,'" *Pew Research Center*, December 8, 2015, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/08/one-fifth-of-americans-report-going-online-almost-constantly/.

[19] Barry Wellman, "The Three Ages of Internet Studies: Ten, Five and Zero Years Ago," *New Media & Society* 6, no. 1 (February 1, 2004): 123.

[20] Ibid., 125-126.

[21] Ibid., 127.

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[141] Shifman offers a definition for "Internet memes"—a choice which ostensibly separates her terminology from the baggage represented by the Dawkinsian "meme." I applaud this choice and, although I frequently shorten the term back to "meme," acknowledge that this is an important distinction to make.

[142] Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 41.

[143] Ibid., 56.

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[145] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

[146] Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1984), 37-38.

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[149]Bauman, Verbal Art as Performance; Peck, "Tall, Dark, and Loathsome."

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[152] Annette N. Markham and Nancy K Baym, "Introduction: Making Smart Choices on Shifting Ground," in *Internet Inquiry: Conversations about Method*, ed. Annette N. Markham and Nancy K. Baym (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009), 11.

[153] Lisa Silvestri, "Context Drives Method: Studying Social Media Use in a War Zone," in *Text + Field: Innovations in Rhetorical Method*, ed. Sara L. McKinnon et al. (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), 165.

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[155] James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); danah boyd, "A Response to Christine Hine," in *Internet Inquiry: Conversations about Method*, ed. Annette N. Markham and Nancy K. Baym (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009), 29; Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play*, 11.

[156] Philip N Howard, "Network Ethnography and the Hypermedia Organization: New Media, New Organizations, New Methods," *New Media & Society* 4, no. 4 (2002): 553.

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[159] Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE, 2000), 54; boyd, "Response to Christine Hine," 29.

[160] Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 26.

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[162] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

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[167] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* 26.

[168] boyd, "Response to Christine Hine," 30.

[169] Ibid., 27.

[170] Ibid.

[171] Ibid.

[172] Ibid., 27-28.

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[177] Silvestri, "Context Drives Method," 166.

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[180] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures.*

[181] Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet*, 185.

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[183] Robert Glenn Howard, "Digital Network Analysis: Understanding Everyday Online Discourse Micro- and Macroscopically," in *Research Methods for Reading Digital Data in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Gabriele Griffin and Matt Hayler, Research Methods for the Arts and Humanities (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 168.

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[187] Institutions, characterized by a formal act of founding, are frequently represented by the state, the church, corporations, and empowered agents acting on behalf of these and other similar concerns. Howard, "Vernacular Authority."

[188] Peck, "A Laugh Riot"; Peck, "Tall, Dark, and Loathsome."

[189] Milner, *The World Made Meme.*

[190] Although Hauser focuses on face-to-face and geographically local interactions in his theorizing on the nature of vernacular discourse, his sentiment remains appreciably resonant when looking at the construction of vernacular generic expectations in digital communication. Gerard A Hauser, *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 11.

[191] Howard, "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media," 509.

[192] Robert Glenn Howard, "Enacting a Virtual 'Ekklesia': Online Christian Fundamentalism as Vernacular Religion," *New Media & Society* 12, no. 5 (November 24, 2009).

[193] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Kent A Ono and John M Sloop, "The Critique of Vernacular Discourse," *Communication Monographs* 62, no. 1 (1995).

[194] Howard, "Electronic Hybridity," 205.

[195] Howard, "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media," 497.

[196] Since the vernacular must define itself as alternate from the institutional that enables it, the two are never truly separate and exist in degrees of hybridity. This is especially important to acknowledge in digital communication, which—from individual websites to the network itself—are the result of a cascade of institutional structures and choices. Howard, "Enacting a virtual 'ekklesia'."

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[295] "I think that Islam is a religion of peace / and that extremists and the media have destroyed its image." whiskeyboy, "Actual Unpopular Opinion Puffin: Let's See How This Goes," *Reddit*, May 20, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/260kcl/actual_unpopular_opinion_puffin_lets_see_how_this/.

[296] lolbience, "My Unpopular Opinion Puffin... on Climate Change...," comment, *Reddit*, (August 28, 2013), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/1l9efd/my_unpopular_opinion_puffin_on_climate_change/cbx4rnl.

[297] modulus0, "My Unpopular Opinion Puffin... on Climate Change...," *Reddit*, August 28, 2013, https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/1l9efd/my_unpopular_opinion_puffin_on_climate_change/.

[298] modulus0, "My Unpopular Opinion Puffin... on Climate Change...," comment, *Reddit*, (August 28, 2013), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/1l9efd/my_unpopular_opinion_puffin_on_climate_change/cbx4m2o.

[299] Ibid.

[300] YouPickMyName, "My Unpopular Opinion Puffin... on Climate Change...," comment, *Reddit*, (August 28, 2013), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/1l9efd/my_unpopular_opinion_puffin_on_climate_change/cbx5h1c.

[301] bromancatholic, "Finally Saw a Puffin I Disagree with," *Reddit*, November 7, 2013, https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/1q2mra/finally_saw_a_puffin_i_disagree_with/.

[302] watchgeek, "Unpopular Opinion Puffin," *Reddit*, May 4, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/24ofme/unpopular_opinion_puffin/; soulreaver325, "Since This Is the Last Chance That I'll Have to Use This Meme, I've Decided to

Create a Final Unpopular Opinion Puffin on Race Relations.," *Reddit*, April 1, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/21y429/since_this_is_the_last_chance_that_ill_have_to/; darknessandlight3, "Unpopular Opinion Puffin on Families Who Adopt Children outside of Their Race.," *Reddit*, March 18, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/20q13t/unpopular_opinion_puffin_on_families_who_adopt/; the_lurkerofshadows, "Unpopular Opinion Puffin on Race Relations.," *Reddit*, April 3, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/223k9b/unpopular_opinion_puffin_on_race_relations/.

[303] fkdupthought, "This Used to Be a Common Line of Thinking until Hitler Took It to a Horrific Extreme... Unpopular Opinion Puffin," *Reddit*, November 19, 2013, http://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/1qxuye/this_used_to_be_a_common_line_of_thinking_until/.

[304] therevenger09, "An Uncomfortable 'Unpopular Opinion Puffin' on Race in America.," *Reddit*, March 25, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/21ck9j/an_uncomfortable_unpopular_opinion_puffin_on_race/.

[305] daimposter, "Reddit's Reaction to the Puffin," comment, *Reddit*, (May 15, 2014), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/25mtqe/reddits_reaction_to_the_puffin/chiw2y2.

[306] Anonymous, "My Unpopular Opinion.," *Reddit*, April 16, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/237qmx/my_unpopular_opinion/.

[307] Ibid.

[308] Aaron Hess, "Democracy Through the Polarized Lens of the Camcorder: Argumentation and Vernacular Spectacle on YouTube in the 2008 Election," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 47 (2010): 118-119.

[309] Calsurfer, "Opinion Puffin on Racism," *Reddit*, December 12, 2013, https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/1sqnx7/opinion_puffin_on_racism/; dmonster1496, "Unpopular Opinion Puffin," *Reddit*, November 19, 2013, https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/1r076i/unpopular_opinion_puffin/.

[310] Many users agreed with this sentiment, but also suggested that Reddit's largest demographic is 20 to 30 year olds and that this group was likely somewhat older than this user suggested.

[311] ThePrincessEva, "Stormfront Puffin Strikes Again," *Reddit*, April 17, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/SubredditDrama/comments/239pfq/stormfront_puffin_strikes_again/.

[312] coloicito, "Unpopular Opinion Puffins are now permanently banned."

[313] The thread was upvoted by 62% of voting users. Contrasting this with the "black people are the real racists" meme discussed in the previous section (upvoted by 72% of users) demonstrates how divisive this decision was.

[314] sparks277, "No More Puffin, Huh. Sounds like Reddit Alright.," *Reddit*, May 25, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/26h3w6/no_more_puffin_huh_sounds_like_reddit_alright/.

[315] Anonymous, "Unpopular Opinion Puffins Are Now Permanently Banned.," comment, *Reddit*, (May 25, 2014), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/26gmt0/unpopular_opinion_puffins_are_now_permanently/chquu8l; MeiCaiKouRou, "Unpopular Opinion Puffins Are Now Permanently Banned.," comment, *Reddit*, (June 19, 2014), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/26gmt0/unpopular_opinion_puffins_are_now_permanently/cibi2hh; teewuane, "Unpopular Opinion Puffins Are Now Permanently Banned.," comment, *Reddit*, (May 28, 2014), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/26gmt0/unpopular_opinion_puffins_are_now_permanently/chtb4oe.

[316]Americani, "Unpopular Opinion Puffins Are Now Permanently Banned.," comment, *Reddit*, (May 26, 2014), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/26gmt0/unpopular_opinion_puffins_are_now_permanently/chrhgg5.

[317] billyK_, "Unpopular Opinion Puffins Are Now Permanently Banned.," comment, *Reddit*, (May 26, 2014), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/26gmt0/unpopular_opinion_puffins_are_now_permanently/chrrpnn; Petninja, "Unpopular Opinion Puffins Are Now Permanently Banned.," comment, *Reddit*, (June 22, 2014), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/26gmt0/unpopular_opinion_puffins_are_now_permanently/ciekpn0; WORST_OF_REDDITOR, "Unpopular Opinion Puffins Are Now Permanently Banned.," comment, *Reddit*, (May 25, 2014), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/26gmt0/unpopular_opinion_puffins_are_now_permanently/chqvagg.

[318] No_Stairway_Denied, "Unpopular Opinion Puffins Are Now Permanently Banned.," comment, *Reddit*, (May 25, 2014), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/26gmt0/unpopular_opinion_puffins_are_now_permanently/chr15oz.

[319] BeckBristow89, "Unpopular Opinion Puffins Are Now Permanently Banned.," comment, *Reddit*, (May 25, 2014), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/26gmt0/unpopular_opinion_puffins_are_now_permanently/chqz2g5.

[320] IMA_Catholic, "Unpopular Opinion Puffins Are Now Permanently Banned.," comment, *Reddit*, (May 25, 2014), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/26gmt0/unpopular_opinion_puffins_are_now_permanently/chqzwrx.

[321] Fazzeh, "Unpopular Opinion Puffins Are Now Permanently Banned.," comment, *Reddit*, (May 25, 2014), https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/26gmt0/unpopular_opinion_puffins_are_now_permanently/chqzo9x.

[322] WHONEEDSFEMINISM, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (April 11, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/20903894665.

[323] Who Needs Feminism?, *Facebook*, April 11, 2012, https://www.facebook.com/WhoNeedsFeminism/photos/a.148743915254229.29149.145767228885231/148748291920458/?type=3&theater; Who Needs Feminism?, "Start a Campaign!," *Who Needs Feminism?*, accessed July 1, 2016, http://www.whoneedsfeminism.com/startyourown.html.

[324] Rachel F. Seidman, "After Todd Akin Comments: Why Women – and Men – Still Need Feminism," *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 23, 2012, sec. Opinion, http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2012/0823/After-Todd-Akin-comments-Why-women-and-men-still-need-feminism.

[325] "Who Needs Feminism?," *The State of Things* (North Carolina: WUNC, May 10, 2012), http://wunc.org/post/who-needs-feminism#stream/0.

[326] Matt Petronzio, "'Who Needs Feminism?' New Tumblr Promotes Gender Equality," *Mashable*, April 13, 2012, http://mashable.com/2012/04/13/tumblr-who-needs-feminism/#MggBk7oBLZq5.

[327] Rossalyn Warren, "Men Are Calling Themselves 'Meninists' To Take A Stand Against Feminism," *BuzzFeed News*, December 18, 2014, https://www.buzzfeed.com/rossalynwarren/men-are-calling-themselves-meninists-to-take-a-stand-against?utm_term=.hsp27NVxq#.smDez6ZO1.

[328] pebar, "Jokeexplain Please?," *Funnyjunk*, March 28, 2015, http://funnyjunk.com/Idiots+need+feminism+comp/funny-pictures/5497645/44; jonjohn, "He Has a Point," *Funnyjunk*, October 30, 2013, http://funnyjunk.com/He+has+a+point/funny-pictures/4863815/.

[329] These labels are self-identifiers used by those observed.

[330] This argument isn't meant to be exhaustive. It is not a catalog of every tactic by which a memetic practice may be deployed or resisted. Such a scope would necessarily undercut my central argument about the high level of appropriation and variation that defines memetic practices as they circulate into different communities. The appropriation process is one of infinite

play, extending indefinitely across every web location that engages with the memetic practice. This chapter is meant to be exemplary, exploring several trends and suggesting a variety of ways in which memetic practices may be appropriated for different ends as well as what the discursive results of such appropriation may look like.

[331] Jessalynn Keller, *Girls' Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age*, Routledge Studies in New Media and Cyberculture 30 (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1.

[332] Ibid. 2, 11.

[333] Keller acknowledges that her use of "stereotype" here is somewhat problematic and notes that she decided to use the term "to utilize the language of my participants." Similarly, my use of the term inherits from this choice. Ibid, 29.

[334] Ibid.

[335] Ibid., 28-29.

[336] Ibid., 29.

[337] Radhika Gajjala, *Cyber Selves: Feminist Ethnographies of South Asian Women* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004).

[338] Mia Consalvo and Susanna Paasonen, "Introduction: On the Internet, Women Matter," in *Women & Everyday Uses of the Internet: Agency & Identity*, ed. Mia Consalvo and Susanna Paasonen, Digital Formations, v. 8 (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 2.

[339] Ibid.

[340] Susanna Paasonen, "Gender, Identity, and (the Limits Of) Play on the Internet," in *Women & Everyday Uses of the Internet: Agency & Identity*, ed. Mia Consalvo and Susanna Paasonen, Digital Formations, v. 8 (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 37.

[341] Adrienne Shaw, "The Internet Is Full of Jerks, Because the World Is Full of Jerks: What Feminist Theory Teaches Us About the Internet," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): 274.

[342] Consalvo and Paasonen, "Introduction," 4.

[343] Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh, "Cyberfeminism 2.0: Where Have All the Cyberfeminists Gone?," in *Cyberfeminism 2.0*, ed. Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh, Digital Formations, v. 74 (New York: Peter Lang Pub, 2012), 3.

[344] Kristine Blair, Radhika Gajjala, and Christine Tulley, "Introduction: The Webs We Have: Locating the Feminism in Cyberfeminism," in *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice: Communities, Pedagogies, and Social Action*, ed. Kristine Blair, Radhika Gajjala, and Christine Tulley, New Dimensions in Computers and Composition (Cresskill, N.J: Hampton Press, 2009).

[345] Gajjala and Oh, "Cyberfeminism 2.0," 3.

[346] Ibid., 1.

[347] Massanari also points out that geek culture is not only emergent and fluid but also just one subculture that expresses hegemonic masculinity. Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play*, 128.

[348] R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (December 2005): 832.

[349] More specifically, the "geek culture" that Massanari is writing about privileges "white, able-bodied, young straight cisgendered male over the woman of color, for example, or the homosexual older man, or the disabled trans* woman." Massnari is also quick to point out that individuals in these latter categories are often part of geek culture (including as active members), but, despite this, they frequently remain "marginalized, relegated to its fringes, and frequently silenced." Although the exact facets of hegemonic masculinity vary between groups, it is essential to acknowledge that this constellation (and its intersectionality) is, in many ways, widely applicable to other masculine digital subcultures. Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play*, 129.

[350] Miltner, "'There's No Place for Lulz on LOLCats.'"

[351] Kishonna L. Gray, Bertan Buyukozturk, and Zachary G. Hill, "Blurring the Boundaries: Using Gamergate to Examine 'real' and Symbolic Violence against Women in Contemporary Gaming Culture," *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 3 (March 2017): 4.

[352] Publishing personal information in this way is commonly known as "doxxing" and includes leaking materials like personal email addresses, workplace contact information, and the home addresses of targeted individuals as well as those of their families or loved ones.

[353] Nakamura, "Glitch Racism."

[354] Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, "A Conspiracy of Fishes, Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 217.

[355] Shaw, "The Internet Is Full of Jerks, Because the World Is Full of Jerks," 275.

[356] Ibid., 274-275.

[357] Ibid., 274.

[358] Massanari, "#Gamergate and The Fappening," 329; Amanda Hess, "Why Women Aren't Welcome on the Internet," *Pacific Standard*, January 6, 2014, https://psmag.com/why-women-aren-t-welcome-on-the-internet-aa21fdbc8d6.

[359] Who Needs Feminism?, "Who We Are," *Who Needs Feminism?*, accessed July 1, 2016, http://www.whoneedsfeminism.com/about.html.

[360] Who Needs Feminism?, "Posters," *Facebook*, April 10, 2012, https://www.facebook.com/WhoNeedsFeminism/photos/?tab=album&album_id=148163118645642.

[361] Unlike Facebook and Tumblr, users on Twitter tended to upload fewer photos and, instead, enacted the practice by using 140-character tweets in lieu of pen and paper. Bereft of the pictorial component, these users identified their posts by including similar language to the mediated version (for instance, starting the tweet with "Why I need feminism:" or "I need feminism because…") and including the hashtag #whoneedsfeminism.

[362] WHONEEDSFEMINISM, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (April 12, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/20950155343/join-the-campaign-upload-your-own-photos-and-tag.

[363] Clockwise from top left: WHONEEDSFEMINISM, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (April 11, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/20905044308; WHONEEDSFEMINISM, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (April 11, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/20904946114; WHONEEDSFEMINISM, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (April 11, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/20905779431; WHONEEDSFEMINISM, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (April 11, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/20911110653.

[364] CNN Wire Staff, "Australian Police Attribute Man's Death to Internet Photo Trend," *CNN*, May 17, 2011, http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/asiapcf/05/15/australia.planking.death/; Lindsay Jones, "The Story behind the 'Tebowing' Craze," *The Denver Post*, October 27, 2011, sec. First-and-Orange, http://blogs.denverpost.com/broncos/2011/10/27/the-story-behind-the-tebowing-crazy/10368/; Milner, "Pop Polyvocality."

[365] Brad Kim, "Planking," *Know Your Meme*, May 25, 2011, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/planking.

[366] Brad Kim, "We Are The 99 Percent," *Know Your Meme*, October 12, 2011, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/we-are-the-99-percent.

[367] For instance, note the difference in tone between these two sentences: "These user-submitted images represent resistance via appropriation" versus "These user-submitted images represent resistance via adaptation."

[368] The reason for this shift toward text is unknown. It may be due to the comparative difficulty of creating an image versus typing text, or it may have to do with the social risk involved in associating one's face with a contentious public issue online.

[369] Note that many users supplied longer posts (often spanning several paragraphs) discussing their experiences and listing several reasons why they needed feminism. Such responses are significant because they would be difficult to express in the appropriated memetic form Who Needs Feminism? was trying to popularize. For example, see: BLACK-TOURMALINE, "We Need Feminism.," Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (April 15, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/21142400071/we-need-feminism; LIONELYY, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (May 10, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/22774921515/i-need-feminism-because-i-am-19-and-about-to-start; THE-TEA-FOX, "I Need Feminism," Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (May 4, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/22393477246/i-need-feminism.

[370] "Tits or GTFO [get the fuck out]" is a common phrase on 4Chan used to ignore any user who identifies herself as female unless she provides a timestamped photograph of her naked breasts. Comments by female users simply receive the reply "Tits or GTFO." This meme has been appropriated into several other web locations. COCONUT--MIL-K, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (April 28, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/21985173212/i-need-feminism-because-of-the-phrase-tits-or.

[371] SAM, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (April 28, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/21975805899/i-need-feminism-because-the-oppression-of-women. Note: the word "multicultural" in this post contains a broken link to an article on foreignpolicy.com. The linked article was likely Mona Eltahawy, "Why Do They Hate Us?," *Foreign Policy*, April 23, 2012, sec. Feature, http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/23/why-do-they-hate-us/.

[372] KLEINEPUMPKIN, "I Need Feminism," Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (April 28, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/21990748936/i-need-feminism.

[373] KITA-KAT, "I Need Feminism," Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (May 4, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/22383411288/i-need-feminism.

[374] WHONEEDSFEMINISM, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (May 29, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/24003868123/we-will-now-begin-prioritzing-submissions-on-our.

[375] Clockwise from top left: GOFORTHANDTHRASH, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (June 2, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/24280307313/i-need-feminism-because-i-should-not-have-to-feel; WHONEEDSFEMINISM, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (June 4, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/24398728650/i-need-feminism-because-i-never-want-to-hear-she; CECILIABALDWIN-BLOG-BLOG, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (June 6, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/24555563483/i-need-feminism-because-i-am-sick-of-pretending; THEFURIOUSWHEEZILL, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (June 7, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/24598624332/i-need-feminism.

[376] WHONEEDSFEMINISM, Tumblr, *Who Needs Feminism?*, (June 7, 2012), http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/24624950915.

[377] Susan Herzfeld, Facebook comment, (May 15, 2012), https://www.facebook.com/WhoNeedsFeminism/photos/a.162003463928274.32815.145767228885231/162006947261259/?type=3&theater.

[378] Warren, "Men Are Calling Themselves 'Meninists' To Take A Stand Against Feminism;" *dontneedfeminism.com,* accessed July 1, 2016, http://dontneedfeminism.com/.

[379] "Google Trends - Web Search Interest - Worldwide, 2004 - Present," *Google Trends*, accessed July 1, 2016, https://www.google.com/trends/explore#q=i%20need%20feminism%20because%2C%20who%20needs%20feminism&cmpt=q&tz=Etc%2FGMT%2B5.

[380] Who Needs Feminism?, "Start a Campaign!".

[381] I Don't Need Feminism, "Home Page," Facebook Community, *I Don't Need Feminism,* (August 7, 2015), https://www.facebook.com/idontneedfeminismbecause/.

[382] I Don't Need Feminism, *Facebook,* July 28, 2013, https://www.facebook.com/idontneedfeminismbecause/photos/a.543029635765027.1073741828.543027985765192/543029639098360/?type=1&theater.

[383] I Don't Need Feminism, "About," Facebook Community, *I Don't Need Feminism*, (August 7, 2015), https://www.facebook.com/idontneedfeminismbecause/.

[384] It is essential to note that several of these I don't need Feminism images have text overlaid on a photo instead of written on a held sheet of paper. Additionally, many of the held-paper images are obvious photoshops. It is entirely possible that several users created fake images to make the community seem more authentic—padding out media on the page and baiting actual women to post.

[385] I Don't Need Feminism, "I Don't Need Feminism Because...," Facebook album, accessed August 7, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/idontneedfeminismbecause/photos/?tab=album&album_id=543104739090850.

[386] I Don't Need Feminism, Facebook photo, (July 28, 2013), https://www.facebook.com/idontneedfeminismbecause/photos/a.543268595741131.1073741831.543027985765192/543268982407759/?type=3&theater.

[387] I Don't Need Feminism, "Gender Reversals," Facebook album, accessed August 7, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/idontneedfeminismbecause/photos/?tab=album&album_id=543268595741131.

[388] Rich Bianchi, Facebook comment, (August 2, 2013), https://www.facebook.com/idontneedfeminismbecause/photos/a.543268595741131.1073741831.543027985765192/543268982407759/?type=3&theater.

[389] I Don't Need Feminism, Facebook photo, (January 11, 2015), https://www.facebook.com/idontneedfeminismbecause/photos/a.543029635765027.1073741828.543027985765192/816538865080768/?type=3&theater; I Don't Need Feminism, Facebook photo, (December 27, 2014), https://www.facebook.com/idontneedfeminismbecause/photos/a.543029635765027.1073741828.543027985765192/806101526124502/?type=3&theater; I Don't Need Feminism, Facebook photo, (December 31, 2014), https://www.facebook.com/idontneedfeminismbecause/photos/a.543029635765027.1073741828.543027985765192/809273915807263/?type=3&theater.

[390] Victoria Guzman, Facebook comment, (October 31, 2013), https://www.facebook.com/idontneedfeminismbecause/photos/?tab=album&album_id=543104739090850.

[391] Daniel Kučera, Facebook comment, (March 8, 2014), https://www.facebook.com/idontneedfeminismbecause/photos/?tab=album&album_id=543104739090850.

[392] Glebs Litvjaks, Facebook comment and image, (February 24, 2014), https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=717155355001902&set=p.717155355001902&type=3&theater.

[393] CookieMonsterWasHere, "My University Started an 'I Need Feminism Because...' Campaign Only to Have People Edit Them. I Think the Edits Make the Point More Poignant.," *Reddit*, April 12, 2012, https://www.reddit.com/r/Feminism/comments/s68zm/my_university_started_an_i_need_feminism_because/.

[394] britty_loo_92, "My University Started an 'I Need Feminism Because...' Campaign Only to Have People Edit Them. I Think the Edits Make the Point More Poignant.," comment, *Reddit*, April 23, 2012, https://www.reddit.com/r/Feminism/comments/s68zm/my_university_started_an_i_need_feminism_because/c4fj59s; Falkner09, "My University Started an 'I Need Feminism Because...' Campaign Only to Have People Edit Them. I Think the Edits Make the Point More Poignant.," comment, *Reddit*, April 12, 2012, https://www.reddit.com/r/Feminism/comments/s68zm/my_university_started_an_i_need_feminism_because/c4bf3pm; onlyalevel2druid, "My University Started an 'I Need Feminism Because...' Campaign Only to Have People Edit Them. I Think the Edits Make the Point More Poignant.," comment, *Reddit*, (April 12, 2012), https://www.reddit.com/r/Feminism/comments/s68zm/my_university_started_an_i_need_feminism_because/c4bip5p.

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