



Revenge by photoshop: Memefying police acts in the public dialogue about injustice

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Abstract

In this article, we are interested in the role digital memes in the form of pictures play in the framing of public discourses about police injustice and what it is that makes memes successful in this process. For this purpose, we narrate the story of one such meme: the ‘pepper-spray cop’. In our analysis, we link the creation and spread of the meme to the democratization of online activism and the subversive acts of hierarchical sousveillance. Based on our findings, we discuss features of the meme and the process linked to its initiation, rapid spread and disappearance as vital for the success of visual memes in the context of online protests.

Keywords

Digital memes, injustice, organizational legitimacy, police, protest memes, public discourse, sousveillance

Introduction

Citizens increasingly turn to new media to document and publish perceived wrongdoings of state actors such as police. Publicizing images or videos of seemingly problematic police acts creates a forum for the ‘citizen witness’ and the wider public to demonstrate

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the boundaries of what they deem acceptable behaviours by police or governments, turning new media into a powerful tool for the public discourse about injustice. With this, citizens '[embrace] the idea of transparency as an antidote to concentrated power in the hands of the surveillors' (Fernback, 2013: 14). Seen as a reversal of surveillance, such acts of sousveillance (Mann et al., 2003) aim to redress the imbalance in power relationships between citizens and the state.

Memorable images play a vital role in this process (cf. Carrabine, 2011). Images can get 'implanted' into people's minds, earning them the highly valued status of a *meme*. Although the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *meme* as an idea, behaviour, style or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture, in the more urbanized sense of the word a *meme* can be defined as a 'virus' that infects the minds and thoughts of people and becomes a symbol that carries a message of considerable power and ability to replicate itself (Dawkins, 1979). In the context of the Internet, *digital memes* usually come in the form of a hashtag or video, or more frequently as a picture, which can be easily and rapidly copied, altered and sent on (Shifman, 2013).

In this article, we are interested in how the use of digital memes and their spread through new media can turn into a strategy to defy seemingly invulnerable organizations. More specifically, we address the role memes play in framing public discourses about police injustice and the factors that make memes successful in this process. For this purpose, we narrate the story of one such protest meme: the 'pepper-spray cop', also known as the 'casual pepper-spray everything cop'. The birth of the meme can be traced back to events around Occupy-Wall-Street (OWS), an international protest movement against social and economic inequality, which started in New York City in September 2011. On 18 November 2011, students protesting at the University of California, Davis (UC Davis) were pepper-sprayed by two campus security officers, as they refused to leave the premises of the university. In this incident, a single picture of campus police officer John Pike 'casually' pepper-spraying protesting students became the centre of a viral storm against the seeming mistreatment of peaceful protesters and of democratic values more generally. The result was hundreds of new pictures,¹ while the event itself quickly earned its own Wikipedia-entry.²

The aim of our article is not to evaluate whether the actions of the campus police officers were justified or not, but to investigate how this particular meme became a symbolic icon in the Occupy movement's protests and the public discourse of police injustice more generally. Our analysis sheds light on the use of digital memes and their impact on the image of public organizations in an age in which new media have become one of the most crucial means of organizing protests and shaping public opinions. The police is an organization that cannot be swayed or 'brought down' by customer boycotts as was possible in cases like Shell (1995, against the sinking of decommissioned oil platforms into the Gulf of Mexico), Nike (2008, against the use of child labour in the production of soccer balls) or Nestle (since 1974, against its advertising of baby formula in developing countries; Donkin, 2006). We review the events around the emergence of the 'pepper-spray cop' meme as an example of how new media create new ways of rallying against such seemingly untouchable forces. More specifically, in investigating this case, we aim to understand how memes shape and afford public dialogues against perceived injustice and how they relate to organizations' abilities to act as legitimate entities in an increasingly

networked world. At the same time, we are also interested in the factors that make such visual images effective in the context of protests, that is, the factors that create successful protest memes. This links our study to recent discussions about the role of new media for social movements and the re-calibration of power relationships between state authorities such as police and members of the public (e.g. Bradshaw, 2013; Penny and Dadas, 2014; Reilly, 2013), while also adding to the growing literature about memes' development, usage and life cycle (e.g. Shifman, 2013; Wiggins and Bowers, 2014).

Politically oriented memes: Using images to influence opinions and debates

The origin of the word *meme* can be traced back to the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1979) and his book 'The Selfish Gene'. As a conceptual term, it describes the evolutionary nature of replication of information, traditions and practices in human behaviour. According to meme theorists, the transmission or replication of cultural traits is a process that greatly resembles the spread of a virus in the human body (Donald, 1993). Just like a virus relentlessly infects cell after cell, the carrier of a certain idea, behaviour or attitude directly or indirectly transfers that idea to another person. The other person then becomes 'infected' and turns into a carrier ready to 'infect' other individuals. In consequence, the transfer of cultural traits through imitation or communication has been variously described as a *mind virus* (Brodie, 1996), *idea virus* (Godin, 2002) or *thought contagion* (Lynch, 1996). This biological analogy does not imply, however, that people are only passive carriers of ideas. People actively use the information they receive and interpret it in different ways depending on their background knowledge or context. Also, individuals and groups actively intervene in the formulation and propagation of a cultural trait and leave their own mark by modifying it.

The most successful meme is the one that manages to spread to the greatest number of minds in the shortest period of time (Aunger, 2004). In this process, the ability for transfer and communication plays a vital role. The Internet with its ability for fast mass communication and reproduction of content is thus an ideal medium for the propagation of memes (Heylighen, 1996), whose 'unique features [...] turned their diffusion into a ubiquitous and highly visible routine' (Shifman, 2013: 362).

At the beginning of a meme's inception stand easily spreadable media such as videos or digital images (Wiggins and Bowers, 2014). These are remixed with new elements such as sounds, other images or texts with reference to each other, creating recognizable patterns in content, form and/or stance circulated by large groups of users (Shifman, 2014). Digital memes are thus products of the remix culture and the participatory potential of new media (e.g. Jones and Shieffelin, 2009). For images, this process of meme production is often somewhat vernacularly referred to as 'photoshopping' referring to the modification of a picture with the help of image software.

Most digital memes, be it texts, videos or images, tend to be humorous or mocking in nature (such as the well-known LOL-cats featuring pictures of cats with purposefully misspelled and often funny texts). Yet, this genre finds also more serious applications. Prominent examples are the spoof-ads by the 'anti-consumerist magazine' Adbusters based on the subversion of well-known advertisements to criticize predatory marketing

and consumer cultures,³ the ‘we are the 99%’ meme, which emerged as part of the Occupy-movement, or ‘Obamicons’, which rose to prominence during the 2008 US elections (Gries, 2013).

Such politically oriented memes ‘are about making a point – participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there’ (Shifman, 2014: 120). In these debates, memes support the expression of public opinions and persuasion of others, but can also become a form of grassroots political action in itself (Shifman, 2014). The creation and spread of politically oriented memes can be understood as a facet of the ‘democratization’ of online activism, parallel to the ‘hyper-democratization’ of video-recordings for political purposes (Wilson and Serisier, 2010).

Many acts of online protests remain disjointed and of restricted impact (Fernback, 2013). Still, for a short while, the ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme became a very public and effective rallying point against a police act perceived as unjust – with serious ramifications for the people and organizations involved. The meme even turned into a stable element in the vocabulary of the Occupy-movement (e.g. in Occupy’s ‘say it, don’t spray it’ icons). This success of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme raises the question of why, from the multitude of pictures available on the Occupy-movement, this one became so popular in the public discourse about police injustice. Using the story of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ as a basis, we investigated how the process and features of the meme are linked to its emergence and extensive usage in this debate.

The birth and evolution of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme

The origin of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme can be traced back to a protest at the UC Davis campus in the United States on 18 November 2011.² The day before, a group of students had placed tents on the campus to voice their objections against tuition hikes and police aggression at a previous gathering as well as to express solidarity with the OWS-movement. The university chancellor requested that protestors should remove the tents, to which the students did not comply. On the 18, the chancellor therefore called in the campus police to have the tents taken away. The protest against this act took the form of a peaceful sit-in on one of the university’s pedestrian lanes. After failing to disperse the gathered crowd, two campus officers decided to apply their pepper-spray cans as weapons of last resort. One of them, Lt. John Pike, was video-taped, while he – without any violence or aggression – sprayed several times over the heads of the protesting students sitting on the ground. As the Washington Post described the situation, ‘*It looked as though he was spraying weeds in the garden*’ or like ‘*applying a toxic chemical to humans as if they were garden pests*’ (Washington Post, 2011). Figure 1 shows an illustration of the scene, which so quickly became iconic.⁴

The image that captured the incident at the UC Davis campus was uploaded to the social news website Reddit on 19 November. It took only a day for the first photo-shopped versions of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ to appear on that same website. A first one featured the original picture of the event with a heading stating, ‘*Don’t mind me, just watering my hippies*’, while a second one placed the campus officer in a 1819 painting by John Trumbull, called ‘Declaration of Independence’ (Figure 2).

Over the next days, additional photoshopped pictures appeared on large social networks such as Facebook, Gawker and BuzzFeed as well as more traditional sites such as



Figure 1. Impression of the original picture of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ incident (courtesy of JNA Brown).

the Washington Post and ABC News. Compounded by previous episodes involving the police’s use of pepper-spray against Occupy protesters, and the extreme violence that was used in certain cases, national US media helped to make the story even more popular by reporting on the incident and showing photoshopped pictures of the ‘pepper-spray cop’. The ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme became a leading piece of news on several major national US networks, such as ABC, CNN and FOX News, resulting in a peak on 22 November in terms of Google News volume.

The escalation of news regarding the ‘pepper-spray cop’ continued and Internet users kept uploading numerous modified pictures of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme. In addition, they also posted humorous product descriptions for the brand of pepper-spray used by Officer Pike at the online store Amazon.com. The highest ranked customer review, a seemingly realistic comment from Officer Pike posted on 21 November, extolling the virtues of this specific brand of pepper-spray as ‘*the Cadillac of citizen repression technology*’ received more than 6000 positive votes and a 5-star rating.⁵ Also on 21 November, a fake Twitter account of the ‘Pepper-spraying Cop’ appeared with the motto: ‘I like pepper-spray. I dislike protestors’. In the first few hours of its initiation, it accumulated over 200 followers. The account was launched with the intention of providing satirical commentaries on the development of the photoshopped meme, yet soon also started to feature other incidents of pepper-spray use by police. It has been posting occasional comments until October 2013 and as of June 2014 was still online with over 1500 followers. In addition to these text-based media, users also created ‘pepper-spray cop’ themed songs, movies and video clips, which were uploaded to YouTube. The most notable examples among these are a ballad dedicated to the pepper-spraying campus officer as well as a cover version of the popular Lady Gaga song ‘Poker Face’, renamed ‘Pepper-sprayed’.⁶



Figure 2. Illustration of first instances of the 'pepper-spray cop' meme (courtesy of JNA Brown).

Following the incident and intense media attention, an internal investigation about the actions of Officer Pike was initiated. In its wake, the officer was suspended on paid administrative leave, and in July 2012 he left the police force.⁷ According to Mr Pike's statements, the incident and the subsequent media attention and public reactions resulted in severe stress and 'psychiatric and nervous damages', for which he was awarded workers' compensation in October 2013.⁷ Following the public outcry and media attention after the event, the California Supreme Court initiated a full internal investigation. The end-report was extremely critical on the overall handling of the protest and blamed the incident on poor planning, poor communication and very poor decision-making at all

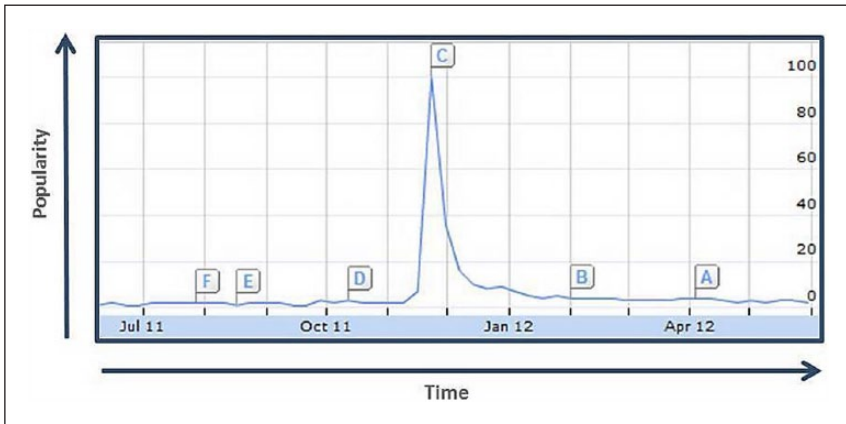


Figure 3. Google view on the number of hits for events related to pepper-spray and police.

levels of the school administration and the police force. As a result of the report, the UC Davis police chief made a public apology and resigned on 18 April 2012. In consequence of the report, new rules and regulations were put in place for future protests, focusing on the safety of protesters and the limited use of force by police officers. Hence, not only was the public image of the police force and the university administration badly damaged, the incident at UC Davis and the subsequent boom of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme became a subject of great public and media attention and fanned discussions on police injustice in the wider context of the Occupy movement. It is hard to imagine, how, without the support of the iconic ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme, this one incident could have reached such prominence in the public and political arena.

What made the ‘pepper-spray cop’ such a successful symbol for public protest?

Using Google’s historic view of keywords, the activity around the ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme can be depicted graphically, resulting in Figure 3.

The different letters in the graph represent historic Google hits for search patterns regarding the term ‘pepper-spray cop’. As indicated in the graph, Google registered six unique news streams including this term represented by the letters A, B, C, D, E and F, respectively. Point C represents the news stream around the incident at UC Davis. Others such as Points A and F appear of interest, but refer to different events. Point F corresponds to an event in Australia, where police officers used pepper-spray on kangaroos. Point A corresponds to an event similar to UC Davis, in which students at Santa Monica University were pepper-sprayed during a protest against high tuition taxes in early April 2012. This raises the question of why, instead of the officers at Event A the ‘pepper-spray cop’ at UC Davis became such an icon for the protest against police injustice.

Dawkins (1979) framed memetic success around three criteria: fecundity (i.e. replicability), copy-fidelity and longevity, all three of which are easy to fulfil in the context of

the Internet (Heylighen, 1996). The ability to replicate digital files has been essentially reduced to a two-step process consisting of pressing the combination of buttons 'ctrl + c' for copying and 'ctrl + v' for pasting. This process creates exact copies of the original, that is, guarantees its copy-fidelity. In the same regard, there is no doubt that a digitalized picture has the ability to survive for a long time. Still, as in principle, every Internet-based image adheres to these criteria, they seem insufficient to explain how specific images become successful in the context of protests and public discourses of injustice. Shifman (2014) suggested that memetic success is linked to simplicity, humour, the memetic potential of the original image, the existence of a puzzle or problem and participatory tools. But again, it remains unclear how far these criteria are related to the success of political or protest memes more specifically.

To determine why the 'pepper-spray cop' meme became such a potent player in the context of discourses about police injustice, we focused our analysis on two aspects: the features of the meme and the features of the process that helped its creation and spread. This review of the meme was based on visual communication analysis of materials from repositories on the 'pepper-spray cop', namely knowyourmeme.com, tumblr, occupy.com as well as results of Google image search (<http://peppersprayingcop.tumblr.com>, for instance, currently holds 135 unique instances of the 'pepper-spray cop' meme). In our analysis, we focused on identifying similarities as well as variations and shifts in the form, tone and meanings across meme versions (cf. Shifman, 2013). Knowyourmeme.com further offers a historical view on the meme development, which provided information on the source and early examples of the meme as well as its spread. Given the sensitive nature of our topic, ethical concerns can arise in the use of names and images of people involved in the event in academic publications creating the possibility of their re-victimization. We therefore avoided naming individuals involved in the incident, with the exception of Lt. Pike and FOX news anchor Megyn Kelly, and decided to restrict depictions of memes to those containing historical images or people in the public domain and to present only information about the event and people that is widely available online.

Features of the meme

In considering the content of the meme, a first interesting observation is the selection made from the captured scene. While one of the first instances of the emergent meme used the full scene simply adding a text, in later versions only Officer Pike together with his pepper-spray can was used. This second format became the 'standard version' of the meme. In this more successful version, the meme thus focused exclusively on the person of the officer and the act of spraying, which became the main productive elements for this meme.

In isolating the act of spraying, the object of the spraying becomes undetermined, that is, the recipient of the act becomes an open slot, which can be filled flexibly. From early on, templates of Officer Pike, such as presented in Figure 4, afforded the use of this image in multiple contexts. In this way, the templates created *context flexibility*, that is the ability of the productive element(s) of the meme to be used in various contexts, while still being able to transport (most of) its original meaning into the new context. This



Figure 4. Illustration of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ template (courtesy of JNA Brown).

flexibility may also explain why the more selective version was more productive than the version using the full scene.

In its more selective version, the meme was also flexible enough to support new usages and meanings. In this context, two examples of the early ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme are worth mentioning. One of them featured the policeman spraying over the presidents’ faces on Mount Rushmore, while the other portrayed the officer spraying over Article 1 of the Constitution of the United States of America (Figure 5).

Spraying over the Mount Rushmore monument is not only a direct ‘attack’ on the symbols of the American presidency, but also a hit on the memory of American leaders like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt. In the same vein, the Constitution of the United States is the supreme law of this country and a guiding principle for American society. Article 1 describes the powers of Congress, which is the legislative branch of the federal government as well as its limits and those of the respective states. More importantly though, the Constitution is a symbol of freedom and democracy in America and carries a strong image of the unity of the American people and their liberties guaranteed by the state. Placing the ‘pepper-spray cop’ into these environments is a clear statement ‘that the officer brutally violated the basic values of justice



Figure 5. Illustrations of political uses of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme (courtesy of JNA Brown).

and freedom as represented by the protesters’ (Shifman, 2013: 10). From the very start, the meme thus emerged not only as a reference to the injustice of police actions, but also to the violation of democratic values more generally – well beyond the original context of the protests at UC Davis.

The ‘pepper-spray cop’ replacing the Statue of Liberty in New York City (Figure 6 top) likewise carries a clear political message beyond the disapproval of his actions at the UC Davis campus. Here one finds again parallels with the ‘liberty’ of society and



Figure 6. Illustrations of later examples of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme (courtesy of JNA Brown).

its tenuous perceived relationship with law enforcement agencies. The image of the police officer spraying over the face of the homo-sapiens (Figure 6 middle) seems to implicate law enforcement agencies in stunting society's progress. The 'pepper-spray cop' did not even spare such fine examples of art as the famous antiwar painting 'Guernica' by Pablo Picasso (Figure 6 bottom). The meme stands here for the condemnation of violence and excessive use of force, although in a broader historical context of state violence and war.

In these examples, the 'pepper-spray cop' meme leaves the confines of the police and is used as a more general statement against state power and authority. The ability of the meme to move away from police allowed its use in a considerably broader range of contexts. This suggests another criterion for the success of political memes: *reference flexibility*, that is, that the meaning of a meme can be broadened from its original restricted meaning into other, often more abstract meanings. This broadening of meaning was certainly facilitated by the close link between police and state authority.

Yet, with this development, the 'pepper-spray cop' meme also illustrates the possible dangers of reference flexibility for the longevity of memes in political discourses. In the re-interpretation of the National Basketball Association logo, for instance, the political connotation has been lost completely (Figure 7 top). Instead, the point of its creation seems simply to introduce a moment of humour. In the same way, Lt. Pike obviously travelled to the moon with the Apollo missions and seemed the deciding factor in the legendary box-fight between Liston and Clay (Figure 7 middle and bottom).

The creators of these examples seem to intend nothing more than to amuse and delight the viewer. At this point, it may be argued that the meaning of the meme has become so broad and indistinct that its further use becomes unproductive. In fact, the decline of the 'pepper-spray cop' meme may be attributable to this 'bleeding out' of meaning, suggesting a possible explanation for the 'death' or abandonment of politically oriented memes. While reference flexibility thus seems to be an important criterion for the initial success of political memes, the relationship may actually be non-linear: too much may be as bad for the survival of a meme as too little.

These observations further point to the fact that humour as success criterion (Shifman, 2014) may be a double-edged sword for political memes. A supporting aspect for the spread of the meme was certainly the considerable creativity demonstrated by many creators of new meme versions, who found a multitude of surprising ways to introduce the 'pepper-spray cop' as a symbol of protest (see Figures 5 to 7 for examples). Interestingly, humour played a small role in the early instances of the 'pepper-spray cop' meme. While one of the first instances combining the original image and the sentence '*just watering my hippies*' was certainly humorous, many of the subsequent memes were deadly earnest. The same can be said of other political memes, which grasped the wider attention in the context of the Occupy movement, foremost the 'we are the 99%' and the Guy Fawkes mask with its connotation of rebellion and its more recent link to the hacker collective Anonymous.

Humour generally increases positive mood in an audience, their willingness to pay attention to a message as well as the overall persuasiveness of messages (Lyttle, 2001). The use of humour may decrease the weight of such a serious issue as human rights and make it more palatable to a wider audience. It can thus be an attractive strategy to use in political arguments. However, as the later examples of the 'pepper-spray cop' meme demonstrate,



Figure 7. Illustrations for apolitical derivatives of the 'pepper-spray cop' meme (courtesy of JNA Brown).

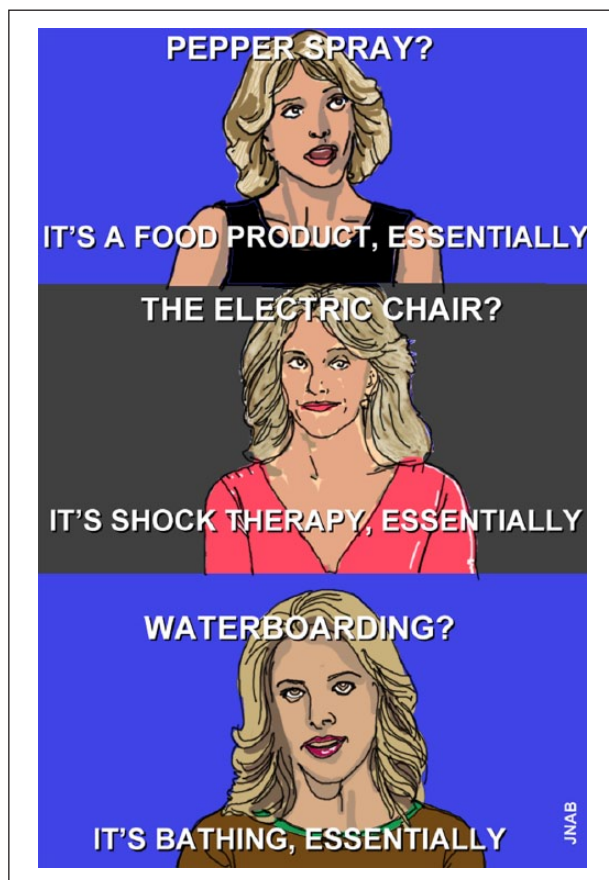


Figure 8. Illustrations of the ‘essentially’ meme as a byproduct of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ (courtesy of JNA Brown).

this is always counter-balanced by the threat to lose sight of the message itself leading to its ‘depoliticization’ (Shifman, 2014: 138). While *novelty* and *continuous reinvention* are certainly important to keep the interest of an online audience, where humour became the main purpose, the political meaning of the meme, and thus its usefulness as a political instrument, largely disappeared. This suggests that for protest memes it may be more critical to retain a strong *emotional appeal* (i.e. *affectivity*; cf. Heylighen and Chielens, 2009).

Comparing the ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme with other politically oriented memes, such as the essentially meme, which was a split-off from the same incident, provides further refinements of memetic success criteria for the context of protest memes. The essentially meme targeted one specific person, the FOX News anchor Megyn Kelly, and aimed to disprove a specific argument, namely the harmlessness of pepper-spray, in extension suggesting the relative harmlessness of the act itself. This was done by converting Ms Kelly’s original utterance (Figure 8 top) into (even more) cynical statements (e.g., Figure 8 middle and bottom).

The political agenda in this meme remained localized and focused on one specific person and topic. In contrast, the issues addressed in the ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme are generalized, namely police violence, state injustice and in its extended versions threats to democratic values and free societies, if state authorities go overboard. Such broader issues also underlie other successful politically oriented memes, such as Obamicons or ‘The Successful Black Men’.⁸ In the context of political memes, the idea that memes should be simple (Heylighen and Chielens, 2009; Shifman, 2014) may therefore require differentiation. While the form of the meme should certainly be simple and recognizable, the message probably should not. Instead, successful memes used in discourses about police and state injustice often seem to carry deep and generalized meanings, that is, address issues recognized by and recognizable to a broad and varied audience in their societal context. We therefore suggest that the success of political memes may also hinge on the ‘depth’ or *generality of the issue* under discussion.

Still, the question remains, why this specific ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme emerged as the symbol of police injustice and not a meme, for instance, based on Event A in Figure 3? In our view, the answer lies in the very early statements about this incident: the fact that a clearly violent action was carried out in such an unemotional, nearly nonchalant manner. While the act itself was in line with the negative expectations of some groups about police, the way it was carried out certainly was not. Hence, the obvious disconnect between a violent act and the detached manner of its execution was what sparked the initial attention. The strangely depersonalized way of acting made it easy to convert Officer Pike into a symbol for the unemotional and detached attitude of police (and state authorities more generally) towards society. In the form of a *pars-pro-toto*, Officer Pike and his actions came to stand in for police and for police brutality in general. This process was certainly supported by the fact that police officers as individuals are representatives of the police as an organization. By donning their uniforms, police officers become immediately recognizable as part of police as a whole, while turning personally anonymous. The sameness and therefore proto-typicality of officers in the public eye facilitates the process of creating a generic symbol out of a single person. In contrast to personalized memes such as ‘we are the 99%’, which depicts individuals with their very personal stories (Shifman, 2014), the ‘pepper-spray cop’ can thus be seen as an ‘impersonalized’ meme. Space restrictions forbid a broader comparison, but it is well possible that it is this depersonalization that supports expansions of functions and thus the wider spread of memes in political discourses.

The incident further carried *symbolic validity*, that is, the action seemed in accordance with shared and accepted perceptions of the organization by (at least some) members of the public. The act is thus immediately recognizable in its meaning (police injustice) without requiring explanations. (A police officer hugging the protesting students would probably not have had the same success as a protest meme.) The act can so easily stand for state injustice, because its very nature seems concordant with the assumed attitude of the state towards its citizens. This together with the *pars-pro-toto* effect may explain the ease with which this individual officer could be turned into a generic representative of police injustice and thus stand for the whole of what seems problematic about state authority.

Features of the process

The most powerful meme cannot become successful without a process to support its propagation. The case of the 'pepper-spray cop' suggests several factors that facilitate the successful diffusion of digital (protest) memes. The very quick creation of *templates* certainly helped to spread the adoption of the picture. The templates formed an important participatory tool (Shifman, 2014), which made it easy and convenient also for less experienced users to create their own version of the 'pepper-spray cop' story and post it online. In the same regard, the template also instantly created a *standard format* for the meme. Instead of several different versions (e.g. in terms of shape, colour or angle), the template ensured that one single version was used, which made it instantly recognizable.

The initial template was posted on the social networking site Facebook. Because the incident had taken place on a university campus, photos of the policeman spraying over the students quickly spread among college students and other young people using the service, and in extension to Facebook users outside the university related to this original group. Initially, the meme thus emerged in a tight and very prolific network of users suggesting that the *density of the network* of 'carriers' may play a crucial role in the initial success of digital memes. Yet, the meme did not remain in the close confines of this community. In picking up the story, online news media as well as traditional media created awareness within a broader audience outside the initial group and also offline. This lent considerable weight to the story and thus provided impetus to the further propagation of the meme, increasing its attractiveness as well as the number of people aware of its existence. This *ability to transfer to other networks* than the community of initiators thus seems another important process factor for its success. It also supports observations made by Bakir (2009) in the context of private (sousveillant) video-footage of the execution of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein about the importance of traditional media networks in spreading subversive messages.

The incident moreover happened amidst already heightened tensions in the context of the OWS-movement. The meme thus emerged at a time, when the police's handling of protests was already under critical scrutiny. The rapid spread of the 'pepper-spray cop' meme was thus probably also supported by the generalized awareness about police injustice in the public and media, linking the success of memes to the notion of *perfect timing* or 'kairos' (Heinrichs, 2007).⁹

Discussion

Online memes are often short-lived and seldom reach beyond the confines of a small group of people (Fernback, 2013). Still, as the case of the 'pepper-spray cop' meme demonstrates, they can become powerful rallying points for a broad community online as well as offline, with dramatic consequences for the organizations and individuals that become either a part or a target of such memes. Similar to the video about the death of Neda Agha-Soltan that became iconic in the 2009 Iranian uprising, the 'pepper-spray cop' meme became a recognizable symbol of what the students, and in extension the OWS-movement, were fighting against. Without this transformation of Officer Pike into a digital protest meme, the incident at UC Davis would probably have remained a singular event without larger repercussions.

Our study provides a view on links between online and offline protests, in which memes are used as devices for the framing of public discourses about police injustice. The ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme originated in an incident during an offline protest. The image then moved online and transformed into a meme that rallied public opinions way beyond the confines of the group affected by the original incident, again leading to severe (offline) consequences for the people and organizations involved. The ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme thus demonstrates the capacity of digital memes to not only shape public discourses online, but also to create real-world impacts.

The meme is an example of the increasingly interwoven nature of offline and online protests and the potential of new media to create powerful and effective linkages between the discourses of online and offline audiences. This may be especially the case where individuals or organizations are as vulnerable to the loss of image and legitimacy as police forces. The close relationship between public discourses in new media and offline consequences for police forces is mostly due to the importance of public perceptions and attitudes for their functioning and work. The willingness of a society to transfer the right to use force rests on the belief that the police ‘will do the right thing’ (Chermak and Weiss, 2005), and this belief is strongly based on the manner, in which police exercise their authority (e.g. Tyler and Wakslak, 2004).

Police and citizens stand in an unequal relationship, in which officers are given considerable authority by law. The publication of negative images and information can be seen as a ‘redressing’ of this imbalance. The function of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme for the discourse about police injustice was foremost that of providing a diagnostic frame (Benford and Snow, 2000). In particular, by pairing the ‘pepper-spray cop’ with well-established icons of cultural and political values such as the Statue of Liberty, the bill of rights or the line of human evolution (i.e. using the technique of cultural jamming; Carducci, 2006), meme creators provided clear and easily interpretable messages of what they considered problematic about the relationship between police and citizens. To a certain extent, the meme further offered motivational framing in urging for action against the perceived injustice (Benford and Snow, 2000). However, in the sense of ‘connective actions’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), the creation and spreading of memes can also be seen as an act of resistance in itself.

Publicizing images of questionable police behaviours brings police organizations and their practices under the public eye and opens avenues for the critical (and perhaps legal) appraisal of police actions. In these acts of hierarchical *sousveillance* (Mann, 2004), transparency is used as a weapon against the (possible) misuses of power, placing citizens in the role of a control agency of police. Such outside pressures can be a powerful change agent for organizations. In a business context, Ansari and Phillips (2011) demonstrated how ‘unconscious’ processes of consumers can change whole organizational fields. In a more forceful way, the creation and spread of memes can create new practices within organizations by shaping public discourses, thus reversing the feeling of powerlessness many citizens feel vis-à-vis state actors and institutions. Although video-activists use hierarchical *sousveillance* strategically (Wiggins and Bowers, 2014), frequently these images are accounts of individuals who record their personal experiences. It could be argued that in publicizing these personal images, personal *sousveillance* (Mann, 2004) becomes the basis for hierarchical *sousveillance*, in that personal views of accidental witnesses start informing and defining general debates, views and perspectives on events.

Studies on new media in political activism are often focused on the citizen camera-witness, who uses 'the mobile camera as a personal witnessing device to provide a public record of embodied actions of political dissent for the purpose of persuasion' (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013: 4). Yet, the use of photos for political memes goes beyond the mere witnessing and distribution of footage, as meme creators re-use and re-interpret the original image in creative ways. It is a purposeful act of re-interpretation and re-contextualization of an image for their own objectives, whether they are in line with the intention of the original eye-witness or not. The process of creating political memes from existing pictures thus turns passive viewing of footage into an active demonstration of solidarity with the victims.

Redistribution of content can be an important tool to create a sense of community, as also demonstrated by Penny and Dadas (2014) for the re-tweeting of messages during the OWS-movement. These are not social movements with clear boundaries, but communities with changing actors and unstable and shifting memberships. Protest memes provide rallying points for such 'unaffiliated individuals' (Mercea, 2012) with the common purpose of creating a sense of community between the victims, the bystanders and the community of viewers. Although this community remains largely diffuse and anonymous, memes help to express, develop and frame shared opinions and actions.

As our study demonstrates, new media provide new means of 'fighting back' against perceived wrongdoings of powerful public actors such as police by creating and connecting communities of like-minded people beyond the confines of their original social groups. The power of digital memes thus lies in the shifting of opinions and discourses in established communities such as media and politics by largely unorganized actors. Moving beyond the three criteria originally formulated by Dawkins, our analysis suggests possible features of the meme, its production and distribution impacting the success of memes in this process.

Limitations and further research

Although we think that our study offers important insights for the investigation of digital memes and their role in public discourses about police injustice, it certainly also has its limitations. Our observations and the development of success criteria are based on one specific example. We tried to contrast our observations against other memes; however, space restrictions forbade extensive and systematic comparisons. While we expect that the meme and process characteristics are transferable to other cases, clearly other examples are needed for cross-validation and for a better understanding of their respective importance across contexts.

Although we conducted our study in the context of police work, we assume that our observations are not restricted to police, as the wish to control the environment to achieve higher legitimacy is not unique to police organizations (Gluckler and Armbruster, 2003). Comparing our observations with protests against other public or private organizations would further help to test the generalizability of our success criteria.

Successful memes spread with high speed and can reach millions of users. It was therefore impossible to follow the entire extent of the 'pepper-spray cop' meme, creating possible biases in the selection of examples. For our purpose, the minutiae of each shift and adjustment were less important than understanding the main factors and drivers for the uptake and propagation of the meme. The focus on the main developments

was therefore a conscious decision on our part. In this process, we took the stance of a recipient of the public discourse rather than the role of an active participant, that is, we did not speak to the creators of the meme or the users re-posting and commenting on it. To better understand their motivations and effects, capturing perspectives of creators and propagators would certainly be desirable.

Still, our view on the development of a single meme also opens up new questions and exciting new avenues for further study. While we identified the importance of networks from the initial community to online opinion makers and traditional mass media, the exact process of spread through these networks remains an interesting riddle. For instance, who needs to be involved in the early stages to make a protest meme successful? And who needs to be involved for the widest possible spread? The broad coverage across disparate media channels (social media, online news sites, TV, etc.) seemed important to make the meme known to a broad audience. Still, the exact role of traditional mass-media compared to new media remains somewhat ambiguous: Are traditional mass-media an important propagation mechanism in itself or is it simply a sign that the meme reached a certain level of maturity?

More generally the question remains, when a meme can be considered mature, that is, has obtained a stable, instantly recognizable meaning? Also what could cause a meme to die off? As far as we are aware, the active use of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ meme has stopped, but it could certainly be revived if an incident would spark similar discussions around police injustice. It has become part of the language repertoire of many Internet users as a symbol for the public protest against police injustice. Yet, would the ‘pepper-spray cop’ always have to hold a pepper-spray can or could he also hold a flame thrower or a water hose and still be recognizable and usable with the same meaning? Future inquiries should clarify at what point changes/additions to the original meme become possible and how much a meme can change without losing its original meaning.

Conclusion

The story of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ is a striking example of how people can be empowered by digital memes to criticize an organization over which they have very little control. Although one may argue that spreading images of the ‘pepper-spray cop’ was just another form of ‘slacktivism’, these acts had very real impacts for the individuals and organizations involved. Digital memes can thus provide citizens with a way to re-balance power with seemingly untouchable organizations. On the other hand, they can also easily destroy reputations and livelihoods. We think that it is in these moments, where ‘playfulness turns to deadly purpose’, that digital memes gain their relevance for citizens and organizations and where we need to understand their dynamics and effects. In our study, we offered an analysis of one meme and investigated possible success criteria in a protest context. We hope that this will provide useful pointers for future research into this important area.

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Notes

1. For examples see, <http://peppersprayingcop.tumblr.com/> or <http://knowyour-meme.com/memes/casually-pepper-spray-everything-cop>
2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UC_Davis_pepper-spray_incident
3. <https://www.adbusters.org/spoofads>
4. For illustrative purposes, and to avoid copyright violations, the original photos, pieces of artwork and graphical social commentary discussed in this article have been re-interpreted by Dr John N.A. Brown. For examples of the originals, see the links in Endnote 1.
5. The full review can be found at: http://www.amazon.com/review/R2HCOTQZGEJDOK/ref=cm_cr_pr_viewpnt/175-3764280-3681109#R2HCOTQZGEJDOK
6. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kiuaQ8sLBfk>
7. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-24650954>
8. <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/successful-black-man>
9. We are indebted to one of our reviewers for pointing us to this concept.

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