Internet Memes as Protest Media in Populist Hungary

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ABSTRACT

Scholars propose that memes are efficient tools of political mobilization as they stimulate large masses to take up a cause. Focusing on what is called O1G activism in Hungary, I demonstrate that the role of memes in political activism is conditioned by the particular sociopolitical contexts in which they are produced. In Hungary, activists used social media to assemble databases of O1G memes, but this strategy was not conducive to building narrative capacity. These databases, however, galvanized other prominent developments. They helped make the domain of politics more inclusive by reconfiguring the affective tone of engagement from confrontation to conversation.

KEYWORDS

media activism, internet memes, social media platforms, authoritarian populism, Hungary

Visual Anthropology Review, Vol. 37, Issue 1, pp. 52–76, ISSN 1058-7187, online 1548-7458. DOI: 10.1111/var.12232.

Until December 2018, Hungarian internet memes were seamlessly embedded in global meme culture. Most memes featured locally relevant messages paired with globally circulating images like a picture of Leonardo di Caprio wearing a tuxedo and raising a glass of champagne to toast the viewers of the meme. This norm changed in December 2018 when internet memes started circulating in Hungary that were intelligible only to social media users familiar with the local political scene. These memes featured the acronym O1G or its sign version (the letter G and number 1 enclosed within the letter O) to offer personalized responses to a new overtime law the Fidesz-KDNP government passed shortly after it was reelected.[1] This new law increased the legally allowable overtime work from 250 to 400 hours per year. By doing so, it cemented Hungary's role in the European Union as a supplier of inexpensive and unprotected labor for Western European manufacturers. This so-called "slave law" provoked massive protests throughout the country and among diasporic Hungarians. It was in this context that the O1G acronym and its sign equivalent emerged as symbols of antigovernment activism.

O1G activism evolved from a falling out between Prime Minister Orbán Viktor and government-supported media oligarch Simicska Lajos in 2015. The conflict ended with Simicska telling a reporter that it was fine to publish his opinion that "Orbán was a douchebag." In the Hungarian statement "Orbán egy geci," *egy* means "a" or "one," hence the number "1" in the O1G acronym, and *geci* means "cum." As a gendered expletive, *geci* is one of the strongest expressions one can wield to humiliate a male opponent in Hungary. The term refers to a man who is dishonest, backstabbing, immoral, and petty.[2] After the statement appeared in the print media, Simicska sprayed the sentence on government billboards. Others followed suit and spread the statement in the form of graffiti, photographs of which circulated as memes on the internet (Figures 1 and 2). In the summer of 2017, an activist who adopted the pseudonym Budai Simicska (Simicska of Buda) began using social media to document and build a database of "Orbán egy geci" graffiti.[3] He did so to expand O1G activism. His posts became internet memes inspiring social media users to create ever-wittier memetic responses. The production of O1G memes, in turn, facilitated the transformation of the internet meme into a prominent medium of antigovernment protest in Hungary.

In a context in which analog media institutions are controlled by the Fidesz-KDNP government (Bajomi-Lázár 2014), the political opposition has no choice but to turn to social media to create new activist spaces. Antigovernment activists,

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however, use social media often without critically reflecting on the fact that these online platforms were not designed to foster political activism. Scholars have written about the ways in which developments in digital media technologies transform common practices of political activism (Coleman 2014; Kaun 2016; Mottahedeh 2015; Stalcup 2016; Treré 2018; Tufekci 2017;

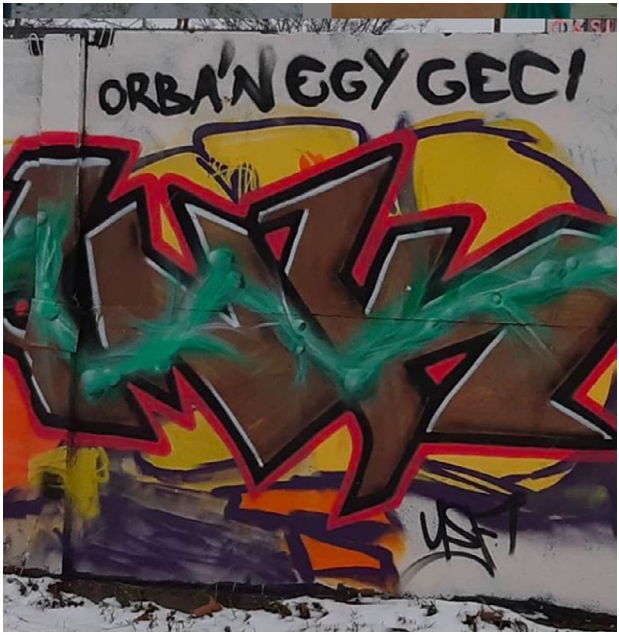

FIG. 1

FIG. 2

Zamponi 2018). Building on this, I demonstrate that the lack of critical engagement with the algorithmic architectures of social media platforms was instrumental to the failure of O1G activism to consolidate an antigovernment coalition in Hungary. O1G memes were assembled predominantly on Facebook and Twitter. From these and other social media platforms, I collected 646 O1G memes and analyzed this corpus with NVivo.[4] Based on this analysis, I argue that Facebook and Twitter enabled activists to build databases of O1G memes, but these databases did not help them develop narrative capacity, which sociologist Zeynep Tufekci defines as the ability of activists to frame the story of their political projects on their own terms (2017).

Tufekci identifies narrative capacity as one of three capacities social movements build in addition to disruptive and institutional/electoral capacity. These capacities determine the strength of social movements. Collected in databases, O1G memes were not conducive to developing narrative capacity and thus were unable to advance a storyline that activists could have utilized to maintain and expand public engagement. New media theorist Lev Manovich views the database as "the key form of cultural expression" of the computer age (2001, 194). New media, he argues, do not tell stories and do not organize their elements into narratives that present development from a beginning to an end. Rather, they offer collections of digital items whose relationships they leave unstructured. Scholars also observe that by enabling consumers to participate in the distribution and production of media content, digital media technologies have simultaneously advanced the waning of the narrative and the expansion of a database-driven consumption of media culture (Azuma 2009; Lukács 2010).

Building on this argument, I propose that using corporate social media to develop political activism did not help activists develop narrative capacity. In my case study, O1G memes remained disparate components of O1G databases assembled on social media. In their database format, they were unable to transform a criticism of Hungary's prime minister into a systemic critique. At the same time, I propose that using internet memes as protest media helped build affective capacity, which catalyzed a transformation in the affective tone of political activism, shifting the idea of political engagement from confrontation to conversation. The ability of internet memes to open new pathways to make the domain of politics more inclusive in Hungary suggests that social movements develop more capacities than scholars previously identified (Tufekci 2017). Reconsidering the range of capacities media technologies enable political activists to build, in turn, helps us rethink what

FIG. 1 "Orbán egy geci" graffiti, Budapest, 2018. Photograph by Anonymous. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

FIG. 2 Protest sign used during the "slave law" protests in December 2018, Budapest, 2018. Photograph by Anonymous. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

we conceptualize as political participation and how we understand social change.

From Graffiti to Internet Meme: O1G Activism

The media oligarch and author of "Orbán egy geci," Simicska Lajos, had been a Fidesz loyalist and a close friend of Orbán Viktor. They went to the same high school and shared a dormitory room in Budapest while attending Hungary's top university. Simicska built his media empire during the Fidesz party's first term between 1998 and 2002, and his media companies unwaveringly supported the Fidesz-KDNP government during its second term in office between 2010 and 2014. However, the relationship soured when the government decided to levy a flat tax rate for ad revenues in February 2015. This law has disproportionately burdened mid-sized commercial media like Simicska's investments, triggering Simicska to call Orbán a douchebag. This public statement led to an open war between Orbán and Simicska, which dragged out for years and ended with Simicska's withdrawal. By August 2018, Simicska had been forced to sell most of his media outlets to Fidesz loyalists. Simicska's statement, however, survived the conflict. While print media initially launched the circulation of the expletive, Simicska Lajos contributed to its dissemination by creating the first graffiti version of the disparaging statement. By doing so, he passed the baton to graffiti writers who were quick to jump on the bandwagon. Photographs of "Orbán egy geci" graffiti, in turn, became internet memes that activists like Budai Simicska assembled on social media platforms, most notably Tumblr and Facebook.[5]

A graffiti writer explained to me that graffiti is a genre that inspires critical reflection on the communicative affordances and circulatory reach of media. I learned that trains, for instance, are privileged targets of graffiti writers because their moving surfaces are able to spread messages. This is a poignant observation that helps explain why antigovernment activists turned to graffiti in a context in which analog media production was controlled by the government. Graffiti writers, just like the producers of O1G memes who followed in their footsteps, critically engaged with the question of what could be transformed into protest media in a context in which the political opposition was denied access to broadcast media. Shortly after the Fidesz-KDNP government won in the national elections of 2010, it passed a law to penalize graffiti writers with a minimum sentence of one year in prison, depending on the extent of property damage (cf. Young 2014).[6] More recently, the government also incentivized civilian reporting on graffiti

writers and placed CCTV cameras in areas where antigovernment graffiti are commonly placed. These efforts to curb the spread of graffiti have unquestionably contributed to graffiti writers' insistence to preserve their anonymity.

As graffiti was illegal, the medium was also less conducive to fostering dialogue than internet memes. By extension, graffiti did not help transform character assassination into a broader critique of authoritarian populism. Although a few attempts testify to efforts to start dialogues, these did not evolve into a systemic critique that could have served as the basis for formulating a political program. One of these attempts emerged from graffiti someone placed on a pillar of the Margit Bridge in Budapest that read, "Orbán geci." After this graffiti was removed, someone restored it, but this time in Runic writing. In doing so, the author of the graffiti departed from the initial aim of graffiti writers to assassinate the prime minister's character. Rendering Simicska's statement in Runic writing was a satirical commentary on the Fidesz-KDNP government's ethnonationalism and right-wing populism.[7]

Another comparable moment in the ensuing graffiti war was when someone placed graffiti on Saint Rókus Chapel that read, "Orbán has caviar for dinner. What will you have?" Someone else responded with the message, "Nothing." After these graffiti were removed, the author of the original graffiti spray-painted on the fresh wall, "Even if you remove this graffiti, Orbán is still a douchebag" ("Hiába fested le, Orbán geci marad"). Just like the graffiti placed on the Margit Bridge, the graffiti spray-painted on Saint Rókus Chapel also became an internet meme. Internet memes are more dialogical than graffiti, which, one would assume, would make them more conducive to transforming a criticism of the prime minister (the leader of an authoritarian populist government) into a systemic critique. The problem with O1G memes, however, was that they were assembled on corporate social media, which did not help activists identify developments in O1G activism that they could then use to expand O1G activism, formulate a political program, and forge a political coalition.

The fact that the main coordinator of O1G activism, Budai Simicska, remained anonymous also did not help develop O1G activism into what some exuberantly started calling the O1G Coalition. Since the original expletive was defamatory and graffiti was illegal, it is understandable why the activist Budai Simicska did not want to reveal his identity. It is unclear whether he planned to come forward, but he tried to make O1G activism more commensurate with mainstream antigovernment mobilization by creating rules to expand the movement. He proposed that the expletive should only be spray-painted on

three walls he designated in the Buda side of Budapest, which were already covered in graffiti. At the same time, to multiply the channels of spreading O1G content, Budai Simicska also recruited volunteers via Facebook to place O1G stickers on walls, public transportation, shopping carts, and traffic signs. To preserve his anonymity, he hid stickers that volunteers were asked to locate using a GPS-based game, geocaching. Furthermore, in preparation for the national elections in April 2018, he encouraged graffiti writers to deface the Fidesz party's election posters with "Orbán egy geci" graffiti and asked them to send him pictures that he then posted on his Facebook page.

Internet Memes in Political Activism: O1G Memes

As Budai Simicska surmised in a blog post, "these were anemic efforts clearly insufficient to undermine the Fidesz-KDNP party alliance," which won its third consecutive victory in the 2018 elections.[8] A few months after the elections, the government passed the so-called slave law, which provoked massive protests in Hungary and the diaspora. It was in this context that the O1G acronym and its sign version emerged as symbols of antigovernment activism. Graffiti writers resumed spreading "Orbán egy geci" graffiti, with their artistic renderings appearing as far away as on London's famous graffiti wall on Leake Street (Figure 3). The memetic circulation of the O1G acronym and sign also skyrocketed. Protesters traced the O1G sign into snow and projected it onto buildings in Hungary, while Hungarians living in warmer climates composed it out of sand, pebbles, seashells, and flowers. Others scribbled the sign on banknotes, transformed it into Christmas cookies, assembled it from alphabet soup, placed the expletive on scrabble boards and crossword puzzles, and used the sign in nail designs, pins, piercings, and body tattoos. Photographs of these acts to transform a multitude of materials into protest media were passed around by internet users and assembled on social media pages, including Budai Simicska (Facebook), A Budai Simicska (Tumblr), O1G (Tumblr), O1g (Tumblr), One Million for Press Freedom in Hungary (Facebook), O1G International (Facebook), #O1G International Protest (Instagram), and #O1G (Twitter).[9] A brief review of literature on internet memes highlights their potential to serve as tools of political mobilization. Following this review, I analyze the 646 memes I collected.

In his book *The Selfish Gene*, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins used the term *meme* to theorize how cultural information circulates (1976). He defines the meme as a small unit of culture that spreads from person to person by copying. In some cases, these copies only slightly differ from the

FIG. 3 O1G graffiti on Banksy's famous graffiti tunnel on Leake Street in London, London 2019. Photograph by Anonymous. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

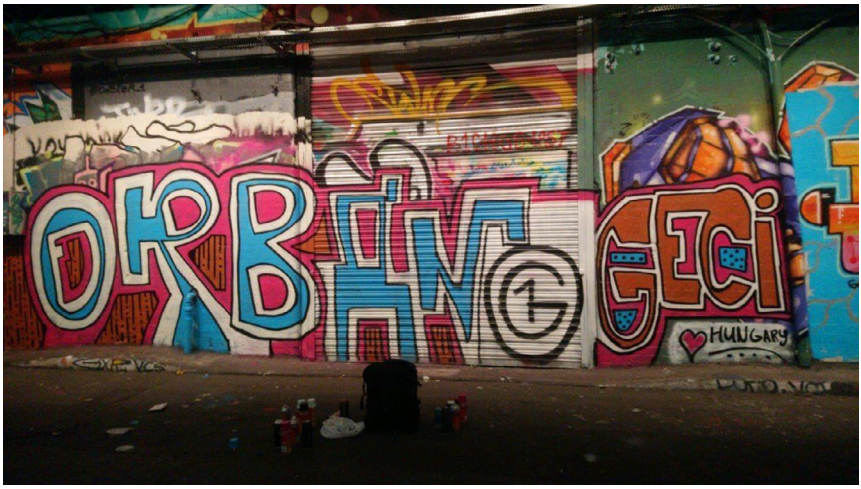

FIG. 3

original, whereas in other cases they are more markedly modified. In a 2013 interview, Dawkins distinguished the internet meme from his pre-internet definition, which involved mutation by random choice. The internet meme, he stressed, is a meme that is deliberately altered by human creativity.[10] An important aspect of internet memes relevant to my argument is that a digital item only becomes a meme when it inspires derivative works. Media scholar Limor Shifman defines the internet meme as a group of digital items that (1) share common characteristics pertaining to content, form, and stance; (2) are created with awareness of each other; and (3) are widely circulated on the internet (2013). O1G memes fulfill all three of these criteria. Departing from the most common form of internet memes (image macros), O1G memes are predominantly still images that do not feature commentaries overlaid on pictures. Since the O1G acronym and its sign version are already commentaries, further explanation would be redundant.

Shifman notes that, more so than analog media such as television or radio, memes encourage communication between internet users. She proposes that internet memes generate public discourses in which variations represent different perspectives. She claims that "memes expand the range of participatory options in democracies" by enabling citizens to express their political opinions in new and accessible ways (2013, 144). Shifman concludes that political memes participate in a normative debate about how professional politics should function and how politicians should perform their jobs. Similarly, political scientists Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg argue that political

slogans that circulate in the form of memes are uniquely conducive to stimulating large masses of people to take up a cause. Memes are efficient tools of political mobilization, they suggest, because they offer the opportunity to personally relate to the general messages political slogans propagate (2012). These observations provide insight into understanding how producers of O1G memes inspired each other to create new memes that offered personal commentaries about the prime minister, authoritarian populism, and O1G activism. Rather than leading to the formation of a new political party or the development of a political program, however, the production of memes in Hungary reconfigured the style of political culture and, consequently, made political activism more inclusive.

Consider the example of O1G memes that portrayed cookies decorated with the O1G sign (Figures 4 and 5). I found 33 cookie memes circulating on social media. Based on likes on Facebook, these memes were among the most popular O1G memes. Most of these were Christmas cookies, and the majority of the bakers were women. In Hungary, toxic masculinity pervades political culture, to which the evolution of O1G activism testifies. In this context, internet memes opened a venue for women to join political activism in ways that were more agreeable to them than more contentious forms of activism like graffiti writing.

At the same time, by baking Christmas cookies that featured the O1G sign, women blunted the confrontational character of O1G activism. They reconfigured the affective tone of political activism and made it more inclusive by linking it to pleasant memories such as mothers baking cookies with their children in preparation for a holiday. Women, however, did more than dissociate the O1G sign from its vulgar and antagonizing origins. By baking O1G cookies, they took a creative approach to joining antigovernment mobilization while also pushing O1G activism toward a systemic critique. Some bakers used their skills and baking sheets as canvases to articulate a critique of authoritarian populism. They expanded their criticism of the prime minister to also playfully question the integrity of the president of Hungary (Áder János), whom they saw as a political figurehead rubber-stamping decisions the Fidesz-KDNP government pressed through the Parliament, capitalizing on its two-thirds majority. Equally important, by baking O1G cookies and posting them on social media, women claimed visibility in political activism.

Technologist An Xiao Mina argues that internet memes are an invitation to social media users to express their views (2018). She proposes that some of the most powerful narratives in the twenty-first century evolved from meme culture. In her view, meme production is a creative process during which

FIG. 4 O1G cookie memes, Budapest, 2019. Photograph by Anonymous. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

FIG. 4

meme developers expose each other to new ideas. In these processes of experimentation, some ideas are dismissed and sink into oblivion, whereas others evolve and unite people around a particular position. Borrowing from advertising, she identifies this process as "intentional overproduction" or the spaghetti method, which means throwing things at the wall to see what sticks. I agree that meme production enables internet users to participate in the realm of politics, but I am less convinced that memes always catalyze the development of new narratives. In the framework of O1G activism, non-narrativization was not due to the limits of the O1G meme. O1G memes were not image macros. Rather, the choices of what materials and contexts were repurposed into protest media functioned as commentaries. Furthermore, O1G memes were means of character assassination, but in the context of authoritarian populism, criticism of the prime minister was an easy pathway to a systemic critique.

Data Visualization on Social Media Platforms

In addition to using NVivo to analyze the 646 O1G memes I collected, I also transported my collection of O1G memes to Apple

FIG. 5

Photos, Google Photos, and Adobe Creative Cloud (Behance) to assess the photograph cataloguing capabilities of Facebook and Twitter, which were most commonly used in O1G activism. These photograph-sharing platforms all feature data visualization functionality that Facebook and Twitter utilize but do not offer to their users. On Facebook, images are presented within an album in the order in which they are uploaded, but users can rearrange the sequence of images if they are willing to invest the time and labor to do so. Twitter presents images strictly in chronological order under the media tab, which will also list every tweet by a given user. On these platforms, data visualization is entirely user driven, and it is a labor-intensive activity given that image categorization requires developing systems of classification and labeling each image. Untagged images are not searchable on Facebook and Twitter, as these platforms do not make the artificial intelligence they use to make images readable available to their users—a point I will revisit shortly.[11] Rather than serving as image-driven social media platforms, the algorithmic architectures of Facebook and Twitter are built to encourage commentary and interaction.[12]

By contrast, Google Photos uses its own proprietary AI-driven system to categorize images. Google Photos is able to automatically create albums that group together photographs portraying "people," "places," and "things" even if the images are untagged. Without my intervention, the application

grouped together memes that portrayed bridges, snow, and people. Additionally, Google Photos uses facial recognition software, which was able to identify all memes in my collection that featured Orbán Viktor, for instance. To my surprise, the application also recognized an activist who appeared on more than one selfie-styled meme. Similar to Google Photos, Apple Photos also offers AI-driven functionality to categorize images. This does not run through cloud, like Google Photos, but on the user's device. By using Apple Photos, the algorithm is taught to recognize certain objects or sceneries, such as "farms," "buildings," or "shoes." Last, Behance does not make images searchable within a user's album, and users commonly complain about the search function of the application. However, it enables users to arrange images in different grid configurations, which allows for better data visualization than Facebook or Twitter.

This experiment confirmed the findings of my NVivo analysis: corporate social media such as Facebook and Twitter do not support the visualization of emerging trends in O1G activism. Platform developers use machine learning to tag photos with information. Making images machine-readable has several advantages. It assists platform management to remove content that violates platform guidelines. It also enables users with sight impairment to process images. Equally important, making images readable helps platform owners transform images into sources of data about social media users. Facebook and Twitter, however, do not offer these data visualization capabilities to platform users and, therefore, do not help activists grasp trends in image-driven political activism. These online platforms were not developed specifically to host visual content. Owned by Facebook, Instagram offers the most sophisticated tools to classify and search images. It, however, remained marginal to O1G activism.

Research by scholars who have examined the advantages and disadvantages of using social media platforms in political activism (Johnson 2017; Treré 2018) corroborates my proposition that O1G activists needed to more resourcefully employ these platforms to make the most of social media's capability to advance their political agendas. Media scholar Emiliano Treré's excellent study demonstrates that social media are harnessed both for political propaganda and political activism (2018). Social media have given rise to computational propaganda as they support the use of political bots, the formation of digital enclaves, and attention hacking. By manipulating hashtags on Twitter, for example, the platform can be used to hack attention by preventing supporters of the same cause from finding each other. Treré, however, stresses that algorithmically mediated

FIG. 5 O1G cookie memes, Budapest, 2019. Photograph by Anonymous. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

environments can also be repurposed as resources for social movements. A successful example is the Spanish Indignados, who were able to hijack the algorithmic architectures of corporate social media. For example, they systematically developed trending topics on Twitter, which allowed them to create and circulate their own narratives. They critically engaged with the extractivist character of social media and understood that they needed to capitalize on algorithmic features such as Twitter's tendency to reward novelty. Although O1G activists were amply "tech savvy," I did not find any evidence that they critically engaged with the algorithmic architectures of the social media platforms they used.

Database and Narrative in O1G Activism

Lev Manovich argues that new media offer collections of digital items without structuring their relationship and organizing them into narratives (2001). Building on this observation, I propose that O1G activism was unable to evolve into a full-fledged political movement because activists used corporate social media that did not allow them to visualize (and then analyze) developments in antigovernment activism. The activist Budai Simicska understood that, by December 2018, internet memes had become the engine of O1G activism and tried to create a database of O1G memes using social media like Tumblr and Facebook. But he did so within the algorithmic confines of these platforms. He invested significant time into advancing O1G activism, but much of this time went into spreading O1G content and documenting these activities on social media. To collect, catalog, and analyze hundreds of O1G memes would have taken weeks. Budai Simicska did not tag images, analyze developments in O1G activism, and strive to expand antigovernment mobilization based on research driven by data visualization.

Although Manovich's theory of the database preceded the rise of social media in the mid-2000s, his argument helps interpret why algorithmically mediated environments such as social media platforms are not as helpful as they could be to advance political activism. Facebook and Twitter are designed to facilitate social networking, not to host photographs. By December 2018, however, O1G activism had evolved into an image-driven form of political mobilization, with memes predominantly assembled on these platforms. Manovich stresses that there is nothing in the logic of a database that would galvanize the emergence of a narrative (2001). Developments in AI-driven image cataloging software, however, prompt us to rethink this observation.

What, then, could better or AI-driven data visualization algorithms have taught activists about developments in O1G activism? They could have assisted activists in identifying segments of the population who opposed the Fidesz-KDNP government and could have helped tap these groups to expand antigovernment mobilization. My analysis of O1G memes maps how O1G activism grew and how the sites of antigovernment activism proliferated. To reiterate, I conceptualize photographs of O1G content as internet memes because they share common characteristics in terms of content, form, and stance. Activists created them with an awareness of other O1G content, and O1G content was widely circulated on social media (Shifman 2013). Using NVivo to code the O1G memes I collected for this project helped me identify three distinct categories of O1G memes: graffiti and sticker memes (235 memes), protest memes (172 memes), and memes that documented acts of repurposing a multitude of materials into protest media (239 memes).

The first group of O1G memes includes images of O1G graffiti and stickers placed on walls, pavements, bridges, statues, shop windows, traffic signs, vehicles of mass transportation, and government billboards. The second group contains images of slave law protests featuring O1G content on protest signs in Hungary (44 memes) and diasporic contexts (128 memes). I counted 31 cities across the globe where Hungarians assembled to protest against the slave law, often in front of Hungarian embassies, which they defaced with O1G content and signs that read "Embassy of Orbania," "Orbanistan Financed by the EU," or "Orbanized Crime, Stop Lying, Free the Press."[13] Finally, the third category of O1G memes captured the production of protest media—the O1G acronym or its sign version traced into snow or sand; composed of pebbles, flowers, or seashells; featured as frosting on Christmas cookies; composed of other food items; scribbled on banknotes; etched onto coins; written on crossword puzzles; assembled on scrabble boards; and inscribed on bodies as nail designs and tattoos. These memes were closer to classic internet memes in that they were wittier than the memes that belonged in the first two groups.

O1G Memes Mapping the Expansion of O1G Activism

Data visualization confirms two developments in O1G activism, which I foreshadowed earlier in the essay. Diasporic protest memes (second group) and memes that document protest media (third group) gave visibility to diasporic Hungarians and women who participated in O1G activism in large

numbers. These memes highlighted that, with the transition from graffiti to internet memes, the affective tone of O1G activism shifted as well. While memes documenting antigovernment protest in Hungary focused on O1G signs and the sizes of protesting crowds, diasporic protest memes centered on individuals coming together to express their opposition to the Fidesz-KDNP government. The personalization of participation in antigovernment protests, in turn, helped redirect the affective orientation of O1G activism away from confrontation toward dialogue.

In December 2018, Hungarians assembled worldwide to support protesters in Hungary (Figures 6 and 7). They posed for photographs with their family members and friends holding O1G signs together with ones demanding media freedom and autonomous judiciary. These signs included propositions like "If Orbán leaves, we will come back" and more personal or affectionate messages such as "Merry Christmas," "Grandma we miss you, but the car rides are too boring to visit you more often," or, most commonly, "We are with you." Similar to the memes that documented the slave law protests in Hungary, most groups of protesters outside Hungary raised Hungarian flags confirming their allegiance and countering the Fidesz-KDNP government's monopolization of patriotism. Many of the protest memes diasporic Hungarians circulated on social media appeared to be intimate social gatherings, and the photographs documenting them were reminiscent of holiday cards. These memes portrayed groups of cheerful people often in front of urban Christmas scenes. Similar to memes that documented the innovation of new protest media, diasporic protest memes also contributed to redefining the style of antigovernment activism and the dominant forms of socialities commonly associated with it.

Memes that portrayed the proliferation of protest media played an equally important role in reconfiguring the affective tone of political activism in Hungary. A characteristic meme in this category was the snow meme that portrayed the O1G acronym or sign traced into snow accumulated on the ground, statues, and windshields of cars (Figures 8 and 9). I collected 65 snow memes and found that the more daring they were, the more likes they garnered on social media. O1G memes traced into snow accumulated on police cars were very popular, and so were memes that portrayed O1G signs placed in front of government buildings kept under CCTV surveillance. Meme producers also strove to outbid each other by creating gigantic snow memes that could only be captured using aerial drones. These snow memes invited diasporic Hungarians who lived in warmer climates to compose O1G memes on beaches using

FIG. 6 Diasporic Hungarians support protesters in Hungary during the "slave law" protests, Swansea, Wales, 2018. Photograph by Anonymous. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

FIG. 7 Diasporic Hungarians support protesters in Hungary during the "slave law" protests, Toronto, 2018. Photograph by Anonymous. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]


STOP
SLAVE LAW
FREE PRESS

FIG. 6


01G
Orbánizmus
Fülünkre jöttünk!
ORBÁNISM
CRIME

FIG. 7

FIG. 8

FIG. 9

sand (Figure 10). I found 16 sand memes. Many of these memes included selfies of meme creators who were evidently less concerned about governmental retribution than their counterparts in Hungary. To counter the competition to produce the largest or most daring snow memes, often tracings of the O1G acronym or sign in the snow were promoted on social media with comments such as "Come outside to play in the snow!"

Producers of O1G signs encouraged others to join in the fun by evoking joyful childhood memories like making snow angels. Comparably, O1G memes appearing on sandy beaches also distanced O1G activism from antagonistic dispositions.

O1G memes that featured food items repurposed into protest media produced similar effects. Like snow and sand memes, food memes testify to efforts to distance O1G activism from its antagonizing origins. They illustrate the resourcefulness of social media users to deploy internet memes as protest media. Given that the slave law protests took place in December and Christmas is the most important holiday in Hungary, Christmas cookies decorated with the O1G sign emerged as the most popular food memes. As mentioned earlier, out of the 44 food memes I found, 33 were cookie memes. These memes did not just replicate the same formula. Key features of these memes were the creativity and dexterity of bakers, qualities that social media users frequently commented on. O1G signs were added to cookies using icing and O1G cookies were typically presented surrounded by other elaborately decorated Christmas cookies, which helped delink antigovernment activism from confrontation. Cookies are not baked to express animosity, and this is particularly true for Christmas cookies that express the importance of cultivating and strengthening social ties.

Finally, memes portraying leisure activities transformed into acts of antigovernment protest also offered important contributions to reconfiguring the dominant forms of socialities associated with political activism in Hungary. In living rooms, the O1G sign was scribbled on crossword puzzles and composed using Lego figures. From living rooms, the production of O1G signs then migrated outdoors. A Hungarian systems analyst in Florida whose hobby was flying rented a small aircraft for $600 to trace a flight route in an O1G pattern. A Twitter user described the pilot's meme as "the biggest, the most expensive, and the least visible" O1G meme.[14] In the meme form, however, the pilot's act inspired a new subgenre of O1G memes: those encouraging internet users to run or walk following O1G tracks. A creator of a sand meme added the following caption to her meme: "Resist in the snow, resist in the sun."[15] Following this logic, memes capturing O1G acronyms traced on maps offered a similar suggestion: resist by participating in demonstrations, demonstrate your resistance in your leisure practices.

Conclusion: Memes as Protest Media

Assessing the efficacy of digital media in archiving social movements, media scholar Anne Kaun notes that the sheer

FIG. 8 Tracing 01G signs into snow accumulated on cars is a common practice, Budapest, 2019. Photograph by Anonymous. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

FIG. 9 01G signs carved into snow became increasingly larger, location unknown, 2019. Photograph by Anonymous. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

FIG. 10

volume of data that digital technologies enable activists to collect compromises the capacity of social movements to control the narratives that are circulated about them (2016). She shrewdly observes that digital media do not empower activists to write history, as "power shifts to commercial players providing storage and processing possibilities if groups do not consider the infrastructure of the technology that they employ" (2016, 5405). Although Kaun is interested in the usefulness of digital media in preserving "alternative political imaginations" (2016, 5405; cf. Zamponi 2018), I find her call to critically reflect on the algorithmic architectures of social media platforms political activists use luminously insightful. Relying on corporate social media such as Facebook and Twitter to build databases of O1G memes did not help Hungarian activists develop a political program, form a political party, or unite a fragmented opposition. Corporate social media are not designed in ways such that they could easily be harnessed to expand social movements. In the end, social media–driven activism is volatile, as the closing of Budai Simicska's Facebook page testifies. In Hungary, as media scholar Elisabetta Ferrari rightly points out, the internet is a powerful symbol associated with such political principles as freedom and equality the Fidesz-KDNP government does not embrace and respect (2019). I suggest that

it is the very belief in the capacity of social media to advance antigovernment activism that needs to be reassessed.

Examining the role of social media in political activism, Zeynep Tufekci argues that the strength of social movements lies in their capacities, which can be narrative (whether a movement is able to frame its story on its own terms), disruptive (whether a movement is able to interrupt the functioning of authority), and electoral or institutional (whether a movement is able to convince politicians to adopt the movement's agenda or to catalyze changes in institutions; 2017). She concludes that social media can help organize political activism, but these political projects dissolve quickly, for they do not develop organizational infrastructures and collective decision-making capacity. Internet memes emerged as the engine of O1G activism, but the O1G memes posted on social media did not spontaneously converge into a narrative. By extension, they did not disrupt the functioning of political authority, nor did they stimulate institutional change. However, they offered other important contributions suggesting that the capacities of social movements are not limited to the three categories Tufekci identifies. Rather, my analysis of the ways internet memes were used to advance O1G activism exposes that social movements may build a wider range of capacities that can grow strong enough to galvanize social change.

Most pertinently, in Hungary, internet memes reconfigured the affective tone of antigovernment mobilization and, by doing so, they made political activism more inclusive. "Geci" is a gendered expletive that Hungarian women cannot use without raising eyebrows. Not surprisingly, after the expletive was transformed into the acronym and its sign equivalent, women also started creating and posting O1G memes on social media. At the same time, diasporic Hungarians joined O1G activism in large numbers both by protesting and also by producing and circulating protest memes. They personalized O1G content by complementing it with other political and personal messages. They also represented their political opinions while visually presenting themselves in recognizable ways i the photographs they posted on social media. By giving exposure to individuals protesting the Fidesz-KDNP government with their family members (including small children), diasporic protest memes contributed to shifting the affective tone of O1G activism. These memes contributed to remedying the toxic masculinist character that had plagued political culture in Hungary.

To ask whether internet memes sharpen or blunt the efficacy of political activism is not as productive as to inquire how they transform the affective tone and the composition of political mobilization. Although databases are volatile, O1G memes

FIG. 10 O1G sign on the beach in Spain, Tenerife, 2019. Photograph by Anonymous. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

proved to be more resilient than O1G graffiti. Internet memes make political engagement more accessible to segments of the population that feel less comfortable with confrontational forms of activism like graffiti writing. For this reason, they can also be analyzed as symptomatic of the diverse ways in which people participate in the domain of politics. Diversity in the realm of politics, in turn, serves as a much-needed antidote to repair crosscutting divisions within the political opposition in today's Hungary. Despite its origins and vulgar character, the O1G sign persists. Activists note that the O1G acronym and sign are resilient because they encapsulate the desire for unity and capture the demand for a symbol that carries the same meaning to everyone within the political opposition.[16] O1G memes articulate a demand for a political system that is the opposite of what the "G" indexes in O1G. They demand decency, transparency, and accountability in politics.

Notes

1. Fidesz stands for Alliance for Young Democrats. In 1988, when the party was established, the maximum age limit for membership was 35. This age limit was lifted in 1993. http://archiv.fidesz.hu/index.php?Cikk=60, accessed September 10, 2020. KDNP stands for Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt (Christian Democratic People's Party).
2. I translate the term into "douchebag," but I want to stress that the Hungarian word is far stronger in terms of its semantic range and affective intensity.
3. In Hungarian, family names come first. Budai Simicska adopted the surname of the media oligarch Simicska Lajos, which he paired with the part of the city where he lived and spread graffiti.
4. I also found O1G memes on Tumblr and Instagram, but these platforms remained marginal to O1G activism. In Hungary, people aged 30 to 49 are the most likely to be involved in political activism. https://ellensuly.hu/fooldal/empirikus-adat-a-magyar-fiatalok-politikai-aktivitasarol, accessed January 6, 2021. In September 2018, Instagram had approximately two million Hungarian users, but less than a quarter of these users fell in the age group of 30–49. https://pikrea.hu/magyar-instagram-felhasznalok-szama/, accessed January 6, 2021. In the same period, Facebook had 5.8 million Hungarian users and approximately 70 percent of them were aged 30–49. https://kozossegikalandozasok.hu/2018/08/07/a-facebook-es-a-magyarok-elemzes-2018-augusztus/, accessed January 6, 2021. Lastly, Twitter is much less popular in Hungary than Instagram and Facebook. In 2018, Twitter only had about 400,000 users. In the context of O1G activism, it was diasporic Hungarians who used Twitter. https://g7.hu/vilag/20181222/nyugaton-a-kozelet-uralja-a-twittert-nalunk-valami-egeszen-mas/, accessed January 6, 2021.
5. https://o1g-orbanegygeci.tumblr.com/post/188026102669/amp, accessed January 6, 2021. https://www.facebook.com/BudaiSimicska/ (now defunct).
6. MTI, "Szabadságvesztéssel Sújtható a Graffitizés," HVG Online, December 13, 2010, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20101213_szabadsagvesztes_graffiti_torveny, accessed January 6, 2021.

7. Drawing from linguistic records found in Transylvania, Runic writing is believed to be the writing system Hungarians used over a thousand years ago. Although Hungarians cannot read Runic writing, the writing system was revived after 2010 to create new signs for municipalities. Critics lamented that the use of Runic writing stoked nationalist resentment over the Trianon Peace Treaty that allocated Transylvania to Romania in 1918.
8. https://o1g2.blog.hu/2019/03/17/ti_nem_unjatok_meg_ezt_az_egybites_ostoba_politizalast, accessed January 6, 2021.
9. https://www.facebook.com/BudaiSimicska/ (now defunct), https://o1g-orbanegygeci.tumblr.com/post/188026102669/amp, https://orban1geci.tumblr.com, https://www.facebook.com/sajtoszabadsagert/, https://www.facebook.com/O1Gintl/, https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/o1g/, https://twitter.com/O1Gintl?fbclid=IwAR1PqhVNWPXBR-Rmpx6Qer9OOwQ5lIhOXFfsegyPh-kgttp_7Psdwppb2mE; all accessed January 6, 2021.
10. Olivia Solon, "Richard Dawkins on the Internet's Hijacking of the Word 'Meme,'" *Wired*, June 20, 2013, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/richard-dawkins-memes, accessed January 6, 2021.
11. Regardless of whether Facebook users tag or upload images with captions, Facebook still learns a great deal about them. Using facial recognition software, Facebook recognizes people in photographs and is able to identify their location by pinpointing nearby cell towers. These data, however, are not available to platform users. https://www.wsj.com/graphics/how-pizza-night-can-cost-more-in-data-than-dollars/, accessed September 10, 2020. Facebook uses a tool called Rosetta to flag content that violates its hate speech policy, but another problem with memes is that artificial intelligence needs tens of thousands of examples to be able to complete complex tasks like identifying a racist meme. https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-rosetta-ai-memes/, accessed January 6, 2021.
12. Metadata such as camera specifications (shutter speed, ISO, aperture data), date, and location are added to images by default. Facebook and Twitter automatically delete metadata from images upon upload. Metadata can be easily altered, and the changes are impossible to identify. All the default tags can be altered, and new tags can be placed upon the image. The screenshot function also erases metadata embedded in an image. https://www.howtogeek.com/340566/are-location-tagged-photos-really-a-privacy-concern/#:~:text=Twitter%2C%20like%20Facebook%20and%20Instagram,location%20from%20your%20photos%20there, accessed January 6, 2021.
13. Diasporic Hungarians used a Twitter page, O1G Intl Protests, to post pictures of themselves demanding that the Fidesz-KDNP government repeal the slave law. https://twitter.com/O1Gintl?fbclid=IwAR1PqhVNWPXBR-Rmpx6Qer9OOwQ5lIhOXFfsegyPh-kgttp_7Psdwppb2mE, accessed January 6, 2021.
14. https://twitter.com/O1Gintl?fbclid=IwAR1PqhVNWPXBR-Rmpx6Qer9OOwQ5lIhOXFfsegyPh-kgttp_7Psdwppb2mE, accessed January 6, 2021.
15. https://twitter.com/O1Gintl/status/1076632608891723776, accessed January 6, 2021.
16. https://o1g2.blog.hu/2019/03/17/elobb-utobb_meguntak_hazamentek, accessed January 6, 2021.

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