HOW HAS THE CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF WEB PLATFORMS BEEN IMPORTANT TO PROGRESSIVE POLITICS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN PROTEST TOOLS?

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"NOTHING UNDERMINES AUTHORITY LIKE HOLDING IT UP TO RIDICULE."

- CLANDESTINE INSURGENT REBEL CLOWN ARMY

This is an exploration into internet activism and the ways in which the creation and distribution of information, is changing the face of modern protest. Internet activism is the use of technologies such as social media to enable faster and more effective communication to large audiences, for the purpose of raising awareness of a particular cause or ideology. This is a progression from conventional methods of protest such as public demonstrations and rallies. There are both violent and nonviolent forms, such as speeches, slogans, signs and banners, picketing, and strikes. Alternatively, there is imprisonment, torture, killing and bombing, i.e. terrorism. There are also interventions and the development of alternative institutions. It can be argued that these conventional methods are perhaps not entirely effective. This essay will use the 'Cute cat theory of digital activism' developed by Ethan Zuckerman, as an analogy for any low value popular online activity. This theory concerns internet activism and web censorship. It denotes that the majority of people are not interested in activism and wish to use the internet for mundane activities such as searching for 'cute cats'. Tools such as Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr, that have been developed in order for people to do this, are useful to social movement activists. They provide a resource to develop protest tools and provides a source of protection. It is harder for governments to shut down a popular public platform than a small obscure one, as it would provoke a large public backlash.

The internet began in 1993 as a government tool in the US. It was mainly text based and used by professionals. It has since developed for commercial use and now supports images, videos and the like. This makes it far more accessible to a wider audience. In 1998 search engines began to emerge, followed in the years after by personal publishing sites, such as Myspace in 2003 and Facebook in 2004. "The companies provided users with tools, and the users, following their own interests, generated content that sustained advertising." (Zuckerman 2013) This quite literally means that "the contemporary Internet was designed, in no small part, for the dissemination of cute pictures of cats." (Zuckerman 2013).

WHAT IS AN OBJECT?

In order to examine the use of internet platforms for digital activism, it feels impossible to not discuss the use of internet memes. A 'meme' is "that which is imitated" (Blackmore 2008), it is a behaviour that spreads from person to person, it acts as a vehicle for cultural ideas and is a viral phenomenon. The notion of the 'meme' was introduced by biologist Richard Dawkins in the 1970s as a way to describe what he called a "cultural gene." They involve the amalgamation of text and images, often evoking humour as a means of poignancy. They demonstrate the power of the internet, indicating how fast things can spread and the importance of timing with regards to spreading a message and idea. They are useful for understanding our environment and how information flows. "Memes play a distinct role in protest; they seem to be to the resistance of today what 'political posters' were to yesterday – the embodiment of shared ideas in a community" (Metahaven 2016)

The meme is itself an object, "an object commonly refers to a material thing, that to which action, or thought or feeling is directed, the thing (or person) to which something is done". (Candlin, Guins 2009) Memes are ideas and jokes directed at people, and in return people respond and react to that idea. "In this sense objects can also be human, animal or vegetable, as well as mineral or synthetic. The category 'object' does not convincingly divide the natural from the artificial world, the material from the immaterial, the animate from the inanimate, or the human from the non- human." (Candlin, Guins 2009) Memes are read as sites of knowledge as they present an alternative to mainstream idea distribution. The meme combines Darwinian survival skills and widespread distribution; the meme is a way of scaling up protest. They are a part of a network culture that allows information to circulate, in a way that appeals like no other source of information. They are contagious, spreading their ideas through the very networks that are built to monitor information. There is no one sender or receiver, this means that it is harder to track down their source. Finding their inception begins to lack impact once the image is circulated, the idea itself becomes more powerful and more important than the person that generated it.

Memes are language transposed onto an image, this combination is convincing as it can be said that language itself is a meme. It is something that is spread through imitation, and is representative of a time and location. "Memes are not phenomena of language; they are phenomena with language." (Metahaven 2016). This use of language is an annotation that conveys meaning in way that makes the meme function. "The standard internet meme is an image captioned with heavy type, superimposed on it 'for humorous effect' (says Wikipedia). The sentences that are thus part of the image create some kind of strange loop or self-reference; but they also involve tacit knowledge on the part of the viewer." (Metahaven 2016). They are particularly successful because they provide an element of play, they are more universal and demonstrate a more accessible language than common political rhetoric, by manipulating the everyday into a form of joke. Jokes are parasites, they feed on information and are capable of twisting a situation as a means to an ends, they open up the internet as a ground for political action. "There are three qualities that define the success of memes: longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity." (Metahaven, 2016)

A great example of a recent event which demonstrates the power of internet platforms for sharing objects with ulterior political motives, is the election of Donald Trump as the President of America. This was a campaign that was ridden on a wave of outrage and a social media explosion. An interview by journalist Zoe Chace for 'This American life' into the spectacle of 'trolling', enlightens us to exactly how this movement came to be so powerful. "A troll is a person who sows discord on the Internet by starting arguments or upsetting people, by posting inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community with the intent of provoking readers into an emotional response." (Wikipedia 2017).

"**Jay Boone**

We did it. We memed him into the presidency.

Zoe Chace

You memed him?

Jay Boone

We memed him into power. We shit-posted our way into the future.

Conor O'hagan

It's true. This is true.

Jay Boone

This is true because we directed the culture."

(This American Life 2017)

This is interview takes place at the 'DeploraBall', a get together for trolls who successfully, in their own words "shit posted" Donald Trump into the White House by making 'snarky' memes for Twitter and Facebook. Thus, creating a curated climate, disseminating a particular message over several months. An example of this is when thousands of emails to and from Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman were exposed. The trolls "weaponised that information for political warfare." (This American Life 2017). In order to ensure that the information that they contained was spread, social media sites such as Twitter were used as a platform. "There was a bit of an industry created - You've got a few different types of people that you'll find in the Twittersphere. There are the researchers, there are the compilers, and then there's the meme magicians." (This American Life 2017) The meme magicians are the ones who are able to translate the emails content into something that is instantly understandable so that it can be rapidly shared amongst individuals. During the election the hashtag #MAGA3X appeared, this was meant as a kind of formula for Trump success. It involved doing three trump things a day – "Hold pro-Trump flash mobs. Get three Trump supporters to the polls. Retweet three Trump-related memes." (This American Life 2017) It can certainly be argued that this formula helped Trump win the election, as it generated a constant stream of information, tensuring that he was never out of the media. These can be seen on mainstream social media sites, as well as specific forums, for example the reddit thread 'The Donald'. This pro-Trump corner of the internet has been accused of being both racist and sexist. It includes people who call themselves alt-right, or white nationalists.

This response of a rational question with an insincere answer is an effective tool "to negate the politics of the frame in which the question was posed." The question of "'do you condone or condemn', is a trap, a gotcha, intended to force all opposition to accord to a neoliberal frame…The absurd response refuses to participate in this exercise. It removes itself from the frame." (Metahaven 2016)

"**Zoe Chace**

But he tweets out hateful things.

Kat Niedermair

Are they really hateful?

Zoe Chace

"I can't wait till you're deported," "deport you." That is hateful.

Kat Niedermair

Yeah, I guess. I think he's joking, though.

Zoe Chace

You kind of like that stuff?

Kat Niedermair

Uh-- no. I mean, yeah. I don't know. I like trolling. I enjoy trolling because I think that things should be talked about. I think that trolling encourages that. But I don't know. I mean, I think that if you're saying that actually at somebody, then-- I mean, it depends on the context."

(This American Life 2017)

Or perhaps more concisely put, "He was completely trolling the Republican establishment".

For every action there is a reaction, and following the success of Trump, there was an immense negative backlash from individuals who disagreed with his political ideals. One particular group of people who clashed with Trump, were Feminists. There is evidence widely available online of Trump using words such as 'Pig', 'Dog', 'Slob', and 'Disgusting animal' (which are in fact some of the lesser offensive terms) to describe women. The election campaign itself was fraught with sexism as a forefront issue. During Trump's victory speech on April 26th 2016, he accused Hilary Clinton of playing the 'woman card', and that she would be "a failed candidate if she were a man". (Detecting Stance in Tweets, 2016). A study conducted found evidence that the 'women card' comment has "made women more likely to follow Hillary Clinton, less likely to unfollow her and that it has apparently not affected the gender composition of Trump followers." (Detecting Stance in Tweets, 2016). This illustrates the impact (or lack off) that such a comment can have on people with regards to their online activity. However, this does nothing to explain how such an issue can be used as ammunition to build a network between individuals that share ideologies online in order to develop protest tools.

In protest to the election of president Trump, a movement grew online that ended up becoming a worldwide protest on January 21st 2017. This was to advocate legislation regarding human rights, womens rights, immigration, racial equality and LGBTQ rights. The Washington March drew 500,000 people, and worldwide participation has been estimated at five million. This was organised almost entirely through social media, spreading worldwide and demonstrating how powerful these sites could be in connecting individuals to create mass protest. The Washington March was streamed live on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, making it widely and easily available for people to access it digitally. This march is a testimony to the power of online platforms as a resource for connecting individuals and ideologies. Throughout the march there was an obvious level of repetition in the visual imagery, it was a collection of living memes. There were slogans that had been circulating online, for example "Grab them by the patriarchy", a play on an infamous exploitive quote from Trump where he was filmed endorsing the sexual assault of women. This phrase became a meme of immense power, with thousands making their own 'pussy hats' as a way of demonstrating solidarity.

SO WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE?

As of six months after the initial protest, whilst the issues marched for are still prevalent, the momentum initially gathered has not been maintained. Of course it is ridiculous to suggest that people should go out on a march every weekend, but arguably the social media presence of the memes generated, has died down. This is at odds with the Trump supporters plight to get him to power, with their harnessing of internet tools like hashtags, which encouraged a prolonged interaction with web platforms. "Protests have formed a kind of carnivalesque background noise to capitalist realism, and the anti-capitalist protests share rather too much with hyper-corporate events like 2005's Live 8, with their exorbitant demands that politicians legislate away poverty" (Fisher 2010). I partook in the march myself and am in fact guilty of this lack of continual interaction with the idea, I believe that the main difference here is that the women's march had a much messier goal. It was not providing a solution to a problem, mainly demonstrating resentment of the establishment. This is a recurring problem with traditional protest methods that begs the question of 'do they actually work'? It was a "protest that everyone could agree with." (Fisher 2010)

It can be said that left wing politics are perhaps failing to prevail, because they do not provide a proper solution. This asks the question of whether the left is doing enough to design a convincing and plausible alternative. There is evidence that it is trying to recapture lost energy through occurrences such as protests, however it is merely trying to repair the implications of a right wing establishment. There is a lack of new kinds of social democracy, with things such as the welfare state and the NHS belonging to another era. The struggles faced by institutions such as these are now a breeding ground for old arguments that simply prove that our current model of capitalism is not working. There needs to no longer be an individualist approach, and admittance that liberal capitalism is not the ultimate form of social democracy and we are no longer the objects of it. "After all, and as zizek has provocatively pointed out, anti-capitalism is widely disseminated in capitalism. Time after time, the villain in Hollywood films will turn out to be the 'evil corporation'." (Fisher 2010)

CAN WE MEME AWAY CAPITALISM?

The steady development of web platforms has been pivotal in developing a stage for objects of protest. The power of the 'internet meme' is something which is being harnessed and advanced in order to do this, "Memes are a rough and ready democracy." (Metahaven 2016) A meme often relies on humour and wit as a way of conveying a truth, jokes are our political weapons that give protestors control over an opponent, they disrupt the structure of politics and that of the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. "The unpaid labour of meme making, pranking and trolling, is a hitherto untapped resource in a networked type of design power, embodied by the in joke' – a cloaked type of worker solidarity." (Metahaven 2016) Jokes provide a feeling of instant gratification through laughter, this feeling is sought and therefore spread quickly. They also provide the opportunity to bring to light topics which people are less likely to feel comfortable talking about, they allow us to mock our own reality. "Design as a meme is a focal point for tacit ideological coordination, a public in-joke, a general strike of common sense making." (Metahven 2016) This shows that design is pivotal to the creation of this new breed of protest tool objects, with the creation of these tools it is possible to begin to shape a new reality through the internet as it opens up as protest space for everyone.

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