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CONSEQUENCES IN POST-TRUTH CIVILIZATION

GRANT KIEN

Communicating with Memes

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Dedication and Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to the memory of my ever-loved, never-forgotten sister, Diana Joy Kien, who was brutally murdered in a selfish act of misogynistic terror. And all the sisters, downtrodden, oppressed, voiceless, and misrepresented people throughout this world. We own this fight whether we wanted it or not. Let us struggle strongly, thoughtfully, wisely, carefully, relentlessly, and let us win gracefully.

I acknowledge and give thanks to all those who have helped make this work possible, inspirationally and practically. My teachers and mentors, whom I hope I do honor to by using the skills they taught me and carrying on the critical tradition: John O'Neil, Barbara Crow, Norman Denzin, Clifford Christians, Sharon Tettegah, James Hay, Cameron McCarthy, and Angharad Valdivia. I hope you hear your voices in the words of these pages. My family and friends whose love, support, encouragement, positivity, and patience has been crucial to completion of this long hard journey: Anna Allen, Stacy Narin, Connie and Ed Kien (Mom and Dad of course), my brother Garth Kien (always my hero and inspiration), Marina Levina, Christopher Smith, Ted Gournelos, Kevin Pina, Jason Myers, and James Craig. My students, whose hope, need, and sincerity gives me strength and inspiration every day. My first reader Jennifer Cao, whose help moved things to completion. And the whole publishing apparatus of editors, reviewers, and liaisons that bring works like this to a broader audience, especially Nicolette Amstutz, whose patience will never be forgotten, and the series editors Andrew Herman and Arthur Herbig.

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Introduction

For the past decade or so, I've been asking my media studies students a question in tribute of Harold Innis: "Is our global digital network a new form of media ushering in a massive civilizational shift?" With this book, I am making my own answer known: Social media has created conditions in our global digital network for what I call "memetic communication" to emerge as a new, twenty-first-century communication phenomenon. Memetic communication mixes and matches Innis' time and space binding rubric. It also adds a third category of characteristics to the rubric that I call "unbinding" (see chapter 10 for a full explanation). Although it is still in its infancy, our creation and use of memetic communication is already bringing dramatic changes in our everyday world at a historically alarming pace, and will continue to bring about civilizational impacts that we have yet to understand and experience.

The term "memetic communication" might seem redundant to people already familiar with Dawkin's (2006) definition of a meme: A self-replicating and evolving unit of culture. All language is memetic. All communication, however, is not. Some communication is simple informational exchange, without self-replication nor evolution. However, some communication self-replicates and does evolve, moving from one media environment to others, taking on the appearance of organic growth. The criteria for this distinction is more thoroughly explained in the first chapter. This "memetic" communication is what I'm concerned with in this book.

This book is about how memetic communication works, and some of the consequences for humanity that we can identify up to this point. I had not started this research as an Innisian project, but as my work unfolded, I came to realize I was indeed attempting to come to terms with a civilizational overview of this new mode of communication. Rather than try to look at it

as an objective observer gazing at the earth from the moon though, I have taken up a position from inside the apparatus and processes I describe in these pages. My method took shape as a qualitative/interpretive approach that I call memeography (Kien 2013). The result is a broad discussion of current media phenomena that conceptually wrestles with the everyday experiences and consequences of memetic communication.

The discussion throughout the book ambitiously investigates various levels of content, medium, audience, and socio-cultural effects. It touches on every manner of theoretical and research focus, producing a highly interdisciplinary text. To those specializing in any one area of communications research and theory—such as rhetoric, behaviorism, or semiotics—my analysis and theoretical application might seem light, and possibly even unaware of certain deeper, more sophisticated advances in a given area of research. This is intentional, done for two reasons. First, I have written this book with the goal of keeping it accessible to upper division and master's-level students. For these students, a given chapter might be used as an introductory point to push deeper into a specific line of inquiry. Second, I have the hope this broad introduction of ideas relating to memetic communication will inspire more in-depth, more sophisticated discussion from experts in the various areas of communication theory and research this book touches on.

The evolution of memetic communication is tied to the history of electronic media. Chapter 1 provides an overview of what media memes are, and important moments that distinguish the evolution of memetic communication within the digital globally networked system which it inhabits. Chapter 2 then explicates the cybernetic system that is crucial to the phenomenon of social media, and its byproduct: Viral distribution. The chapter describes the first consequence of memetic communication: Unprecedented and uncontrollable feedback loops in the global media system. This cybernetic phenomenon gives individual audience members power to influence the system in ways few could imagine just a few decades ago.

In the third chapter, I explore the prosumerist motivations, uses, and gratifications of the social media audience, and the resulting media patterns. I show how although there is plenty of chatter in social media, much of it is merely recycled, regurgitated, graffiti-like tropes. This leads to chapter 4, which foregrounds excitation as a driving force for human behavior in social media. This emphasizes rhetorical pathos (feelings) over logos (logic) and ethos (credibility). It also brings with it prioritization of information in ways that make sense in the digital environment, which are accompanied by consequences in our offline lives.

In chapter 5, I explain the fourth consequence of memetic communication, which is the isolated, individual, and discrete mode of consuming social

media. With an array of digital tools and tactics, we curate a virtual world for ourselves that we inhabit as disconnected individuals. This facilitates the formation of communities that do not require any grounding in or acknowledgment of the world outside themselves.

I focus the sixth chapter on the disproportional media effects that result from a social media environment primed for moral panic and mass hysteria. I summarize these phenomena as normal everyday experiences in a world emphasizing excitation and self-curated phenominstic audience experiences. This leads me to an examination of the nature of truth and solipsism in chapter 7, asserting this is the blooming of postmodernists' warnings from decades gone by.

In chapter 8 I interrogate the nature of virtual communities in the social media environment. These communities seem to serve as containers of tropes and fables about the self and other, rather than healthy environments that encourage growth and prosperity for all. Virtual communities are likened to hives, silos, and echo-chambers. Such communities function as safe-havens for like-minded people who are inclined to maintain the status quo rather than risk expulsion.

Irony and its limitations as a form of critique and intervention are my focus in chapter 9. I show that the effectiveness of irony and satire are questionable in fostering a more productive, egalitarian discourse. Additionally, an environment dominated by ironic content also masks actual dogmatic believers in the issues being made fun of. Finally, irony demands the submissive compliance of the disempowered to achieve its goals.

In chapter 10, I move on to examine the seeming impossibility of eradicating false and misleading information from our digital world. Once data has gone viral, it seems to acquire immortality such that it survives concerted efforts to remove it. This can have devastating ongoing impacts on peoples' lives. If this were not enough for people to bear, in chapter 11 I explain the evolution of online activist tools, which have often devolved into trolling, and accidental tragedies resulting from good intentions.

I take the tools explained in chapter 11 a step further in chapter 12, diagramming how they have been appropriated and enhanced by the Alt-Right to target and harass journalists, women, Jewish people, and anyone else they decide is antithetical to their agenda. This new phenomenon of digital witch hunting can have swift and devastating consequences for individuals, squelches public debate, and jeopardizes the quality of information available to the general public.

The nature of political conflict and the battle for aesthetics is my focus in chapter 13. By examining how communities mobilize around aesthetic symbols, I chart how an emphasis on what looks right triumphs, regardless

of its actual merits or faults. Then in chapter 14, I show why it is so hard to combat this phenomenon since we are all complicit in it by merely being social media users.

I end the book on an optimistic note with the fifteenth chapter, calling for an evolution of media ethics to match the advancement of our technologies. I review the forming groundswell of ethical work in this regard, which I argue holds out the promise that we may still take better control of the cybernetic media organism we are part of through our individual efforts.

Numerous challenges arose throughout the research and writing of this book. For starters, the intricacies and numbers of sophisticated connections are overwhelming. I couldn't have possibly found all of them. Defining the parameters of each issue was an emergent process in both the data collection and the writing up phases. The stopping point for each case in the research phase appeared organically when new information gave way to repetition. When writing it all up, I subjected the work to merciless reorganization to schematize the interconnections wherever I found it possible. Thus, the chapters are highly inter-referential.

Added to the challenge of interconnectedness, it is obvious my research covers an incredibly broad scope. Thankfully I was able to bookend the project historically within the social media era. My work in global technography (Kien, 2009a) helped contend with the global scale, by defining the range of the field by the eruptions of phenomena. Focusing on memetic communication as the defined subject was crucial in making decisions about relevancy. I focused on phenomena that fit my working definition, while anything that fell outside its parameters I moved to my reserve folders. That is not to say that the lines between have always been clear and strict. Quite the opposite. Rather, following these criteria, I was able to choose the most explicit case studies to elaborate specific points.

The incredible speed of change in digital technology and social media, vs. the speed of writing presented another formidable challenge. As many in media studies already know, trying to adapt to every emerging issue and technology is impossible. I found the key to overcoming the temporal problem was focusing on the unchanging aspects of phenomena. At the same time, specific current events arise that absolutely must be included, or the work will seem to have holes in it. The 2016 US presidential election was one such event. When I began this work, I had no intention of paying such close attention to the presidential campaigns. Once things were underway, however, it was clear that social media had truly changed the game for us all.

I will also apologetically note that this book is Americentric. Although memetic communication is a global phenomenon, almost all the key applications and platforms are US companies, located in the USA, and overwhelmingly

used by Americans. My unique position geographically in the San Francisco Bay Area, including the Silicon Valley, has given me insight and opportunity to have discussions with people close to the technologies. While I would like to give greater voice to the global community through my work, I found the most poignant cases and issues around memetic communication to be happening relatively close to home.

A final challenge in this kind of work is the uncertainty that comes along with a brand new area of inquiry. I first began this direction of research in 2012. At that time, little research and publication had been done, and the frontier was close. In the ensuing seven years, the number of publications and researchers has increased, but it is still a small community of academics and scholars working directly with internet and other media memes. Suffice it to say we are advancing together in our work, and I am encouraged that more are seeing the importance of this area of inquiry.

This book includes numerous images from across the internet. I have been exceedingly careful to choose only fair use and public domain images. I did not wish to promote nor antagonize any branded or corporate entities and thus have not included any images of this type. I have also blurred and/or altered anything in the images that might promote a company or website. For example, most meme-generator sites include a logo stamp in the corner of the image macro, which I have blurred in all the images chosen. The image macros themselves are widely distributed across social media, and thus ownership cannot be traced to any one entity.

I will also note that almost every image in this book was found in the course of my research, not created specially to represent the theory discussed. Most can be easily found through Google searches. Hence the quality does vary, and I have retouched several without fundamentally altering their content.

As a final introductory comment, I will mention that advancing our own human ethics is crucial in this era of memetic communication. However, it is still just the first step. As A.I. and other programming entities evolve, the control of memetic communication will get ever more difficult. It is already a challenge because the machine amplifies our human activities. When we add social bots (programs that share messages, upload pictures, and automatically connect users in social media) to the equation, the future becomes that much cloudier. According to Alves and Berente (2017), there are at least 23 million social bots on Twitter. This makes for 8.5 percent of all Twitter users. There are approximately 140 million social bots on Facebook accounting for as much as 1.2 percent of total users. Instagram is about 8.2 percent social bots, making up the equivalent of approximately 27 million users. Additionally, platforms like Snapchat, LinkedIn, Tumblr, BuzzFeed, and many others also have millions upon millions of social bot accounts.

I have resisted going down the rabbit hole of A.I. in this publication, but it is undoubtedly the next step in coming to terms with the progression of our media environment. For the time being, I hope that the work presented here will help us all better understand ourselves as global netizens, to make better choices in our social media use, and to empower ourselves to take control of memetic communication rather than victimized by it.

Chapter One

Memes and Memetic Communication

In this first chapter, I lay out the context for the remainder of the book by elaborating some background and theory needed to understand what a meme is, how we create memes, how they evolve, and what is unique about communicating with media memes since the arrival and ascendance of social media. I also itemize the consequences of memetic communication that shape the table of contents for the remaining chapters. I will begin by having you insert yourself into a hypothetical scenario.

Imagine waking up one morning, reaching for your phone to shut off the alarm beside your bed, and realizing with a start that your inbox has thousands of messages in it. Perplexed, you begin looking into the cause of your digital avalanche: A glitch in your email program? An autoresponder gone bad? A virus? A vindictive ex spamming you? A case of mistaken identity? How about none of the above. Rather, a silly picture you posted twenty-four hours ago on Facebook for your friends to laugh at has gone viral. Your friends thought it was funny enough to share with their social networks, who then thought it was funny enough to share with their networks in turn, and so on. Overnight, your image has been distributed around the world, increasing exponentially in its reproduction with every new forward/posting/like/up-vote. You have become internet famous. Your image has become an internet meme, and it has taken your life along with it. You have awoken to the start of a whole new way of being, entering a world in which nothing will ever be the same as it was when you went to sleep. In effect, you (or at least a version of you) have been assimilated into the digital world. How did you get here? And where are you headed? What does this mean for you, your family, friends, and professional relations? And most importantly, how can you ensure the positive gains outweigh any possible damages?

While this scenario might have been dismissed as a far-fetched fantasy just fifteen or so years ago, the essence of this hypothetical situation has played out so many times over the past decade that it has become an accepted and normal phenomenon in our world of global hyper-mediation.[1] The extent to which media shapes society and vice versa will likely never be a settled argument, but this particular phenomenon is a recent arrival in the study of media effects. A conspiracy of several technical advances, socio-cultural activities, and theoretical/philosophical assertions in our everyday lives has enabled almost anyone on our hybrid global communications network to become a viral media sensation. However, individuals and private lives are not the only things affected in this situation. Rather, the same systems that give rise to this global media condition are also subject to it.

From economics to organizations, from production to consumption and back again, from thoughts to dreams to actions, from individual to society to global village, the effects of even the slightest activity in the system have the potential to ripple like waves and become amplified throughout the entire network. Of course, not all actions in the network go viral and have such effects. In fact, it can be extremely difficult to set such a wave in motion intentionally. However, sometimes just the right content arrives at just the right moment for the conditions of the network apparatus to sneeze it out around the world, and thus a media meme is born. Eruptions of this nature are what I define in this book as "memetic communication." And when they happen, there are always consequences, sometimes good, and sometimes bad. It is these moments of memetic communication I wish us to understand better.

This chapter covers some historical and theoretical background to help better understand the mechanical aspects of what Susan Blackmore (1999b) called the "memeplex": the system in which memes are launched and perpetuated. Then in chapter 2 onward I describe and discusses fourteen consequences of media memes:

- Consequence 1: Mass media power in the hands of the audience creates channels for cybernetic feedback loops within the media apparatus/machine
- Consequence 2: Old social problems and oppressions get recreated and repackaged in a new media format
- Consequence 3: Social media distribution can lead to incredibly rapid, exponential distribution (aka "go viral"), and anything can thus appear to be urgent and important
- Consequence 4: Audiences create their own virtual worlds, curated to reflect their individual/discrete tastes and beliefs
- Consequence 5: Over-reactions in the form of digital moral panics and technopanics lead to exponentially disproportional media effects

- Consequence 6: Critical thinking and rationality are forfeited for clever postmodern playfulness
- Consequence 7: Solipsistic virtual communities do not communicate with others about important issues, perpetuating falsehoods within themselves while rejecting new information from outside
- Consequence 8: Bigots, racists, fascists, etc. hide out among "ironic" consumers of media memes, giving cover to their real beliefs and intentions
- Consequence 9: Data becomes immortal in virtual space, further eroding the general credibility of information while at the same time destroying innocent people's everyday lives due to incorrect identity information
- Consequence 10: Memetic politics create a sense of political engagement for "armchair activists" and "internet warriors," without them having much meaningful impact on the world
- Consequence 11: Organized virtual gangs and terrorists hunt down, attack, and virtually destroy anyone they perceive to be a barrier to the ideology they are promoting, causing severe hardship in people's professional and offline lives
- Consequence 12: Emphasis on the appearance of things, rather than the truth, embroils us in a politics of aesthetics rather than having politics address important material issues
- Consequence 13: Once a practice of resistance to capitalist consumer culture dominance, détournement has become a normal, everyday practice in social media, appropriating the revolutionary power of situationism and diverting individual agency toward further obfuscation of exploitation
- Consequence 14: A global call has gone out for an ethical revolution in digital media involving rigorous fact-checking and individual responsibility

Are there more than fourteen consequences? Almost certainly. And if not yet, then likely many more will arise, as this is a new format of communication and we still have much to learn about it. These fourteen consequences I expound on form a complexly interconnected web of effects that entail one another. Together they form a point that recognizes what we have learned so far, and from which we may launch further studies. With my apologies, any one of these consequences in and of themselves warrant more in-depth elaboration and research than I present in this book. My main point in bringing these together as a collection here is to show how they become more significant as a whole than the sum of its parts. I will illustrate in the following chapters that no one of these consequences stands alone as an end unto itself. Instead, they feed one another and amplify feedback loops that, in turn, sustain the momentum of the consequences. But this is the topic of chapter 2.

Before I get to that, let me provide a better perspective and overview of the circumstances leading up to this moment.

AN ETHICAL IMPERATIVE: GODWIN'S LAW

The invention of "Godwin's Law" in 1990 is a good starting point to investigate the consequences of media memes. Having grown weary of flame wars[2] on Usenet newsgroups, attorney Mike Godwin expressed ethical concerns about the extent of netizens' responsibility to contend with and correct damaging and false information on the internet. His writing is one of the first to observe that, as he put it, "viral memes are capable of doing lasting damage" (Godwin 1994). This concern inspired his experiment in meme creation, popularly known as "Godwin's Law." Intentionally dressed up in the verbiage of scientific and mathematical/statistical law, Godwin stated, "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one" (Godwin 1994). Some might notice here a repackaging of the law of probability. Indeed, the longer any conversation goes on, the more likely it is that a specific word, phrase, or idea might be said. Godwin's Law, however, was not based on the probability equation nor any credible research at all. Instead, it was merely a statement about his personal experiences and observations in Usenet group discussions. His meme about the invocation of Nazis or Hitler in online discussions was an attempt to counter casual comparisons with Nazi Germany and Hitler's fascism that frequently erupted in user discussion forums. His concern was that such comparisons misrepresent and trivialize the reality and horror of the Holocaust.

The success of Godwin's Law is found in what it proved about viral online content, rather than in what it states. Godwin's experiment demonstrated that it might be possible to deploy "counter-memes" intended to correct online oppressions and inaccuracies. Not only did Godwin's Law spread far and wide, it also mutated into several unique forms. One interpretation took the law to mean that discussion threads should be considered dead and be shut down at the first mention of Hitler or Nazis. Another popular interpretation considers whoever invokes Hitler or Nazism to have immediately lost the argument. Godwin's fictional "law" became so widespread throughout popular culture that the Oxford Dictionary introduced it as a term in their 2012 edition. Their current definition aligns with the fabricated nature of the meme, classifying it as a "humorous" noun, and theory rather than a fact. That said, Godwin's observation of the ethical dilemma remains far from solved. As I will show further on in this book, Godwin's proposed solution did not rectify the problem he was trying to address, since casual invocations of Nazis and Hitler remain

quite common and, in some ways, have mutated and proliferated. Instead, the success of Godwin's Law demonstrates for us that memes and counter-memes can coexist quite comfortably, and both thrive in our digital networks. To understand how this can be so, some definition and history are in order.

DEFINITION AND HISTORY OF MEMES

The way we often use the word "meme" in popular culture and media studies might mislead us into thinking they are phenomena limited to the internet. This is not at all true. The deployment of the word "meme" into various disciplinary discourses has far removed the term from its origin (Burman 2012). Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins invented the word in the 1970s to signify what he theorized as an organic, self-replicating, and evolving unit of culture, to explain how "selfish" genes might make selections and account for the resilience of culture as an aspect of biological life (see Dawkins 2006). To qualify as a meme, the entity must be capable of replication, but cannot only reproduce exact copies. In addition to self-replication (i.e., it contains all the information/instructions it needs to make a copy of itself), it must be capable

**Figure 1.1.   Godwin's Law and Kitler, a hybrid image macro combining the "Hitler Kitty" internet meme (images of cats with markings that look like Hitler's moustache), with the "Happy Cat" meme (famous for the phrase "I can has cheezburger?"). *Sources*: "Godwin's Law Chart," original creation of the author, Grant Kien. "Kitler," Creator unknown, fair use copyright, found at https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/64289-kitler**

of change, improvement, adaptation to changing environments, and become something other than what it started as. It must leave behind its previous generations, creating a history of development along the way. Memes, like our genetics, happen over time. In short, it must be able to evolve.

According to Dawkin's definition, all language and communication are memetic, which is commonly understood by people who work with the concept of the meme as a replicator of culture. There have been many works trying to describe the exact nature of the memetic particle in our human biology. While the issue of cultural reproduction is far from settled in biological evolutionary discourse, there has been little to no disagreement that the memetic behavior Dawkins described seems to be precisely how reproduction and evolution work in digital environments. Contemporary media theorists tend to take up Aunger's (2002) suggestion that memes may be electric in their nature:

> If electricity is a stream of electrons—small atomic particles moving quickly through a channel—then perhaps memes are small conceptual elements transmitted through a particular channel, a linked chain of neurons. The suggestion is that a meme must somehow be electric too: An electric meme is what we should look for. (Aunger 2002, 325)

As an evolutionary biologist, Aunger was suggesting we literally look inside of the flow of electrons that comprise electric current for memetic replicators. Neural activity is electric, but if memes are to be found in electrical current, we surely do not need to confine our scope of memetic inquiry to the human nervous system. Aunger himself used computer viruses as an example of an organism we can observe evolving in an electronic environment, inadvertently elaborating that electronic memes indeed exist. In doing this, he married electronics with culture to explain how algorithms may evolve as independent entities. In the digital electronic realm, the evolution of memes may happen through mutations like repurposing images and words, rearranging and/or altering aesthetics, and/or jumping across platforms like the Dancing Baby meme described in appendix A.

We frequently use the word meme in popular culture to describe content that goes "viral," typically through social media. In agreement with Shifman's (2013) call for a "communication specific" use of the term, I am concerned with the concept of media memes as an effect of digital media. Hence the term I introduced earlier: memetic communication. This term covers the popular use of the term meme to signify an image macro (an image with words written over it), along with the terms "media meme," "digital media meme," or "internet meme." These are all typically shortened to "meme," as I also do throughout this book. All of these specific types of

memes label content that takes on distributional characteristics, breadth, and reach that make it appear as if it has its own vital life-force. This happens on the internet, but also across numerous other digital media platforms such as smartphones, TV, and video games. While human agency is an integral part of the system, it is only one component of many that add momentum to digital media memes. Still, my investigation is motivated by the human aspect, and the consequences of memetic communication for humanity. The urgency to better understand memetic communication has truly come to the fore after the 2016 US presidential election, in which social media played a vital role for the first time in the success of the winner. Dynel (2016) explains, "It is via memes that Internet users respond to current sociopolitical events, some of which might not have been widely recognized otherwise" (662).

Viral content is media messages that appear to exponentially jump from one site (aka a host) to numerous others, as a common cold virus jumps from one human body to numerous others through the shotgun effect of sneezes. This kind of deliberate "electronic sneeze" through social media is the basic concept behind viral media distribution, which produces exponential rhizomatic growth patterns, and mutations of the content as it is passed along, much like a living pathogen. Our civilization is arriving at a condition of global digitally networked social media saturation.[3] This has established and maintains a virtual environment that is uniquely different from our planet's physical environment, which at the same time has become inextricably part of our ordinary everyday experiences.[4] This electronic virtual environment nurtures electronic memes, providing an environment in which they look like they have life trajectories. Mulligan has called the internet a "meme factory" (in Wang and Wang 2015), a description that captures the mechanical process, but "meme nursery" perhaps better describes the organic process. As memes copy, reproduce, transform, and mutate, they quickly become disconnected from their origins. They become what Baudrillard (2002a) described as simulacra. This virtual environment is thus a simulacrum populated by free-floating signifiers (i.e., simulacra, the memes themselves), which are constantly repurposed as they are passed from one site to many others through the actions of individual users' dual agency as media consumers and producers (aka prosumers).

To further clarify terminology, I use the word media (aka "media apparatus") in this book to describe a complex hybrid assemblage of people and machines that altogether store and distribute information. This happens quite seamlessly on a global scale in our contemporary condition, most popularly with the internet. With that said, in the remainder of this chapter I will describe how the objects of memetic communication, internet memes, have come to exist as media phenomena, how one encounters them, their possible

influences on our behaviors, thoughts and cultural patterns, and a theoretical description of characteristics that distinguish them as a unique type of content made possible only by the technological advancement of our global network.

HOW MEDIA MEMES EVOLVE

While Godwin's experiment is now more than a quarter century old, and the term meme was first coined in the 1970s, the first identifiable phenomena we now know as media memes are much older.

One of the earliest examples of a modern visual media meme appeared in 1941 when Winston Churchill was frequently photographed and filmed issuing the "V for Victory" hand signal. Just as he had picked up the gesture from elsewhere, Churchill's image was in turn appropriated and imitated by
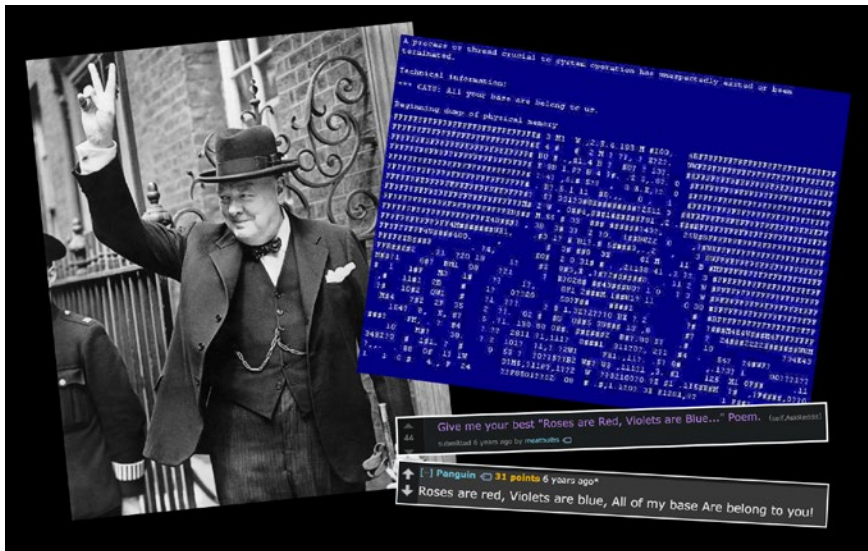
Figure 1.2. Early Media Memes. Churchill's "V for Victory" hand sign has evolved and survived through the ages. The "All Your Base Are Belong to Us" meme from the European release of the 1991 Sega video game, Zero Wing, is considered by many to be the first traceable electronic meme to go viral. The mistranslation from the Japanese game became a popular phrase among hackers, who would use it as a pronouncement of dominance over another's electronic space. It is also referenced in the Kitler meme shown in figure 1.1. *Source*: "Churchill V Sign," created by the United Kingdom Government. "All Your Base Ascii Art," creator unknown, found at http://skins19.wincustomize.com/15/60/1560663/32/1829/preview-32-1829.jpg. "Ask Reddit" screen shot snips (with modifications), found at https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/ahh3j/give_me_your_best_roses_are_red_violets_are_blue/.

other prominent figures such as Richard Nixon, propagating it throughout Western visual media. Anti-war protesters in the 1960s and 70s in their turn appropriated the gesture and reassigned its meaning as a signifier of (victory for) peace. Then in 1972, US Olympic figure skater Janet Lynn (an anti-war advocate) set off a wave of Asian assimilation when she was nationally broadcast cheerfully flashing the "V" sign after falling on the ice while warming up in Japan. Since then, the meme has become so thoroughly adopted by Asian people posing in photographs that it has in many ways become synonymous with popular images of Asian culture throughout the Asian world (Japan, South Korea, and China in particular). I received anecdotal evidence of its cultural entrenchment when I once casually asked a South Korean friend why everyone does it, and she unhesitatingly replied, "You just have to do it if you're taking a picture," with the same common sense attitude one might have if I were to question why we have toilets. The "Victory Hand" signifier is so important to Eastern and Western civilization that in 1993 it was entrenched as part of Unicode 1.1, the international computer character encoding standard, crossing into yet another platform and further mutating and evolving the meme into a textual icon. In 2015 it was included with Emoji 1.0, the first release of emoji documentation from Unicode used as a standard universal list of emoticon codes. This furthered its evolution into a cross-platform symbol easily distributed throughout social media across numerous devices.

Technologically, this same time frame of the late 1960s throughout the 1970s, the media system in which social media resides was developed (see appendix A). From the first internet message in 1969, many important benchmarks along the way contributed to the creation of the social media memeplex that we use today to launch and grow all types of ideas. The history of how this memeplex developed is complex and interwoven with numerous civilization-changing events. The main point of this book, however, is to grapple with the consequences for us in the present and future rather than look backward.

THE CURRENT SITUATION: WHAT'S NEW ABOUT MEMES

Students of semiotics are often taught Saussure's (1959) classic formula, S=Sr/Sd, to explain how signs are imbued meaning. A "sign" (the S in the formula) is composed of two parts: the abstract signifier (Sr means "signifier"), which refers to something (Sd means "signified") in the actual physical world we live in (i.e., the signified thing). A classic example of this is the word cat: When taken as a sign, it uses the letters c-a-t (Sr) to represent

the physical world furry animal (Sd) we imagine to be exemplary of all cats. This gives us a reasonably stable sense of what we are talking about when the lines of meaning are obvious and grounded in a somewhat stable material world. However, the postmodern world destabilized that sense of sureness. In other words, we may take it for granted now that a sign could mean what seems obvious, or it could just as easily refer to something entirely different than what it used to. Without this chaotic logic reflected in the instability of signification, it would be difficult if not impossible for internet memes to have come into existence the way we know them today.

One of the most influential postmodern theorists, Jean Baudrillard (1995), explained the world we now live in is characterized by relativism and suspicion of grand narratives, rather than modernist objective certainty and universal laws of the past. In a semiotic analysis, this is because simulacra are created when the signifier becomes disconnected from the signified, leaving the signifier to float freely and be re-attached to whatever meaning an audience member chooses to use it for. To sum up Baudrillard's explanation, we live in a world constructed and maintained by making copies of copies of copies (i.e., simulacra), so the things we see in front of us often have no identifiable origin nor authentic material entity we can point to and state: "This is the original thing." This postmodern shift can be formulated by altering Saussure's semiotic equation to read $S=Sr/?$ to express an unknown and variable signified entity. The signifier can be reassigned to make the sign mean whatever one wants because what is signified has become open to whatever one chooses. The user of the sign can attach the signifier to an object or concept of their preference, whether it exists in the material world, or is an imagined fantasy or myth. For example, the word spam used to exclusively represent a processed meat product, but now perhaps more popularly understood to mean unasked for and unwanted email (aka electronic junk mail).

Scholars have spent much effort exploring the outcomes of this postmodern condition for our civilization. This line of inquiry has been central to understanding recent physical and cultural events and happenings. One result of saturation in a postmodern culture is how we as individual audience members and consumers have come to consider everything capable of being a signifier as ours to appropriate, deconstruct, and reassign into a new, meaningful semiotic assemblage. This logic has been a fundamental contributor to the evolution of Western consumer culture. Having far more goods available than necessary to cover our basic needs, postmodern consumers find ourselves in a daily struggle not to nourish our physical bodies, but rather to make the best possible aesthetic and brand choices. For example, think of the paralysis that overtakes some people when confronted with a colossal aisle of potato chips at the supermarket, from which they are pressured to make a selection.

Consumers are challenged in their everyday activities to pick from a seemingly never-ending cascade of choices: product, brand, flavor, size, price, nutritional content, the signification of social status, and so on. The material product at the end of it all (lest we forget the meager potato chip) represents so much more than calories for the physical body. As Featherstone (1991) pointed out (and is explored in more detail in chapter 3), we live in a world with an over-abundance of signification, which effects qualitative changes in our everyday lives. At this stage of our civilizational transformation, it might even be considered strange to try to stabilize or fix the signification, definitions, and meanings of many things. It simply goes against the trend of the copious symbolic world we have created for ourselves to select from.

The agency of individual actors in the selection, modification, and redeployment of signs that results in the creation of memes is crucial. Gal, Shifman, and Kampf (2016) go so far as to consider memes "performative acts, applied both for persuasive purposes . . . and for the construction of collective identity and norms" (1698). The late Alvin Toffler coined the term "prosumer" (1980) to describe consumers who take part in the production of what they consume. Social media are reliant on exactly this type of performative agency. For example, Facebook users are both producers of their experiences on the site and consumers of it. The content we receive largely reflects the choices we have made in terms of preferences, aligned with the tastes we have expressed in the content we have chosen to post for ourselves. In this book, I use the term prosumerism to denote individual acts of creatively producing identity through the consumptive use of aesthetic signifiers—a crucial survival skill in our contemporary world. We participate to the best of our ability in daily creative consumption, sorting out issues of taste, economic ability, and the paralysis of having to decide from too many options. This logic of prosumerist agency expressed through selection is exactly how we experience the virtual world. Add to this the ability to modify the content, and we have the breeding ground from which memes are born. Shifman (2011) explains that openness for interpretation and modification in such a way that contributes to "incompleteness" is an important factor for the success of internet memes.

Once an electronic meme is birthed, its success depends on the extent of its ability to reproduce and mutate. As explained by Xu, Park, Kim, and Park, "Virality ensures the dissemination, whereas meme ensures the longevity of the innovation in that it is supported by a community of creators" (2016, 119).

Nichols (2003) argued that all virtual space (not just the internet) is simulacra. The power to search and select from among available choices is the definition of control for new media audience members. There is no need for us to keep aesthetic signifiers (Sr) attached to objects or concepts originally

signified (Sd) in the virtual environment that most of us navigate on a daily basis. It may be hard to discover any pretense that we should, since digital spaces are constructed entirely as simulacral zones, unlike the physical world. Where we tend to believe the physical things we are signifying in our communications did once (if not still) exist, this type of solidity and stabilization never existed in virtual space. Signifiers in virtual space are, in essence, electrons arranged into patterned flows, which are and have always been "free-floating," available for us to use toward whatever ends we can and want to. Electronic memes are an almost perfect expression of the type of communication resulting from this situation: easily consumed, easily altered and repurposed, easily shared, easily discarded. Understanding the effects and impacts of memetic communication, however, is not so easy.

NOTES

1. See Contrera 2015.

2. Emotionally charged comments between a couple or few heated discussants in a public online forum that typically devolves into name-calling and threats.

3. For more on post-global network as I invoke the concept here, please see Levina and Kien 2010.

4. If you are interested in how I understand the virtual/physical environment relationship, please see Kien 2009b.

Chapter Two

Our Digital Steamworks

In this chapter, I describe the first consequence of memetic communication, an enormous cybernetic media system that finds itself under intense pressure. Social media puts the power of mass communication directly into the hands of the audience, creating channels for cybernetic feedback loops within the global machine our media apparatus has become. In the era before social media, content added to the global media system was carefully managed by those who owned it, and the system was relatively stable. In our social media environment, however, volatility and unpredictable fluctuations are the norm, depending on the whims of the audience. Everything pumped into the media system must be accommodated, so the system must expand to accept each input or expel something else to make room. If it does not expand, the system comes under tremendous pressure. The higher the pressure, the more devastating the potential eruptions and explosions can be when the system springs leaks.

THE CRAMER EFFECT

As I explained in the previous chapter, Godwin's Law showed that the "counter-meme" is not a totally effective method of contending with misinformation and malicious intent in social media. On the plus side, the meme challenged netizens to investigate further and pursue solutions to these problems. Even so, the imperative of Godwin's ominous warning—that potentially any actor (no matter how great or small) in the global network might set in motion far-reaching effects—was not obvious to all for some time to come. He issued his warning long before Jim Cramer's "Mad Money" program hit the airwaves in 2005 on CNBC. However, one effect of the program's quick rise in popularity demonstrated what Godwin had foretold: The speed and ease

of stock trading online had made it possible for viewers to act immediately, in real time, to Cramer's in-show stock advice. This produced short market fluctuations matching the buy and sell suggestions Cramer gave on his show (Engelberg et al. 2010). This came to be known as the "Cramer Effect" (aka the Cramer Bounce) and stands out as remarkable for the disproportional and immediate effect the "Mad Money" program demonstrated. A decade and a half after Godwin's warning, the full implications of what he had foreseen were starting to become visible on an everyday basis.

The mass mediation capabilities social media puts in the hands of the audience have the potential to accelerate and amplify feedback loops in the global media system: within, across, and between platforms. The exponential amplification of even little pieces of communication in our media ecosystem highlight what Godwin (1994) explained as an "obligation to improve our informational environment," since any piece of information, whether true, false, good, evil, or benign, is subject to rapid and disproportional outcomes such as the Cramer Effect.[1] Unfortunately, research and examination of the problem of this and similar disproportional media effects (see chapter 6) show the solution is not as simple as a counter-meme strategy. That might have been more possible in the first generation of the digital informational environment in which controlling distribution or destroying or deleting information were options. Our current global digital media system has evolved beyond these options though (see chapter 10). So how *does* it work then? Like a cybernetic steamworks.

In 2006, former Alaskan senator Ted Stevens declared before the American public that "the internet is . . . a series of tubes." His comment was meant to counter the metaphor of the internet as a highway system through which information packets are couriered by trucks (i.e., "the Information Super-Highway"). If he had simply added the word "pneumatic" before the word tubes, he might have avoided ridicule. Instead, his statement became a meme in and of itself, usually deployed to mock someone or express sarcasm about a person's knowledge of how the internet works. However, a system of tubes jammed with information packets (in fact, wires jammed with moving electrons) is a fitting analogy for the concept of how the network ecosystem functions from a cybernetic perspective.[2] So to explain the way memes are launched into the world and how they grow to global proportions, I must first describe the nature of their cybernetic habitat.

CYBERNETICS

Few theoretical ideas have had as profound and widespread influence as cybernetics. From 1946 to 1953, prominent scientists from far and wide gath-

ered to represent numerous disciplines and fields at a series of ten meetings on cybernetics, known as the Macy conferences. The interdisciplinary spread and prominence of representatives all but ensured cybernetics would become insinuated into almost every aspect of theorizing for some time to come. One of its principal founders, Norbert Weiner, described it as "the science of control and communication in the animal and machine" (Wiener 1961). I have seen it argued that cybernetics is the origin of modern communication theory, influencing all that came after it (Craig 1999). At the root of cybernetic theory is communication. The anarchist writing group Invisible Committee (2014) critiques cybernetics as the dominating form of post-war government, which is not a far-fetched claim. They also point out that popular culture misrepresents what the word cybernetics describes.

Much ado has been made of the prefix "cyber" in digital culture,[3] to the point that its original meaning has been twisted in popular parlance. Cybernetics works with the premise that once organisms are established and functioning (generally speaking: organic life, machines, and ecosystems of interrelated parts), they will self-correct (the "cyber" part means self-guide) through a communicative process of feedback amplification (aka positive feedback) and reduction (aka negative feedback) with the rest of what constitutes the system (i.e., its network) (Weiner 1985). This premise puts communication front and center in the theoretical model.

A thermostat is a commonly used example of a simple mechanical cybernetic system. For those unfamiliar with the components of a thermostat, it is a thermometer combined with a relay switch (a switch that tells another switch to turn on or off), which work together to maintain a relatively constant air temperature by telling a furnace to turn on or off as needed. More sophisticated versions of this apparatus exist in the form of climate control systems combined with elaborate air quality monitoring apparatuses that perform different functions using a similar feedback monitoring process, but the general principle is the same: The components sustain an ongoing loop of communication between different parts of the system, which altogether maintain a relatively steady, constant condition throughout the organism. As the system becomes more sophisticated, so too does the network of communication (hence the "net" part of the term cybernetics: a self-guiding network). Fitting nicely with this simple example, computers are in fact simply just vast sets of electrical switches, arranged in such a way that they are initiated by electricity, and then control electrical current through various relay loops (circuits) to perform mathematical functions through the performance of their hard-wired circuitry.[4] So every computer is itself a cybernetic organism. However, computers are obviously extremely more complicated in both their uses and implications than a simple thermostat.

What is now often referred to as "classical cybernetics" entailed the study of "control and communication in the animal and the machine" (Wiener 1985). The term itself came from the Greek word "kybernetes," which translates to English as "steersman" (Heylighen and Joslyn 2001). The person in this position on a Greek naval vessel would observe hazards and deviations from the intended course of the boat from the bow (front), and give instructions to the person on the rudder at the stern (back) to change his or her course. Mechanical devices called governors and servomechanisms were invented to perform similar corrective functions on industrial machines, such as steam engines. These words reflect the classical cybernetic goal of dominance and control over closed systems, by maintaining consistent pressure in tanks and revolutions of moving parts. The importance of the feedback loop in maintaining constancy highlights how central communication is to the process: Every aspect of the system participates in maintaining the whole through a process of constant communication throughout. Hence it is easy to see how researchers and theoreticians in the field of communication could become fixated on this conceptual model that is so completely grounded by their subject matter. However, the classical theory of cybernetics could not withstand the test of applying the theory to itself; a cybernetic analysis of cybernetics. Where classical cybernetics was described as the observation of systems, second-order cybernetics has been called the "cybernetics of observing systems" (Bopry 2007).

SECOND-ORDER CYBERNETICS

If we conceptually step back from the house described above, we see clearly that the heating system does not demarcate its own limit. It is connected to, participates in, depends upon, and affects numerous other systems: The comfort level of the human in control of the thermostat, the fuel industry, the manufacturing industry, the efficiency of the home's insulation (i.e., the home building industry), and many other systems. In other words, even while there is constant communication among all the functioning parts of a machine, there is also continuous communication between the machine and all the other systems it participates in. Hence, total control of a given system is impossible. This problem gave rise in the 1970s to "second-order cybernetics" (Von Foerster 1979).

The first computers were standalone, individual machines, and could be understood well enough through a classical cybernetic analysis. When people started connecting computers together into larger and larger networks, the information system it produced exceeded the element of containment needed

for the classical model to make sense. The internet and all the other networks it interacts with (i.e., telephone networks, TV networks, banking networks, social networks, etc.) model the way second-order cybernetics describes the world: No one network is the entire internet, while at the same time, the internet is the combination of all the networks it interfaces with at any given moment. This is not simple wordplay. It is an attempt to express how no single organism or system is self-contained or closed off from the rest of the world (or universe if we want to scale it up that far). Jones (2013) evokes Bateson's concept of "ecology" to explain:

> Humans, animals, and machines do not operate as independent entities, but rather combine with one another and with the environments in which they exist to form complex *systems* of communication and control. What this conception of "ecology" does is disrupt traditional notions of the "self" as an autonomous, bounded entity. (Jones 2013)

Any sense of singularity is an arbitrary closing off, and only temporary, conceptual isolation of the system from the other systems with which it has relationships. For example, a thermostat or heating system would not be needed if it were not for the weather patterns that result in the cooling and warming of the house. Further, without a house and all the materials it entails, the needs of the inhabitants, the fuel for the heating system, and the myriad other elements that go toward the necessity and maintenance of the heating system, there would not have been any motivation to create a heating system in the first place. Even if we leave the sun out of it, we already have a list of numerous interacting systems. And yet, none of these other entities are finished in and of themselves either. Each entity participates in the various systems that give rise to and maintain them.

Web 3.0, the "internet of things," adds yet another level of complexity, connecting our home thermostats to our cell phones and laptops. People may now control their home climate system from their phone on the other side of the globe if they wish. In a sense, there is an element of infinite regress involved, as it seems impossible to get to a linear starting point at which the entire "system of systems" was set in motion. So as I will explain further on in this book, origins matter little within the current iteration of our global media system.

Von Foerster's seminal work describing "the cybernetics of cybernetics" (1979) breathed new life into the field of cybernetic theory by confronting the discoveries that had revealed the limits of assuming closed, self-contained systems. Second-order cybernetics removed hierarchy and objectivity from the control loop concept (implications of which will be examined in greater detail in chapter 7), which brought along an ethical dimension. Cyberneti-

cists recognized that reality cannot be separated from the process by which it is explored. In other words, we seek out specific aspects of reality, and the means we use to learn about that reality also demarcate (i.e., limit) how we are able to understand it. Much different from the modernist notion that there is a natural "real" and "true" world outside ourselves just waiting for us to discover and know it, second-order cybernetics describes us as actively participating in the construction of our reality. To the extent humanly possible, we understand the world based on what we want to discover by selectively paying attention to some things and ignoring others, and creating our own explanations for what we encounter.[5]

In classical cybernetics, feedback was just communication between different parts of a closed system, in which the concept of autonomy was an outcome of circular organizational forms. In simple terms, this means systems work to accomplish whatever it is they do, and as a result, they accomplish what they have worked toward, in a continual process. Feedback (the communication between various parts of the system) is a positive or negative response to purposeful communication. For example, in situations of interpersonal communication, a listener's yes or no responses indicate whether or not they understand what the speaker has said. With traditional mass media such as broadcasting and publishing, feedback has typically come in the form of statistics about audience choices and reactions to programming content. However, we have moved well beyond the confines of the traditional mass media system of the twentieth century. The internet as a media ecosystem enabled a whole new and extensive range of feedback.

One feature of our global media system is highly individualized tracking of everything one does on their networked devices, creating what is known as "Big Data" sets. These massive data sets are analyzed continuously for patterns, then further processed through a user's self-selected filters on their various interfaces, and in turn, feedback is highly personalized and tailored content.[6] It is both intensely cyclical and constant, whereas, in more traditional media systems, the feedback loop was much more intermittent and generalized. By stimulating responses through communication, feedback is a means of controlling a system, but that control resides within the system that embodies its circularities. In other words, feedback is a communicative act and is only purposefully relevant to the system it is intended to affect on. On the other hand, feedback can also have unintended effects, especially on systems it does not realize it is communicating with, or when impacted by a system that does not recognize or does not care about its impacts on a specific portion of the network (for example, early industrialism's effects on the natural environment). In our current media system, when combined with the

previously described disproportion, these unintended effects can be devastatingly negative, or absurdly positive (see chapter 6).

CONSEQUENCES OF FEEDBACK

When something in a system's environment causes a disturbance, negative feedback triggers components in the system to make adjustments that bring it back closer to its previous state of balance. For example, the thermostat in a home heating system makes it so the negative difference of temperature outside is not noticeable from inside a house. Failure to act on the feedback results in the failure of the system (i.e., if the thermostat or any other component of the system does not respond to the communication, the temperature in the house goes down). Although the ecosystems of our natural world are incredibly more complex than home heating systems, we can apply the same concepts.

Systems that have evolved naturally sustain themselves in numerous circularities the way I have described above. Interlocked and interrelated systems all work in a sophisticated, ever-shifting, and changing network to correct for fluctuations and maintain a relative state of equilibrium. This notion is important in understanding how the global media apparatus as a digital ecosystem functions to maintain and expand through acts of constructive consumption (which I explain and discuss in chapters 3, 13, and 14). Simple cause/effect explanations that rely on linear logic rip open the interdependent circularities. In doing so, we are unable to gain an authentic understanding of the system's purpose, intelligence, morphogenesis, autonomy, and life (Bateson 1987). As Bateson described, information is "a difference that makes a difference" (Bateson 1987)[7] to some other part of the system, not an end unto itself.

Circularities respond to stimuli rather than differences. The state of a system might be different from one moment to the next, but that in and of itself does not stimulate a response. Instead, responses are provoked by differences in a system between what actually is, and what the components of the system believe should be—there is an element of expectation that precedes the demand for a response.[8] Such differences are communicated to other parts of the system, which process differences of differences, and so on.[9] The process eventually replaces the exact differences that set the circular process in motion, likely restoring the status of the system to the expected condition. For example, unfriending someone on Facebook whose posts you generally disagree with returns your newsfeed to the condition you expect to see. More simply, returning to the thermostat metaphor, a change in temperature causes the mercury in the relay switch to expand or contract, communicating differences by compar-

ing what is (the temperature it reads) with what is expected (the temperature you have programmed into it). The mercury only triggers the system to action when there is a certain level of difference from what is expected, but once it does, the system is told to turn on the gas, ignite the gas, and blow the warmed air through the ductwork. The warmer air then feeds back to the mercury in the thermostat the current condition of the temperature, and the mercury either expands or contracts, again signaling the rest of the system.

What we observe as the behavior of a system is its response to stimuli based on the information it has about the stimulus. The behaviors of social media users are thus their responses to the information they receive from one another in different parts of the system. There are no causal stimuli and resulting reactions like the linear cause/effect model of logic would have us search for. Instead, there is a constant flow of communication, and the flow of these differences is the information that causes changes at a later point in the system. In my graduate seminars on theory, I often use a plugged sink as an example of this.

The failure of a sink to drain signifies there is probably a blockage because what is happening is not what was expected. The blockage must be overcome somehow to drain the sink and restore it to the expected condition. This can be done by either forcing more through the pipe with greater pressure to dislodge the blockage (i.e., a plunger may produce positive feedback that escalates the crisis until it is forced out, to provoke a return to normalcy). Or normalcy can be restored by relieving the pressure and breaking up or removing the blockage (i.e., removing the blocked water and using acid to produce negative feedback by dissolving and dispersing the problem). In either case, the goal is to have the system communicate its openness to the water further up the line in need of draining. The cause of the blockage, if known, might only be useful to the system to help choose the action and possibly help prevent it again in the future, but the most immediate concern—what gets communicated—is restoration of the system to its previous order, rather than focus on the cause/effect issue. The rest of the system does not learn about the causes, just the effect it has on their own function within it.

When a meme appears in someone's Facebook feed, its origin has little to no relevance to the person's immediate reaction to its information. The user processes it the moment it is encountered: possibly skipped over and ignored, read, forwarded, modified, commented on, or researched further. Additional information only matters after one's initial encounter with the meme.

COMMUNICATION, INFORMATION, AND LOGIC

The conceptual schematic I have outlined is a system that facilitates the transfer of information. So far, I have only developed the plumbing, and have not yet dealt with the contents. Bopry (2007) makes the point that semiotics (the study of the system of signs used to communicate) and cybernetics share many observations in common. In analyzing the content of communication, information exists only in a system of coordinated interpretations, not within a message itself. This means that a message provides different information to different parts of a system according to how it might be relevant and meaningful at each point of interpretation. The same set of numbers might mean something completely different on a calendar than in a bank account, and from various interpretive perspectives (i.e., good, bad, or indifferent). This is important when we consider issues of interpretation (discussed in chapter 9). Additionally, information can only inform those who know how the information was made, who can thus understand its meaning from its interpretive position inside the system. For example, languages use specific words that mean specific things within their respective language sets. Even words that sound the same in different languages often mean entirely different things.[10] A word must refer to its own system of meaning to be understood. In cybernetics, this introduced the problem of self-reference, which can become a paradoxical conundrum. For example, grammatically correct phrases like ''do not read this sentence'' or ''be spontaneous'' seem to make sense, but defeat their own messages.[11] Self-reference is contrary to logical thinking. These paradoxes can be settled by applying the theory of logical types (Russell 2010), which eliminates self-reference in discourse by putting concepts in a higher category that can be used to contain and describe them. Otherwise, paradox disperses into a time series that renders the statement meaningless.[12] By simply taking those statements and categorizing them as ''paradoxes,'' we end their infinite loop (or at least contain it within another, more functional category). Thus we assert conceptual hierarchy to save our logical process, regardless of how its arbitrary nature is itself illogical.

Working within this schematic, recursive computation takes advantage of the circularity of information within arbitrarily designated sets.[13] Algorithms are instructions that layout actions step-by-step toward the completion of a function. Step-by-step assembly instructions that come with prefabricated furniture are analogous of algorithms. Software coding uses algorithms to make hardwired computer circuitry perform mathematical functions. The mathematical functions are circular in that they contain their own instruc-

tions that make them recurrently operate on themselves. Regarding memes specifically, Blackmore (1999b) references Denett's concept of "the evolutionary algorithm" to explain how memes qualify as evolutionary replicators (entities that not only copy themselves but also change and adapt in their own regeneration).

The simple computational ideal is for recursive operations (i.e., algorithms) to solve whatever problem is put into them. However, the implications of introducing algorithms are far more transformational for our culture. Mechanical calculators that used the centuries-old Leibniz Wheel all the way into the 1980s were suddenly displaced by modern computers, with their faster and more adaptable recursive computations. If we think of recursive computation's information as the metaphorical blood of a computer system, computer-aided communication is then merely the reproduction of messages throughout a vast array of circuitry, much like blood cells throughout a circulatory system. But just as there are many different types of cells and organisms within a biological circulatory system, within this digital circulatory system there are many different types of calculations and algorithms. Some are mundane and utilitarian, while others help us to think differently about things.

Some algorithms expand our capacity to comprehend and select answers from among more possibilities than we would otherwise be able to keep in our minds. This is known as intelligence amplification (aka cognitive augmentation) (Ashby 1999). In simpler terms, these kinds of algorithms help us to consider more information and thereby enable us to think "bigger" thoughts. Web browsers are a common digital example of this, or even more specifically, the Google search formula. These tools enable us to use computers and the global network to make decisions based on what their algorithms are designed to calculate, given the information we have input (a form of "computational intelligence," see Wang et al. 2009). Companies like Autodesk work with these types of algorithms to create computer-assisted design programs, which produce designs that the human mind could not possibly come up with on its own.

SELF-ORGANIZATION

Self-organization (Heylighen and Joslyn 2001) is another important cybernetic concept that helps us understand our global media system. According to Ashby's (1999) law of self-organization:

> circular networks of recurrent communication stabilize such systems while internal variation ensures their ability to move from one stability to another, in

the course of which communication becomes increasingly orderly and resistant to interference from outside. (In Krippendorf 2007)

In other words, self-organized systems become closed off from external influence. Self-organizing systems increase order inside themselves (diminish entropy), and/or decrease order (increase entropy) in the environment they are situated, by maintaining boundaries and identities. As an example, an organization (let us say a factory) can maintain control by preventing those inside (the workers) from organizing (creating a union), while preventing the emergence of competing organizations from the outside (competitors, regulators, etc.). Related to self-organization, the "order from noise principle" states that random disturbances stimulate responses within a system that speeds up self-organization (like the idea of "shaking things up" in an organization, to come out stronger from the resulting rebuilding process).

In simpler terms, self-organizing systems protect themselves from other elements in their environment by developing indigenous patterns of communication and identities that only they understand. They become impervious to instructions from outside themselves, closed organizationally, and individuals from within the system are unable to move to another. For example, a flock of birds or school of fish look from the outside to act as if they are of one mind, while their distinct communicative processes make them somewhat immune to interference from external communication that might try to disrupt them. Likewise, we cannot authentically explain or understand interactions within social organizations by looking from outside. Instead, one must know the secrets and rituals of an organization from "inside" to accurately comprehend its culture.

Self-organization is a salient concept when thinking of online communities. Marshall (2000) argues that online communities demonstrate several characteristics of self-organization, though there are also some issues (most notably, asynchronicity) that make online communities different from physical communities. Scaling up to a macro perspective, Castells (2002) showed how the internet itself was not just a uniting communications network, but also a model for global reorganization.

AUTOPOIESIS

Heylighen (2007) described society as an autopoietic system, and Marshall (2000) used online communities to illustrate the autopoietic nature of virtual society. Autopoiesis means self-production, which is a necessary component of evolution (see chapter 1). Autopoietic systems are made of recursive networks that produce all the components needed in its own system

(Heylighen and Joslyn 2001). These components produce only what is neces-sary to regenerate, and are self-sufficient in producing all the components needed. Biological organisms are autopoietic in their continual regeneration of their locational physical infrastructure. Additionally, they regenerate to overcome internal deterioration and external disruptions.[14] They do not serve a function. Instead, their reproduction, purposiveness, adaptation, cognition, and even survival are epiphenomena. They survive to exist, so to speak. This is an important aspect to keep in mind when considering whether media content has become a meme or not: Does it look like it is reproducing, spreading, and evolving to maintain its existence, or is it merely being used as a limited, blunt communicative tool by a smallish group of people?

Cybernetic systems also have "cognitive autonomy" (Krippendorf 2008). This means, for example, humans cannot step out of ourselves to externally judge what causes what we perceive; we can only ascertain through our perceptions. This, in turn, challenges the notion of objectivity, which is impossible given the premise of cognitive autonomy. Research on neural networks indicated that cognition recursively operates on its own processes, which means what we see as "reality" is wholly made inside our nervous systems. This includes environmental interactions. So the reality we perceive as individuals does not logically represent anything outside of our personal cognition. We maintain autopoiesis this way. Our constructions of reality are preserved "as is," which results in having the experiences expected when we act them out. Alternately, they might be modified or added on to when some-thing unexpected happens. In these cases, experience leads to what we know of as learning. If learning does not happen, a construct of reality is typically terminated if acting on it has bad effects on the actors, and the ideas die with them in such situations. So our understandings of specific aspects of reality may be preserved, changed, or dismissed, depending on the outcome of our particular experiences.

CYBERNETICS IN SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTION

One of the most visible characteristics of any new medium is what it changes or maintains in language and discourse. For example, the recent trend of us-ing emojis in text messaging both signals a shift to more iconic communica-tion in that medium, and has provoked a lot of interest and judgment from people concerned about the condition of our popular language. Social media presents numerous opportunities to apply this type of analysis. According to Krippendorf (2007), a discourse:

a. creates its own reality,
b. its objects are continuously elaborated within its discourse community, which
c. institutionalizes its recurrent practices, and
d. maintains a boundary around what does and does not belong, and
e. justifies the reality it constructs to other discourse communities on which it depends for material support.

We can identify all these elements at play in the case of emojis: An emoji "reality" is constructed by using emojis to communicate between community members, using them consistently in the "right" way while rejecting any other ways of communicating, and being of use in the social media economy. However, discourses are not fully autonomous. They must have a reason to be constructed. What merits discourse is socially constructed, and communally acted out. With emojis, the merit comes internally from the individuals who use them as their own specialized language to bond and maintain their network community. Externally, the opportunity to create and market a new digital product provides sufficient merit to keep from interfering, and even assist with the development of this evolution of the language system.

Jones (2013) explains that cybernetics focuses on the performativity of discourse, which is a key aspect of how humans participate in meme generation and evolution (explained in more detail in chapter 3). Texts work as a form of servomechanism, the implications of which align rather well with a Foucauldian/critical explanation of how discourse operates as a form of control over ideology (Foucault 1983). Be that as it may, it is in and for discourse that memes are replicated and evolve as they are passed from one person to others, as every reproduction of a text involves three changes: (1) "resemiotization" which is "the act of turning some thought, phenomena or behavior into a semiotic artifact using different kinds of semiotic systems or "modes" (e.g., speech, writing, gestures, images) as well as different media (materialities)"; (2) "retemporalization," which involves fixing "thoughts, phenomena or behavior into certain 'chronotopes,' configurations of time/ space" which "collapse long scale actions into moments, or expand moments into longer timescales," as they can "present information chronologically (as with a narrative) or spatially (as with an image)"; and finally there is (3) "re-contextualization" which "makes a situation-bound thought, phenomenon or behavior *portable*, able to be lifted out of the present moment and the present activity and imported into different moments and different activities" (Jones 2013, 11–12).
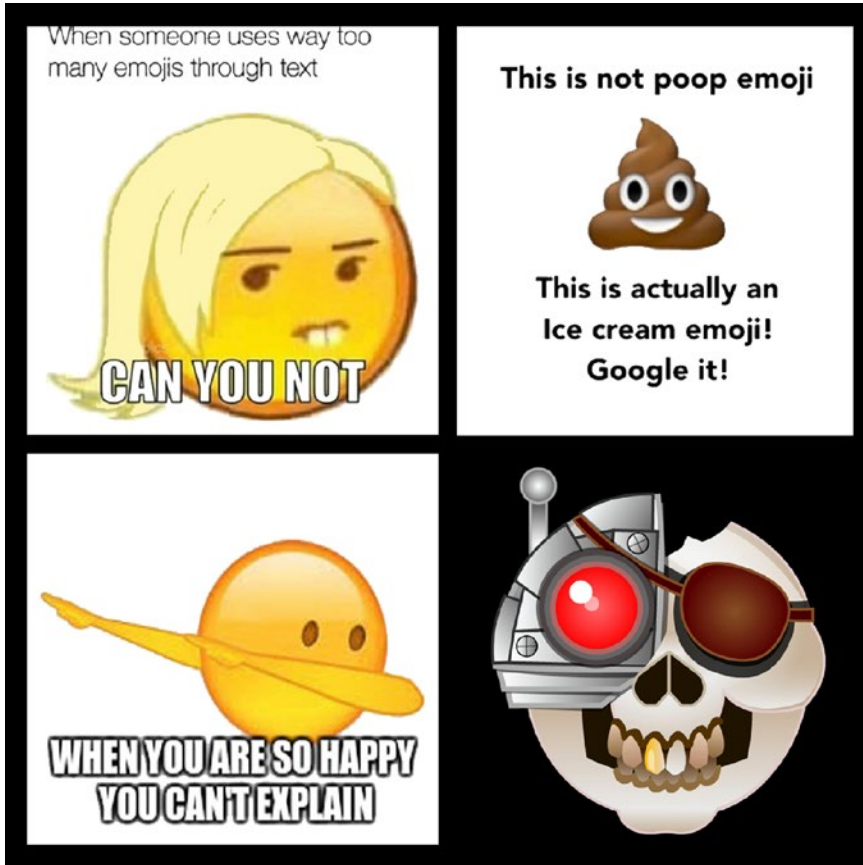
Figure 2.1. Emoji Discourse. The top left references the popular "Can You Not" image macro, while the top right exemplifies policing the emoji discourse. The bottom left emoji depicts the "Dabbing" dance meme, while the right portrays a pop cultural Cyborg reference. *Source*: All emojis are derivatives of the public domain copyright Unicode Full Emoji List, v11.0, found at https://unicode.org/emoji/charts/full-emoji-list.html.

CYBERNETIC "KNOWING": PARTICIPATORY EPISTEMOLOGY

Simplistic apparatuses that reliably perform one function at a time are known in cybernetics as "trivial" machines (e.g., a can opener). These kinds of machines can usually be understood just by observing how they work. Complex "nontrivial" systems have more autonomy though, so observation can only give us a spurious understanding of them. Computers, humans, and various

social formations are examples of nontrivial systems. We can learn about these types of entities by being responsible for making them, and by the experiences we have through interaction with them. Machines such as computers can be understood through both methods since we both build and interact with them. However, humans, at least up to this point in the ongoing revolution in genetics, are not designed and made in a factory. Until now, we have evolved with our environments, and understand our world from interacting with it. So we can only know people and social formations through interaction. This has important implications for fields such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology (any of the human sciences really), as it means survey data and human subject research may be considered spurious unless there is a considerable effort to interact with the people involved.[15] Through their shared experiences, researchers and all other stakeholders in the research (objects of study, analysts, the analyzed, interviewers, interviewees) together form a system. The resulting knowledge for any participant is only the magnitude of their own involvement and how they participated. They cannot know the whole of the system nor deeply understand the object of study. Thus participatory epistemology explains the subjective nature of how our knowledge is limited by our own experiences interacting with what interests us.

Resulting from this epistemological breakthrough, inquiry has generally turned away from notions of pristine, God-like objectivity. Instead, participatory epistemology works with language, conversation, and discourse to discover "metaperspectives" and abstractions as social constructs. This grants human stakeholders in a given system "equality, agency (accountability), cognitive autonomy (individually owned and potentially unlike conceptions), and the ability to communicate with one another (coordinating participants' understandings)" (Krippendorpf 2007). This brings about an ethical implication, since everyone has a stake in the "reality" being discovered, so the researcher is held accountable to the people who live in and cannot necessarily leave the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Participatory epistemology makes for a more open and egalitarian system within itself, but at the same time it further closes itself off from other systems. It may even encourage people ensconced in other systems to ignore certain experiences they are not a part of. This is especially an issue in online communities when they become so closed that new information is rarely brought into them (see chapter 8). The result is the creation of an experienced reality that is void of "other" perspectives on issues and problems, which, without good understandings of the reality outside their own, can substantially weaken a given community's ability to survive external threats.

OUR DATA STREAM UNDER PRESSURE

I discuss the role of individual humans in the global media machine with more detail in the next chapter, but it is important to mention here the human role is to choose and act as a propelling force within the cybernetic system. We choose specific information based on what seems logical for us to pay attention to, then push it forward through the tubes of the global media machine. This describes what we are doing as social media users, while how and why questions are dealt with in chapter 3. The consequence of this basic human activity for the system itself is the relevant aspect for this chapter.

In his seminal writing "Minerva's Owl," Harold Innis explained:

> At a point when a set of ideas becomes so dominant that it permeates every discourse . . . because it is overextended its faults are painfully . . . obvious. Thus, it collapses under the weight it has to bear. (Innis 1999)

One type of overextension in our global media apparatus results from cross-platform portability. Media content is no longer confined to one format or another. Rather, second-order cybernetics became the logic of business. The prominence of social media and user's empowerment through "convergence culture" (Jenkins 2008) resulted in a focus on the building of brands that could be applied to content in all media. Hence video games became bound to the film industry, which became bound to television, which became entangled with the internet, the internet with financial systems, financial systems with retail systems, and so on. The transfer of information around the system exponentially increased, to the point now that audiences are considered "fractured," sorted by narrow "niche" tastes (Rust and Oliver 1994).

With the understanding of cybernetics I have laid out, I now return to the metaphor of the internet as a system of tubes. In this "tube" model, we can think of the disproportional effects as the system's effort to correct imbalances through feedback (like the plunger analogy). A steamworks system needs to be able to bleed off some pressure to sidestep and correct failures within the network of pipes, and thus avoid an explosion. The interconnected global media system must likewise find ways to move information around and keep its mechanisms functioning normally. Where in a steamworks we are concerned with physical explosions from a buildup of steam pressure, in the global media system we are endangered by what Virilio (2000) called an "information bomb" in which we are threatened with "cybernetic eugenicism":

> Tomorrow's war will be *globalitarian*, in which, by virtue of the information bomb, the qualitative will be of greater importance than geophysical scale or population size. Not "clean war" *with zero deaths,* but "pure war" *with zero*

births for certain species which have disappeared from the bio-diversity of living matter. (Virilio 2000, 144–45, italics in original)

In this scenario, only certain kinds of new information can be allowed into the system, which has profound consequences for notions of truth, fact (see chapter 7), and solipsism (see chapter 5) in closed communities (see chapter 8).

Being a relatively new system, and a system still under construction, our global media is constantly put out of balance due to new additions to it and a lack of well-established norms, protocols, and regulation. There is little governance nor any resting of the monstrous 24/7 global network we have created, and hence disproportion is the present norm in terms of its social outcomes. While the mechanical system itself might be able to accommodate the chaos and disarray of the rapidly growing technological monster, we organic humans are not built to withstand such pressure.

There are several identifiable sources of pressure put on the system, and hence on us:

- Pressure to keep information circulating, in motion
- Pressure to fix things when we see they are broken
- Pressure to participate
- Pressure of too much information (information overload)

The immediacy of our real-time interactions and circumstances cloud the danger. A steamworks with too much pressure needs to be relieved, or it will explode. As I have mentioned, this can be done through a valve. Or it might happen when a weak point in a pipe or connection develops a leak. It might also be relieved by turning its energy into another form. This is much like our intermittent viral effects (sometimes, not always). Or, perhaps unlikely, the load can be shut down at its source. It remains to be seen what combination of options will rise to prominence, but for my purposes in this book, the consequence for our global digital network is a system under intense pressure from an information overload, which causes various uncontrollable leaks to erupt throughout the system that vent as socio-political consequences. This is the cybernetic context within which media memes and memetic communication have evolved, with human agency as a driving force. I will now turn our attention to the process of this human participation.

NOTES

1. As shall be examined in chapter 3.
2. Sarah Kliff makes such an argument in "The Internet Is, In Fact, a Series of Tubes," *Washington Post*, September 20, 2011. See https://www.washingtonpost.com

/blogs/wonkblog/post/the-internet-is-in-fact-a-series-of-tubes/2011/09/20/gIQALZw fiK_blog.html.

3. For example, its use in words such as cyborg (cybernetic organism), cyberculture, cyberpunk, cyber crime, cyber bullying, etc.

4. For a summary of the function and some ontological impacts of the digital computer, see Gere 2008.

5. I discuss this issue in the context of our current media system throughout chapters 7 and 8.

6. Described in more detail in chapter 4.

7. Similar to George Spencer-Brown's "distinctions," Claude Shannon's "choices," and Ross Ashby's "variety."

8. Of particular relevance to chapters 5, 7, and 8.

9. The #BlackLivesMatter civil rights movement is an example of this, showing that even though differences in treatment of black citizens are known, it does not result in change unless there is ample feedback in the political system to provoke a different response. Reduced to its simplest terms, it is a "squeaky hinge" principle, in which the hinge that makes noise gets oiled, even though other hinges may be equally or in more need of lubricant.

10. For example, the word "red" is a color in English, means "network" in Spanish, and "beautiful" in Russian. This is known as a "false cognate" in linguistics.

11. This issue rears up in chapters 5 and 8.

12. For example, we can look at the paradox of Epimenides, the Cretan, who claimed "all Cretans are liars," which can be dissolved into a time series by assuming he is telling the truth, it follows he is lying, which follows that he is telling the truth, which follows he is lying. . . . Or similarly, a statement such as "All truth is relative."

13. In mathematics, set theory works with this notion of collections of objects, which may be contained entities, intermingled with other sets, or even contain a set of sets.

14. In contrast with allopoietic systems that produce something other than what constitutes them, are designed for a purpose (e.g., factories produce things needed elsewhere).

15. This issue is being addressed through the development of qualitative research methods, especially ethnography. For more on this emphasis in the human sciences, see Denzin 2001.

Chapter Three

Rehash(tagged)

In this chapter, I explain Consequence 2. Driven by individual prosumer agency, digital consumer culture remediates our popular culture's logics, rituals, power relations, and social problems, into our new social media format. I elaborate a macro view of how culture is (re)produced, (re)invented, and (re)circulated by individuals in our digital consumer culture memeplex to communicate with one another by altering, repurposing, and forwarding messages (and occasionally creating new ones). This individual user agency altogether fuels a critical mass of activity that births memes and results in memetic communication. The uses and gratifications that motivate us to use media in the ways we do establish communal and individual rituals that may be detrimental to the goals we have set for ourselves and society, while reinforcing society's symbolic order.

Imagine if you and your neighbors were to spraypaint a new word or short phrase on the front wall of your houses or apartment buildings every time you walked past it. The word could be whatever you choose, in any style or design you wished. It would stand as your message to your community, representing your state of mind, hopes, aspirations, and concerns at the moment you painted it. Sometimes it might be a random thought. Other times a response to another neighbor's message. Or occasionally, something you had put some real thought into. It might at first seem risky, daring, out of place, possibly even exciting. You might feel a sense of empowerment as you share in expressing your profound existentialness to the world. Your walls would quickly become covered in your own graffiti, as you tagged them numerous times every day and night. Then after a while, the newness would wear off.

For many people, tagging would turn into just another everyday habit, possibly even a chore. You would find yourself painting over what you had written previously, creating a bit of a cluttered mess, making it hard to remember what you had already written. It would become a less thoughtful,

mundane task. But since everyone else was still doing it, there would be a feeling that you should keep it up as well. Even in this mundane condition, every expression you painted on your wall is still something you had chosen and assumedly wanted there as a representation of yourself. At this point though, what words and phrases would you select?

It is unlikely such quick, uninspired, and inelegant writing would often accomplish much more than merely repeating headline-like buzzwords, tropes, the occasional phrase chosen just for offensive shock or comedic value, and—those times you really don't have the mental capacity to think of something original—outright copying of something from your neighbors' walls. You might write things like, "Weather: It's not good!" "Politics = headache," "New phone!" or "Love NYT headline." Simple things. You'd probably even find you have repeated yourself, rehashing similar expressions in slightly different ways. And a closer look at your neighbors' walls might reveal that they are not all that different from your own. Yet the ritual was established, and you would seldom if ever talk about it with others. The simple things you write might express a moment. The act and aesthetic itself may continue to unite your community in a cultural practice symbolically, but the messages at this point likely do little (perhaps nothing) to push forward a meaningful change in your world.

While some might scoff at this unlikely analog scenario, it more or less describes how many people use Facebook: tagging our own walls numerous times a day; looking at others' postings in our newsfeeds as if we are driving down the street reading the fronts of their houses; borrowing and rehashing thoughts, ideas, and expressions we are already familiar with. In so doing, we are binding our community together through the rituals of these communicative acts.

One long-lived and popularly recognized global meme, "Kilroy Was Here," is a product of exactly this type of graffiti, spread all around the world (predominantly by military service people). The act of creating graffiti (aka tagging) has been remediated into a digital format, and with it the ability to quickly create viral media memes. To understand how this has been accomplished and what it implies for our world, I must take you back to the start of our civilization's digitalization project.

DIGITALIZATION

Digitalization is a word used to describe the conversion of analog information into digital code, to be stored and retrieved through computers. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, Western civilization began converting as much

Figure 3.1. Kilroy. The top shows an analog graffiti image of the "Kilroy Was Here" meme. The bottom shows the same meme in digitalized "ASCII Art" format. *Source***: "Kilroy Was Here," creator unknown, found at https://www.red dickmilitaria.com/images/kilroy-was-here02-600x399.jpg. "Kilroy Was Here ASCII Art," creator unknown, schema found at http://triple-double-u.com/ascii/?s=ascii-art&y=weather&w=hotels&q=jkl/kilroy.txt&mailit=x.**

information about the world as we could into digital code. It began with a lot of scientific data, record keeping, and ballistic calculations. This digitalization project has evolved over the decades to include optical, sonic, emotional, and almost every other order of information. If we do not know how to digitally capture something yet, rest assured there is likely some entity somewhere working on a digital "solution" to that problem.

The digitalization project began in earnest in 1964 when the IBM 360 mainframe computer went to market, introducing standardization in computing. Before the IBM 360, each digital computer had been somewhat unique, designed specifically for each individual buyer, and therefore different from all others in their capacities and limits. With the rollout of a viable commercial computer, plus the space race in the 1960s which demonstrated computer

use for mass audiences, new cultural forms and practices emerged with the West's cultural embrace of hi-technology.

In the present moment, we continue to digitalize everything we can. Even our coffee makers and electric toothbrushes are digitalized, making them into cybernetic organisms by combining feedback-creating sensors with programming to guide their operation. As Gere has written, "Digitality can be thought of as a marker of culture because it encompasses both the artifacts and the systems of signification and communication that most clearly demarcate our contemporary way of life from others" (Gere 2008, 12). Digitality refers to the digital computer and experience of discreteness (which will be explained more in chapter 5), but computers are only useful because they give us access to the binary code that we translate our information into and use to store our digital data. So digital code is only useful to us insofar as we have machines we can use to create and access it.

At this stage of digitalization, digital products can be both material and nonmaterial, since the code itself is often traded as a commodity. In effect, much of our world is "dematerialized": either transcribed into discrete code and stored for retrieval later, or actually created in digital space and then later produced as a physical item, or possibly existing just as code in perpetuity. In the process of digitalization, analog physical forms that are solid and continuous, such as a street scene, are partitioned into discrete, codified units. The image is translated into dots on a grid, which is in turn stored as mathematical code. Machines act as both encoders and translators, and we use them to make sense of a world we never actually see when we choose not to look beyond the image. This is an important aspect of digitalization to note, as it has profound implications for epistemology and how we come to believe what we do about the world (discussed further in chapters 5 and 7).

As most of us computer users know, digital code can be easily copied. This engenders the possibility of making numerous exact copies of a digital file. The code is also extremely portable, meaning it can be transported or sent elsewhere easily and cheaply (at this point in tech development, usually through landlines or across wireless connections), which allows exact replicas to propagate (for example, online file sharing programs that store files "in the cloud" or work with a network of users' hard drives such as Bit Torrent). Digital information itself conflates the product/currency divide, with even the data from tracking our web surfing or shopping transaction histories becoming information products that are traded and sold by credit card, online retail, and many other companies.

This aspect of digitality changes how we think about and value originality and authenticity. The information itself becomes the commodity to be bought and sold. To quote Gere again:

> To speak of the digital is to call up, metonymically, the whole panoply of virtual simulacra, instantaneous communication, ubiquitous media and global connectivity that constitutes much of our contemporary experience. (Gere 2008, 11)

Taking this a step further, digitalization does not just store information in digital format and change our perception of the world; it also remediates our everyday lives.

REMEDIATION

Remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1998) is a concept inspired by Marshall McLuhan's observation that the content of any new medium is the old medium it replaces. We see this constantly happen with our digital devices. The old media and programs do not disappear. They become assimilated as part of a more sophisticated machine. Hence, in addition to containing telephones, our smartphones have within them everything from cameras to word processors to video/music players to games to appliance remote controls to anything else that can be converted from a standalone device into a digital application. Both our digital appliances and the software they run remediate our consumer tastes and cultural values along with their technological functions. This is central when considering how consumers build personal brands (i.e., their virtual selves[1]) by freely circulating signifiers available through the internet, constructing a publicly expressed identity with media that signifies the styles and practices they want representing them. In the process, people remediate previous technical iterations, and also cultural logics and principles that have accompanied them. In other words, values and issues such as greed, generosity, discrimination, benevolence, political orientations, philosophies, etc. get reproduced in a new format when they are remediated as part and parcel of the technological change.

An example of remediation is the commodification of digital space itself, and the use of digitalization to remediate capitalism: "commodification, with the help of digitalization, is able to penetrate into communication processes and thus construct new commodities" (Prodnik 2012, 274). Prodnik explains further, "there is now an enduring global commodification of everything,

including culture, creativity, information, and diverging types of communi-cation" (Prodnik 2012, 275). The remediation of capitalism in digital space is closely correlated with the consumer culture that dominates virtual space.

THE ROLE OF THE HUMAN IN
THE GLOBAL MEDIA APPARATUS

Toffler's concept of prosumerism mentioned in chapter 1 has gained much traction in recent years. Changes in the production of goods that allow con-sumers to customize products to their tastes before they are manufactured have resulted in individual consumers also sharing in the production pro-cess. For example, imagine ordering a dish off a menu in a restaurant, then once the basic preparation has begun, you get up and go to the kitchen to adjust ingredients and proportions to your exact liking. That may not seem too difficult when it comes to food, but we are also doing similar things with far more elaborate productions. As prosumers, we are dabbling in the production process of everything from cars to running shoes. Toffler fore-saw the arrival of this blending of roles back in the 1980s, prompting him to combine the two previously discrete identities (consumer and producer) into one. The manufacture of material goods required a great deal of ad-vancement in both communication and mechanization of mass production to achieve a point at which we could say prosumerism plays a meaningful yet unremarkable (or even mundane) role in everyday life. Digital goods, however, have emphasized user interaction almost as long as the internet has been around.

The 1990s invention of hyperlinks made it normal for people to interact with their online content by choosing what would appear before them on their screen, which previously would have required laborious loading and unloading of pre-programmed data. Interactivity achieved new heights with the addition of user-controlled preferences and filters, and then later, the ability to mashup various media into one's own social media page. The prosumerist mentality became commonplace online, with users customizing their web-browsing tools and activities to produce precisely the experiences they wished to consume. In the present day, the choices to produce, consume, "like," and possibly reproduce/forward media memes demonstrates prosum-erism to near perfection. However, the role of the human in the global media machine concerning memetic communication goes beyond just prosumerism, to both more basic and more profound functions.

Aunger (2002) has a slightly more basic way of describing the human role in the memeplex, likening memes to parasites and people to unwitting hosts:

memetics is the cultural analogue to the study of how disease-causing pathogens diffuse through populations. The striking metaphor of memes as "mind viruses" . . . takes memes as particles of culture that parasitize human hosts, causing them to behave in ways conducive to getting copies of their information into the heads of other people. Memes, like viruses, are parasites because they make use of another organism's physical, chemical, and mental processes for their own transmission. Furthermore, both memes and viruses undergo vigorous competition for survival. Viruses must overcome the immune system and induce the host to transmit new virus particles to uninfected hosts; memes must overcome those memes previously existing in a host's mind and then induce her to transmit the meme to new potential hosts. . . . In short, we don't have ideas; ideas have us! We are hosts to parasites feeding on our brains that cause us to behave in ways beneficial to them, not us. (Aunger 2002, 17–18)

This job of "hosting" memes in our minds may or may not be a scientifically sound theory. As explained in the first chapter, the biological veracity is inconsequential when our focus is on memes as digital media entities. What I find useful from Aunger's explanation is the idea that, while digital information resides in the virtual world, the human mind's processing of information, nurturing of ideas, and decision-making still has a powerful role to play in the reproduction of memes.

Heidegger explained that we humans are what drives technological advancement, as we are the ones who create it, use it, and push it toward new frontiers (Heidegger 1977, 18–19). We create what we believe will be useful for ourselves, then use it, and improve upon it. The internet and other digital environments are no different from automobiles in that way. We have altered our labor habits to match our machines of production many times through the development of industrial society.[2] In the present moment, the ubiquity and availability of digital technology has turned even our leisure time into laboring time. We digital consumers participate in the production of the very same digital experiences we consume, with every act we perform in digital space creating new data that contributes to the digital information economy (Castells 2000, 2001; Mosco, 2009). Bruns (2008) calls social media activity and the construction/distribution of memes "produsage," to reflect the productive nature of using the technology. The acts of generating content, sharing, liking, reposting, forwarding, altering, and perusing are all claimed as free labor by the monstrous media machine within which we do it. Lawson, Sanders, and Smith explain, "the structures that govern society's understanding of information have been reorganised under a neoliberal worldview to allow information to appear and function as a commodity" (2015, 1). Our prosumerist produsage helps sustain and keep the global media apparatus in motion. Living in a condition of globalized digital consumer culture (explained in

more detail further down), we achieve much of our consumption through experiences facilitated and delivered with media.

Our global media machine reaches around the world at every moment, collecting content to feed its insatiable appetite for data to process. Its ubiquity and tremendous hunger make it seem like a perpetual motion machine, with every act of media production and consumption generating more information on which to feed. The digital code behind our user-generated content is instantly absorbed, even before we can consume it ourselves. Our contemporary technology is no longer just a simple extension of human capacities (McLuhan 1995). It is a monstrous machinic apparatus that also has certain capacities of its own. While us individual humans experience it like virtual pilots controlling a system of "private telematics" (Baudrillard 1988), the hybrid network itself is a cybernetic organism that comprises the capitalist global media apparatus. This organism objectively seems to function with its own pathology and ethics. Of course, this is impossible to substantiate, but it is definitely out of the hands of any one individual human's or human collectif's (Callon and Law 1995) control. Programmers and computer architects have embedded the logic the machine needs to perpetuate and grow on its own since the 1950s, by inducting the logic of cybernetics into the technological apparatuses that constitute the platform for our global network. All we need to do as humans is use it to input enough of our energy to keep nudging it along.

Blackmore (1999a) observed that at present the system still needs humans to help it grow and sustain itself, but that may change someday. Perhaps we are already seeing it change before our eyes. With the normalization of performance enhancement, the activation of the global brain, and the rise of viral thought, perhaps we are also arriving at a new, evolved popular definition of human "being." If so, what is the nature of our new ontological condition?

Let us take Heidegger's (1977) position to heart: humans are the engines of technology. A simplistic interpretation of this idea would position humans much like a horse drawing a carriage, or an engine driving the wheels of a car. However, in this new era of media and technology, a more accurate metaphor might be something like playing dodgeball with many balls in the air, and no one in the center of the circle. The "dodge" part of the game is now avoiding midair collisions. And instead of balls, we are using hashtags and internet memes, what Pothineni and Mishra (2011) call "social objects." Social objects are the forms used for memetic communication. In social media, we find ourselves assimilated into an ongoing team juggling game. The goal of the game is not to win, as that would cause everything to stop. Instead, the simple goal is to keep it going, to avoid the crash, to improve the performance of the game apparatus, and continuously add more balls and players. As with all

capitalist endeavors, winning means growing, expanding, keeping the balls moving through the air—precisely, evenly, predictably, systematically.

Why would we choose to be part of this game? The answer lies in the cultural imperatives we are compelled to take part in. Lehdonvirta (2012) argues that consumer culture has been digitalized, and with it have come new needs and expressions of virtualized consumerism. To understand the nature of digital prosumer behavior, I must explain more about the digital consumer culture in which we live.

DIGITAL CONSUMER CULTURE

Although it has been a while since first publication, Featherstone's *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (1991) sits as a solid bookend in understanding of our contemporary digital culture. He explained that the most popular critique of consumer culture is its dependence on the constant expansion of capitalist commodity production. This expansion brings about an accumulation of material culture (an overabundance of goods far beyond what we *really* need). It also brings growth in leisure and consumption, to the effect explained above. The massive popularity of our digital devices (laptops, smartphones, etc.) would not have been possible without this expansion of material culture, and globalization as an expansionist project of capitalism. Along with the material proliferation of digital appliances, there has been an explosive expansion of virtual goods (which is the category media memes belong to).

The growth of production and abundance of goods has also brought growth in consumption. With consumption being the point at which capital expenditures are turned into profits, this has, in some ways, put an unprecedented amount of power into a united consumer class. This power is in many regards still being discovered, and is being used both on purpose and accidentally in ways that are transforming our world. These effects are the subject matter of the remainder of this book from the next chapter onward.

Our new consumer power comes along with our virtual consumption, which enables brand and consumer communities to unify in our contemporary world. Some celebrate the empowerment of the consumer as an equalizing socio-political phenomenon. Others are suspicious of being manipulated through desire and seduction. This suspicion is not misplaced. Desire and seduction play a crucial role in the consumption of media, played with by politicians, advertisers, and other consumers alike.

In sociological terms, Featherstone described satisfaction and status (both achieved through external validation) as dependent on the display of prestigious items, which are also useful in maintaining stratified differences among

people. We use our consumer goods to create social bonds, and also for sepa-
rating distinctions. That is, in our consumer culture we are taken to be what
we appear to be. In social media, what we appear to be is what we show our
network that we are. Macek (2013) explains, "Members of online audiences
also share, narrate and circulate 'themselves' and representations of their
lifeworlds" (295). Our digital consumer goods include media devices, plus
software and other products of digital code (music, images, video, etc.), all of
which participate in the creation and maintenance of social connections and
divisions. There is great effort put into creating and maintaining these socio-
logical aspects of media use, which will be discussed in more depth further on.

A more hedonistic understanding of consumer culture explained by Feath-
erstone is motivated by people's drive for emotional pleasure, dreams, desire
in consumption, and a celebratory culture of aesthetic pleasure. Featherstone
wrote that our culture of consumption (aka consumer culture) is sustained
by an "over-supply of symbolic goods" and "cultural disorder and de-clas-
sification" (1991). This disorder facilitates a refocus on desire and pleasure,
which becomes the heart of the consumer experience. The consumer is driven
to search out and consume experiences moreso than find satisfaction in the
primitive consumption of material goods, since our general needs are so eas-
ily and diversely met in our supply-side economy.

From an economic perspective, "The object of all production is consump-
tion, with individuals maximizing their satisfactions through purchasing"
(Featherstone 1991). Our cultural industries act as filters for how we decide to
spend our leisure time. They present us with goods that awaken and feed our
desire to consume. The appeal to our desires displaces a rational concern for
utility, which is stated economically as the replacement of use value (value
determined by how useful something is) with exchange value (value deter-
mined by how much we think the status signified by something is worth).
This leaves the signifying element of the consumer item free-floating (as
described in chapter 1), with no material anchor to secure its meaning. This
signifier is then associated with desire through clever advertising (14).

Through this process, the creation of the "commodity sign" is the making
of "brands" that are no longer tied to the value of how useful products are.
The brand itself becomes the commodity rather than the object labeled by the
brand, and the status afforded the brand determines its value. For example, we
do not buy a "drink" or a "cola drink." Rather, we buy a Coke or Pepsi. Our
consumer-cultural logic leads us to value the brand more than the material
good it represents. The satisfaction of thirst will happen regardless of which
beverage we buy, so what we emphasize is the label rather than the contents.
This has the effect of aestheticizing "reality" (making reality seem like it's all
about maintaining an image with nothing of substance underneath it all) in an

environment with an overproduction of signification. And there are a LOT of aesthetic choices to make in our everyday consumer lives.

We cannot simply go to the town market and buy groceries anymore. Instead, we must choose from a range of branded grocery outlets (the "Farmers' Market" being just another brand choice), then once we are in the store, choose our individual items from an overwhelming array of almost identical material goods that are distinguished almost entirely by their brand identity. It has been argued that choice and authority are used as strategies by corporations to make it seem normal for communication to be profit-orientated and privately owned (Fürsich and Roushanzamir 2001). In this economic condition, consumption is much more navigation of culture through astute brand choices rather than basic utility and survival. The main differences between this material process and our virtual selections are a vastly expanded range of digital products to choose from, and the ease with which we may consume such portable products. To some extent, this explains how an iconic brand like Apple, which makes nothing that is primarily essential to people's daily existence, rises to become a necessary inclusion in many individual's self-identity (Magaudda 2015).

As I mentioned, Featherstone described that a "logic of consumption" works to "demarcate social relationships" (16). These relationships are at the heart of determining the exchange value of goods. The numerous classes of consumption may act as rites of passage into certain social groups (i.e., the kind of car one buys, the neighborhood one lives in, the clothing brands one wears). Cultural competence in transforming consumption from a destructive to constructive process is now a valued skill. Consumption has become a conceptually constructive act by using the product as a signifier, instead of ending its existence. The key here is thinking of the brand as an aesthetic construct. As an aesthetic, it doesn't need to be "consumed" in the way food or other material goods might meet their demise. Rather, this kind of consumption happens through sensory and emotional experiences (explained further in chapter 4). One's lifestyle may become pluralized, living a little bit (i.e., consuming) within different niches (i.e., part athlete, part gamer, part adventurist, part professional, etc.). Klar (2013) argues that our own multiple identities may even find themselves competing with one another. This, in turn, raises the ethical dilemma that one is living only to please oneself, rather than empathetically relate with others. Social media creates an ideal social environment in which to promote our consumer choices and ideals to one another, and to compartmentalize our social activities into differently sorted groups that never come into contact with one another (a problem examined in more detail in chapters 5 and 8). The ease with which we may tell and show one another about our experiences creates the appearance of togetherness and

shared community (though not necessarily *actual* togetherness), which factor
into this discussion further down.

Lury (1996) emphasized the postmodern aspect of consumer culture,
explaining that contemporary consumption is mainly about meaning and
playfulness. Like Featherstone, she explained that production-led consumer
culture dominates our logic and society through a parade of new products,
and by encouraging consumptive behaviors. She underscored the importance
of how consumption is linked with pleasure. Since commodities take on the
form of a generated "experience" (i.e., exchange value) over the material use
value, "style" functions as a marker of belonging and status. Style de facto
determines the new usefulness of the aesthetic product (again, its exchange
value). It is not just style in the sense of the design of a product's form. Added
to this is an emphasis on the style of consumption: the *way* we consume has
become as important as the brands we choose. As she put it, "Life should be
seen as a work of art" (Lury 1996). Advertising is used to teach consumers
aesthetic knowledge of brands, while at the same time promoting styles of
consumption. Brand logos then function as aesthetic representations of ex-
periences individual consumers desire to have or to prove they have already
experienced. We consumers thus find representation of our identity through
our choices of logos and symbols that contribute to an "individual."[3]   Our
consumption is driven by the quest for signifiers of value to us.

Lury went on to explain that the mass media system works to both popu-
larize and distribute signifiers. Our individual striving to satisfy desires, to
improve our personal brands, and to belong all drive the economy of sym-
bols—our consumption of aesthetics privileges stylization as the most defin-
ing feature of consumer culture. Our actions and the movement of goods are
directed by our knowledge of the technical, social, and aesthetic dimensions
of our culture. The knowledge of these dimensions is itself distributed as the
determining factor of aesthetic value. This leads to a culture that values myths
of authenticity (an idea about the purity of something's origin, hence the use
of the terms "original" and "authentic" in advertising) over practical useful-
ness. An extreme caricature of this sensibility would be a dehydrated person
refusing a glass of water because it came in an old cup filled from the tap (an
unbranded product) rather than from a branded bottle.[4]

An unequal distribution and uptake of consumer knowledge maintain
social stratification, mainly concerning prestige and authenticity. Lury re-
ferred to Clifford's (1999) schematic of the "art-culture" system to explain
this process. Clifford described the "art-culture" system as a set of institu-
tions, practices, and beliefs that organize the production and consumption
of cultural goods (such as art, literature, entertainment). Lury invoked this
theoretical model to describe how consumer culture is given shape through

artful techniques and strategies for advertising, design, packaging, etc. Clifford explained art and culture as products of a socio-cultural machine, within which aesthetically valued objects are circulated and sorted. Similar in conceptual origin, Macek calls the individual's work in social media apparatus the "social curation of content" (2013, 300). Value is assigned through a set of relationships that determine the degree to which specific things may be considered authentic or inauthentic. In effect, the art-culture system is a legitimizing framework for the labels "authentic" and "original."

While we are building our identities, we are also somewhat unconsciously contributing to what Winner (2003) described as "technical arrangement." He explained that the way we make things contributes to the structuring of political order. The meanings of our technological artifacts (including digital aesthetic objects/designs) are socially constructed, and the way we organize our information (i.e., what gets prioritized, what gets ignored) implies political arrangements. The political order is in itself a socio-cultural construct also subject to rearrangement. McCracken (1986) three decades ago had already illustrated that consumer goods carry and communicate cultural meaning, and the meaning of goods is continuously transformed. Since meaning is culturally dynamic, advertising, fashion, and rituals of consumption are "instruments" by which meaning is conveyed. In the present, this includes the virtual instruments of meaning we consume in our social media activities.

Culture lends stability to the meanings of consumption and the symbolisms of specific goods. McCracken explained that meaning is, in essence, a relationship between categories and principles. On a more philosophical level, the relationship between categories and principles demarcates the connection between epistemology (the way we know things) and morals/ethics (what we consider the right way to think, act, and behave). Our cultural categories serve us as "coordinates of meaning" that we encounter as a basic, naturalized, taken for granted taxonomy (system of categorization) with which to describe and navigate the world. We use this, in turn, to create and describe a "worldview." This worldview includes our taxonomies of identification (race, class, sex, gender etc.) which, as cybernetics has already taught us, are not meaningful the way we intend them to be outside the cultural system from in which they are created. McCracken explained that North American culture encourages dynamic cultural categories, with a great deal of slippage and change along with individual selection as part of its logic. This is an apt description of the dynamic ways we experience the digital world. Cultural categories segment the world into discrete and logically palatable conceptual forms (which feeds the notion of living a "discrete life" discussed in chapter 5). These cultural categories are then made real through our human activity. As he put it, "individuals continually play out categorical distinctions, so that

the world they create is made consistent with the world they imagine" (Mc-Cracken 1986, 73). Consumer goods thus make cultural categories material (things and people become seen as gendered, sexed, raced, etc.).

Lest we succumb to the paradox of self-reference, McCracken enacted the theory of logical types by summoning a higher categorical notion of "cultural principles." He explained these reside in the ideas determining the organization, evaluation, and interpretation of cultural phenomena: "Cultural principles are the assumptions that allow all cultural phenomena to be distinguished, ranked, and interrelated" (73). At play in every aspect of society, cultural principles are the ideas that we use to justify segmentation into cultural categories, such as the principle that value is reflected in cost, and more is better. In the West, like cultural categories, cultural principles are also dynamic and shifting, and individually elective.

Media and design work as instruments that transfer meaning, imparting a sense of already-existing symbolism in objects, and making the product part of cultural myth. Meaning is always mobile in this system, always in transit from one context to another, but takes on the appearance of stability through the rituals we use them in and pass along to others—for example, certain times, places, and ways of playing video games. However, rituals manipulate as well as stabilize meaning through action, creating a predictable "passage" of the mobile good while transferring its symbolic meaning. McCracken, concerned more with material goods than virtual ones, identified these transfers as exchanges: gifts (person to person), possession (purchase), grooming (style), divestment (sale, charity). In our current moment, digital goods exchanged on social media have as much cultural salience as any other signifier in our consumer culture. Prosumption and broadcasting of one's activities increase by orders of magnitude the amount of potential exchange any one individual may participate in. To better understand this process, Carey's (1989) cultural model of communication as the "creation, apprehension and use" of symbols illustrates the interplay of the symbolic with the production of material culture.

RITUALS AND REALITY

Susan Sontag (2003) argued that "reality has always been interpreted through the reports given by images" (80), and that "a painting . . . is never more than the stating of an interpretation" (81). Aligned with Featherstone's notion of the aestheticization of reality, she explained, "One can't possess reality, one can possess images . . . one can't possess the present but one can possess the past" (85). I add to this that we may encounter it as an "always-already" thing, but as we have come to understand from the proceeding sec-

tions, our symbolic order is dynamic, under perpetual maintenance, revision, and re-creation. This is the work of our rituals of consumption. In our digital culture, we have digital rituals of digital consumption.

Aunger (2002) speculated, "maybe ideas are replicators that have evolved abilities to get themselves planted in new host-minds and thereby gain a foothold for future replication" (11). Again, because this writing is not concerned with proving memetics from a biological perspective, we can simply take this as a fact in the virtual world. Memes are, then, ideas residing in virtual space that become linked to other ideas to "form a unique complex" (11). The replicator is a snippet of code that in one way or another stimulates its own reproduction. The thing that motivates and connects things to make the new entity is called a catalyst. Its driving motivation must be, "Can this fit with this?" like a jigsaw puzzle. It can make both mistakes and innovations by joining two ideas that look aesthetically similar but are from different parts of the puzzle. That is, they can function in either location in the puzzle, although they are originally meant to be in one place and not the other. The removal of the history of the sign, as in simulacra, detaches the information from its history, allowing for the play of ideas. Aunger argued, "when information *replicates* . . . an additional causal force becomes involved in the explanation of communication" (12). I answer his speculation with the suggestion that ritual could possibly be that additional force, that mimesis might be what perpetuates memetics. And that "how to" process information is part of the operational hard wiring. Taking McLuhan's thesis to heart, "the medium is the message," we can trace some of the evolution of this process. As human beings have changed, the medium has changed, and thus the way we process information has changed, meaning the catalysts have changed as well. The urgency to improvise to survive in the natural environment of days gone by has given way to the urgency to improvise differently in the built environments of today. For example, driving a car now emphasizes processing an entirely different set of information than it used to, as we read our screens and instruments as much and sometimes more than the road ahead. Additionally, the thing that allows the "foothold" for change may be an already-existing experience. For example, the Western dinner ritual in which saying grace has evolved to taking pictures, thereby aestheticizing our experiences of dining. As Aunger put it:

> In the course of being transmitted, cultural information is typically also reproduced rather than merely being passed along: Brains cannot transmit a belief without learning it first; a copy is thus left behind. The transmission of cultural beliefs . . . requires the duplication of the information packet itself. (49)

In a complementary line of thought, Blackmore wrote:

Memes are "inherited" when we copy someone else's action, when we pass on an idea or a story, when a book is printed, or when a radio programme is broadcast. Memes vary because human imitation is far from perfect, and the vagaries of memory mean that every time we retell a story we change some little detail, or forget some minor point. Finally, there is memetic selection. Think of how many things you hear in a day, and how few you pass on to anyone else. (Blackmore 1999a)

So it is cybernetically logical that a meme is a unit of culture, but culture as a broader system determines and propagates memes. Humans, using memes as material for our constructions of virtual identity, provide the energy for memes to reproduce and launch themselves into the future. In so doing, memes feedback into the cultural system.

James Carey's argument for communication as culture explains that ritual gives importance to communication as a process of "construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action" (Carey 1989, 19). He goes on to state that "we first produce the world by symbolic work and then take up residence in the world we have produced" (Carey 1989, 30). While he was not commenting on memes specifically, his point was that whatever the symbolic order might be, it is human agency and activity that fuels its dynamism. We rehash what we learn from one another, and extend our best efforts to make the world match the symbolic order we take as the natural order of things. However, in so doing, we tag each iteration of the symbols we use with our own inflection. There could be no more obvious example of this process than the re-captioning of image macros (i.e., internet memes). In the memeplex, Shifman explains, "an Internet meme may spread in its original form, but it often also spawns user-created derivatives" (2013, 362).

The intensity of focus on the reproduction of memes in this chapter may seem to suggest that the content is more important than our human communication. My apologies if it comes across that way, as that is not my intention. Rather, it is important to have drilled down to the workings of memes to understand not just how they use us, but also how we use them. But let us not forget that as we rehash information and send it around the world to one another in these acts of self-identification, there are consequences in terms of judgment and meaning. The combination of speed, global reach, and simulacral signification all conspire to create a new scale of emotional appeal which is both exceptionally gratifying for a prosumer's sense of participation in digital consumer culture, and at the same time disorients our sense of practical judgment in such a way that it can sometimes be difficult to judge appropriate responses. I will explore this issue in the next chapter.

NOTES

1. For more on the importance of personal avatars and online presence, see Kien 2009b.

2. For example, Henry Ford's invention of the automobile production line revolutionized manufacturing and altered the role of the factory worker forever.

3. Individual only in that our choices are merely variations on a central theme, slightly distinguishing ourselves from the rest of our social sphere, but not so different as to make ourselves unrecognizable as part of it.

4. Anecdotally, when lecturing on consumer culture here in California, I usually ask students what they would think about a professor drinking from an old Coke bottle filled with tap water from the bathroom. Our younger generations are so completely enculturated with consumerism that inevitably, a significant number (about half) express utter disgust with drinking water that came from the bathroom, while others try to justify the behavior with words like "cheap" and "eccentric" for not using a bottle specifically designed and branded for drinking water. Occasionally one or two will argue that it is sensible and there is nothing wrong with it.

Chapter Four

Urgency and Emergency

In this chapter, I focus on the emotive aspect of social media content for users, and how that directs our decisions and behavior in social media use, resulting in Consequence 3: Social media dissemination can lead to amazingly rapid, exponentially wide distribution. This is the phenomenon of memetic communication in action. Individual empowered, active audience members encounter memes as a quick fix to extend the excitation they gratify through media use. Driven by lust to sustain a physical state of excitement, almost anything can appear to be urgent and important. This in turn causes ethical distortion and disorientation which encourages a slide into individual relativism.

A SAFE WEEKEND ON REDDIT

The morning of Saturday, March 16, 2013, I woke up and, as usual, started mindlessly drifting through my morning ritual of coffee and media intake. I habitually begin my morning reading with news sites to catch up on what has happened in the world in the previous twenty-four hours. After that, I ordinarily check my social media, which includes Facebook and Reddit, in that order. That Saturday morning, it did not take more than a few moments to realize something significant had happened on Reddit. The feed was dominated by pictures of safes, advice on how to open safes, stories about safes, information about kinds of safes, and generally all sorts of information and jokes about safes. Safes were memeing on Reddit and would continue to dominate the feed for several days. Touching it off was a post entitled, "A friend of mine moved into a former drug house and found this HUGE safe. How do we get it open?"[1] A photobook accompanied the title showing various views of the safe and the house it was in, with captions describing each

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picture. The aesthetic and the story accompanying it had caught the imagination of the Reddit community, who speculated about how there could be drugs or money in it, and the legalities of who would own the contents if indeed there were something of value found inside. Professional locksmiths and safe installers offered advice about how to crack it (and how not to). The tenant obliged requests for updates and pictures as he tried a couple of solutions. A couple of people mailed him plumber's scopes to look inside (which was fruitless).

The interest of the community shifted to something new after a couple of days. A little while after that, the OP (original poster) announced that the safe had been cut open, and revealed the contents with pictures: a spider and its web. By the time of the big reveal, many people had lost interest and had quit following the thread. But the "safe weekend" had already become part of Reddit's cultural lore. Weeks, months, and even years later, people occasionally post, "Did they ever get that safe open?" The safe became what is called "meta" on Reddit: Simply write the word in a post or reply, and it functions as an insider's joke. Like other "meta" signifiers that went through a similar memetic transformation, it is so loaded with meaning on the site that one cannot be an "authentic" Redditor without knowing how to use it and why. So the signifier "safe" (as a noun) has become something much bigger in the Reddit community than any traditionally rational person might have ever considered possible. And it was all set into motion by an innocuous posting that, under different circumstances on perhaps a different day, might have been immediately downvoted into oblivion and never seen again. From this, we can learn that what is considered "important" (or exigent) in digital consumer culture is NOT necessarily the same as things considered important in our offline world.

Our social media environments have blasted many other memes that have been similarly as unimportant and inconsequential as Reddit's safe into pop cultural immortality. For example, the "What Color Is This Dress" meme that shot to dominance overnight on social media in February 2015, then quickly jumped to TV and news media (see figure 4.1). What is most relevant about such phenomena for my purpose in this chapter is the way they illustrate both the power of the active audience, and the relative unimportance of the topic treated by the meme to what we might consider traditional socio-political discourse. This is not to say that the content does not matter, but rather to make the point that the message itself is not evaluated by audience members based on the same relevance to economics and power relations as more traditional media content entails, such as news and documentary formats. Instead, almost any information can feel urgent when it starts to go viral. And almost anything can feel like an emergency.

Figure 4.1.   What Color Is This Dress? At its peak, the "What Color Is This Dress" meme in February 2015 was getting 840,000 views per minute on Tumblr (14k views per second), 11,000 tweets per minute, and 673,000 concurrent visitors on BuzzFeed. A Wired story on the phenomenon was visited by over 30 million unique viewers, and the meme was given air time on numerous popular TV shows. Within a few days, scientific experts had explained why different people might see the dress differently, and the meme receded into relative dormancy within a week. *Source*: "What Color Is The Dress?" Posted by user swiked on Tumblr, account closed. "Ask Reddit" screen shot snips (with modifications), found at https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/6p194i/what_is_the_pettiest_reason_you_have_had_for/.

The "active audience" (Nightingale and Ross 2003) concept is shorthand for describing that individuals are responsible for actively choosing what they do with their time and energy. This puts media on equal terms with other activities such as working, sports, chores, or even resting. Katz and his cohort discovered many decades ago (see Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1973) that people pick an activity from their list of options when deciding what to do with their time, contemplating questions such as, "What can I do? What do I want to do? What must I do? What will I do?" They might decide

to consume media. The next step then is choosing from among the various media available: TV, laptop/web surfing, Play Station, music player, phone apps, etc. Sometimes these choices are not mutually exclusive and combine two or more media to create an activity such as web surfing while watching a movie. The final step is then to choose which movie (which further breaks down into genre choices) and which sites to visit. The user/audience chooses the content from the numerous options at one's disposal. In days of traditional mass media dominance, this might have been sufficient to describe the average media user's experience. This is not so anymore.

In the present time, we audience members are much busier. The portability of devices and content, plus our roles as prosumers (discussed in the previous chapter), add at least four more levels of choice. First, we have almost absolute control over when and where we choose to consume media. Second, we can choose how to modify the content we consume. Choosing whom to share our content and modifications with electronically is a third task for contemporary audience-members. And choosing if and how to store the content (i.e., on a drive, in the cloud, on a feed, etc.) is yet another decision to be made. There may be even more decision-making tasks involved in contemporary media consumption, but these stand out as especially important for media memes for reasons that I will discuss further on.

With all the activity people engage in just to start consuming media, it could be easy to ignore the effects the content has on the audience. It has been popular to blame consumption of mass media content for social ills almost since the historical beginning of mass media distribution, despite overwhelming proof that individual mass media consumption typically reflects existing predispositions rather than creating them. It has been known for some time that traditional mass media effects are weak, delayed, and indirect (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). It has never been ruled out, though, that media does have effects over time. Whatever limited effects traditional mass media might have on people's thoughts and actions are achieved through persistent and consistent messaging that relates the message to an important aspect of a given audience member's life (i.e., cultivation theory). And even then, the influence is to direct attention toward an object, brand, issue, or idea (known as agenda setting). The idea that media can be used to "plant thoughts" and "brainwash" society is far less dramatic in reality than popular movies and political alarmists would have us believe. Advertisers and communication campaign designers understand the socio-political effects are limited to influencing what and how society thinks and talks about issues and topics (McCombs 2004). Moreover, because the audience is so active in their consumption of media, the reasons people choose what they do are important to consider.

The key to getting a message to people and have it circulated in society is to make its information useful for social purposes. The old two-step flow theory of communication (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) still anchors many of the most taken-for-granted assumptions in modern advertising and campaign communication strategy. In addition to helping message creators understand what kinds of messages might be successfully circulated in society, it also describes exactly who should be targeted: opinion leaders. These people act as mediators for media messages in given social interactions. Stated differently, they help the people they interact with to process the information they have received via media and put it to use in their everyday lives. Sometimes it is to act on the information itself, but quite often (especially with entertainment programming) its main use is to serve as a means of connecting with others (i.e., having something in common to talk about). In bygone days, this process moved at the speed of face-to-face conversations. However, the velocity of the internet and the dominance of social media has impacted this process, by speeding it up and removing the need for face-to-face communication. In the current media moment, the entire process may happen exponentially faster, involve more people than would previously have been possible, and appear to have much more rapid and far-reaching effects. The entire scale of time has changed for us with digital media. I will show further on this is an important exigence.

Uses and gratifications research (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevich 1973) showed that motivation (for media use) and reward (gratification achieved through use) are primordial aspects of media consumption. First, people's individual needs generate expectations of media, thinking about what they want to feel or learn. People then seek to gratify the need they have conjured through some form of media consumption. Their research suggested there are four ways in which audiences use media texts: entertainment (the act of consuming is pleasurable), social interaction (content serves as a topic for conversation), personal identity (used constructively as described in the previous chapter), and information (the content contains useful facts and ideas). In our era of digital social media, it is entirely possible for memes to be useful in all four of these ways at the same time. That is not always the case, but the portable and mutable nature of digital media along with the communicative abilities of social media empowers message creators to recombine these four uses into very powerful signifiers. The ability to combine all these dimensions adds to the potential for varied interpretations on the part of whoever consumes the message, which impacts the emotive aspect of the message. It also has implications for what we consider to be truth and fact (as discussed in chapter 7). Even with all these mitigating factors, messages that fit the category of "human interest" are predictably more socially successful

than others. This type of content seems consistent with what Fürsich (2003) labeled "nonfiction entertainment": content that exposes facts but packages them uncritically to maximize audience satisfaction

Content fitting the category of "human interest" motivates people to consume media more than any other type. Wasike (2011) found this applies for both general media consumption, and "issue-specific" media use. It is followed by technology and science. This suggests that people are most interested in learning about other people's challenges, struggles, and triumphs, followed by science and technology. However, the same study showed people prefer to talk about entertainment when discussing the media they have consumed (not their preferred media content, human interest), followed again by science and technology. The study does not explain why people might prefer not to talk as much about the media they consume most. However, it is a helpful study in giving us an indication of the top three most useful types of content for audience members. In practical application, it gives us a way to sort gratifications based on whether people are seeking out the media they consume for their own sake (i.e., learning or individual improvement), or whether it is toward some other goal, such as social interaction.

We can also sort gratifications according to whether they are based in biology or intellect. The main categories we typically hear about in this taxonomy are excitation/sensation seeking, mood management, social reinforcement, aesthetics, and economic profit. Here again, media memes may fudge the lines and combine categories. Physical excitation makes the act of consuming media pleasurable, invoked by things like comedy, sex, and violence, which all elevate heartbeats and shock the body into releasing endorphins that create a high. Mood management comes into play with people choosing content that fits with the mood they are in at that moment (Meadowcroft and Zillmann 1987), as they strive to maintain their state of excitation. So once someone is on a roll in a particular direction, they are most likely to seek out more of the same (or even more exaggerated) content in the same vein. They are not intentionally excluding other information per se. They are just motivated to choose information that follows from what they have last consumed to maintain and possibly add to the feeling. Inversely, audience members use media to knowingly help change their mood.

Social reinforcement is a type of gratification that comes from demonstrating one is "in the know" about what is important and popular within a social circle. This is especially relevant to the social status pressures individuals feel in consumer society. Social reinforcement requires group discussion of content, since social performance elicits a feeling of gratification. The goal is to provoke some external validation (such as "likes" in social media, for

example). This may also entail parasocial interaction (Horton and Wohl 1956) when characters in the text or program get discussed as if they are part of the friendship group. For example, talking about a character of a TV show as if they are a friend and part of your community. Parasocial interaction can be used to compensate for absent partners and friends, the lack of a robust social circle, and can serve as an occasion for social gatherings with friends and family. In social media, almost all communication might be considered to be motivated by social gratification. Social media may also obfuscate the line between parasocial and social behavior, as it can be hard to know if someone is part of the conversation or if they are being discussed without their knowledge. Moreover, due to the speed and casual nature of social media communication, we might not ever know if our social grandstanding was effective or just ignored.

Aesthetic gratification comes from the simple pleasure that comes from appreciating the appearance of things. We learn most aesthetic preferences socially, through developing an appreciation for art, music, forms of movement, physical forms, and so on. Aesthetic gratification looms large since social media is entirely aesthetic, and users have a great deal of control over what passes through their feed.

Finally, economic gratification from media consumption can come from learning valuable management skills, the monetary value of information itself for an individual in which information is an asset, and gaining knowledge about money and economics. The moral economy of media emphasizes social capital rather than commerce (the importance of which I will discuss in chapter 13). Strangely, for a culture dominated by consumerist logic, monetary economic gratification is one of the least noticeable forms of gratification in social media for average users. This is not to say it does not exist, but that direct financial gratification is rare in social media. The economic aspect of social media seems mainly expressed as a type of shopping behavior, with users combing through content in search of aesthetics they wish to lay hold of. A brief dialogue about the rhetoric of memetic communication shall help understand why.

MIMETIC EXIGENCY

Villanueva-Mansilla (2017) argued that memes can be considered rhetorical devices, what he called "menomes." Huntington (2013) makes the case that internet memes should be analyzed as a form of visual rhetoric. Dating back further than ancient Greece, rhetoric is widely recognized as the oldest approach to the study of communication. The ancient works on rhetoric focused

on the elements of effective use of symbols and argumentation to convey information and persuade others. Contemporary rhetoric has added much to the cumulative body of rhetorical knowledge. An especially important turning point came in 1968, when Bitzer introduced a notion that he called "the rhetorical situation" (Bitzer 1968). This phrase sums up three key components of rhetoric:

1. Situation—Rhetoric occurs in response to an exigence or some urgency, problem, or something not as it should be
2. Audience—Communication happens for an audience, individuals capable of affecting the exigence in some way
3. Constraints—Situations are constrained by negative and positive factors that can enhance or hinder the audiences' ability to affect the exigence

Rhetoric is made to exist when a rhetor (a person making an argument) sees or makes an exigence (a demand or need). The rhetor then communicates the exigence in such a way that the audience's interests are related to some or all parts of the rhetorical situation.

Several factors can possibly be used to try to persuade the audience members to act. First is the rhetor and how much agency they have; how much they as an individual can impact the situation. In social media, the rhetor's main agency is launching a discourse, after which the discourse itself may quickly supersede his or her ability to maintain much of a presence. Second is the audience, and how constrained they are to act: Can they take action, and if they choose to act, what are the limitations on what they may do? In social media rhetoric, the audience is constrained to responding aesthetically. The discourse/message/symbols used to describe and explain the exigence are also factors in persuasion: The way the descriptive elements fall into place in some ways determines the effect of the rhetoric. Next, the way the issue itself (the exigence) is brought into existence and then addressed has an impact on the outcome. Finally, there is the broader context surrounding the rhetorical situation, including history, economy, and culture. Like all rhetoric, memetic communication must have all three of these elements to be successful. However, as I describe below, the situation and exigence that brings it about seem especially pronounced in social media.

Bitzer's model revolutionized the field of rhetoric by building on a theoretical foundation that had remained relatively unchanged since the ancient Greek civilization. The classical model of rhetoric schematized by Aristotle focused narrowly on interpersonal communication between the rhetor and his or her audience. He identified three main elements required for persuasive rhetoric: (1) logos (the logical argument), (2) ethos (the credibility of the

speaker), and (3) pathos (the appeal to emotions). Any of these three elements may be to greater or lesser effect emphasized in any rhetorical exchange. Western cultural epochs have had trends in what is valued most in argumentation. For example, the medieval emphasis of honor may have encouraged greater scrutiny of ethos. The modernist focus on rationalism centered logos more than the other two. Rationality, objectivity, and empiricism coupled with experimentation came to dominate popular rhetoric. The dominance of electronic media in the twentieth century has encouraged a focus on pathos. The excitation I mentioned above has aroused audiences to grant primacy to the feeling one gets from communication, to the detriment of scrutinizing logic and credibility. Wirth and Schramm (2005) show that emotions and excitation outlast cognition in media consumption, since the body takes a bit of time to return to a resting state, while our minds can change topics relatively quickly.

To return to the present rhetorical moment, altogether we have come to understand that the content of rhetoric urges us to consider a particular type of imagined context. Jenkins (2014) describes these imagined contexts as "modes":

> Modes exist prior to their actualization in specific images with particular viewers, making them, like their theoretical counterparts affects, pre-subjective and pre-objective, structuring any image-object or viewer within its field. (Jenkins 2014, 442)

The rhetorical situation structures the rhetorical act and experience, like a bowl gives shape to water. The nature of this influence is something like what Baudrillard (2002a) explained as "hyper-reality," an experience in simulacra that is so vibrant it makes reality seem faded and dull by comparison. Nashef explains:

> The pervasiveness of media, in the form of mobile phones, tablets with their applications and social networking sites, singularly or in unison create and sustain the existence of the hyperreal. They succeed at once through an imagined call for urgency and an implosion of meaning that cannot be contained. This type of media is a priori a form of simulation, and has not only erased the boundaries that exist between the real and the unreal but has also developed as a site accountable for continual deference of the being-in-the-world, forcing on the latter a perpetual existence in the hyperreal. (Nashef 2016)

The term "urgency" here is crucial to understanding memetic communication. Emotion (pathos) seems to motivate audience prosumerism more than any other rhetorical tool or gratification need. Urgency is linked with excitation, both physically and psychologically immediate. Like being tossed a hot potato, social media users feel an urgent need to immediately toss into the air

what they have been served, but (due to the nature of social media distribution) the metaphorical hot potato reproduces and multiplies as soon as it is relaunched. This constant sense of urgency and emergency is one of the dominating features of memetic exigency. Berger and Milkman (2012) explain:

> Emotion shapes virality . . . positive content is more viral than negative content, but the relationship between emotion and social transmission is more complex than valence alone. Virality is partially driven by physiological arousal. Content that evokes high-arousal positive (awe) or negative (anger or anxiety) emotions is more viral. Content that evokes low-arousal, or deactivating, emotions (e.g., sadness) is less viral. (Berger and Milkman 2012, 192)

To illustrate highly arousing media, we can look at violence in video games. Even more insidious, however, is pornography, the entire purpose of which is to create physiological arousal. Although not often acknowledged in discourses of the internet and digital culture, pornography has been at the forefront of digital innovation since even before the jpeg image file was created, in the form of ASCII art. Since those early days of the internet, pornography has often been on the cutting edge (if not leading the way) in content development and delivery. Just as print advertising learned much from print pornography regarding seduction through images, many of the techniques of seduction and excitation at work in digital media have an obvious relationship with the unspeakable/willfully ignored pornographic digital realm. Lyotard (1984) went so far as to describe consumer culture as a "libidinal economy," in which consumerism is motivated primarily by a pleasurable, erotic drive that is propelled by the seduction of advertising. So, pleasure is an important exigency of digital media use.

The speed of digital consumption adds to the intensity of the experience for audiences, allowing for a seemingly endless flow of images for aesthetic consumption. Virilio (2001) described immediacy and instantaneity (the "instant" nature of online communication) as technological characteristics. This ensures that "real time" (i.e., what's happening "right now") predominates digital communication. He explained that cyberspace gives its users "tele-contact," allowing people to McLuhanistically extend their senses to see and hear at a distance.[2] The constant, high-speed stream of digital information disorients users, disconnecting our sensibilities from the pace and flow of the physical world, feeding an expectation that everything in our lives happens "right now" in "real time." Time—and speed in particular—is of utmost importance in structuring our experiences of the world. In Bitzer's terminology, speed and the danger it brings are exigencies. Lyotard also warned that proliferation of speed and information brings the inevitability that at some point the system will crash and collapse due to some unforeseeable event (an accident).

It would be sensible to us to stop for a moment and ponder the possible severity of such a threat. From inside the user experience though, this only adds to the excitation, for what could bring about a rush of adrenalin more reliably than a lurking sense of impending danger?

Aesthetic gratification also evolves online (another exigence), as the self-created flow of images creates a color bath of light for the user's pleasure. At the same time, it gives one a feeling of empowerment, as if piloting a virtual vessel. We replace many of our formerly direct relations with mediated images. Our control over the images (really, just control over the selection of content) flatters the viewer into believing "he or she has a connoisseur's relation to the world, whilst all the time encouraging a promiscuous acceptance of the world" (Sontag 2003, 97). This entails an evaluative "universal equality of all things" (Benjamin in Sontag 2001, 97). This "universal equality" brings us back to the seeming absurdity of where this chapter began: The mystery of a stranger's unopened safe, or the true color of a dress we will never see with our own eyes, can seem urgent enough to dominate our media feeds for several days, and take on mythological status in an online community.

In the rhetoric of digital media, memetic exigency is not driven much by the urgency of physical world concerns. Rather, it is propelled by the gratification of maintaining temporally fueled prosumption of highly excitative content that would look something like how the Cookie Monster eats cookies on Sesame Street. Whatever happens to be on the plate gets caught up in the feeding frenzy, regardless of flavor or whether it is a cookie or not. The speed of this rapid consumption leads many memes to peak at their maximal distribution in two to three days, and to go dormant within a week (MDG Advertising 2012).

As I previously described, excitation may appear to dominate user motivations, but we must also remember the exigency of seeking social reinforcement (another notable exigence), especially given the importance of social media to viral communication. This is apparent in the way individuals choose to conduct themselves online, modeling social norms much as they would in any other public situation, policing themselves and striving to maintain their own perceived normalcy (Gal, Shifman, and Kampf 2016). Underlying all these theoretical layers, people are still communicating with and for one another. This is essential to the success of meme, since any content too radically different will be ignored, rather than gain momentum through audience members' reuse. At least for a moment, all individual prosumers act like opinion leaders, interpreting and rebroadcasting the content under their control. Face-to-face conversations are not required in our social media two-step flow. Opinion leadership in social media is achieved by reposting or forwarding, happening sometimes asynchronously and sometimes instantly.

It can be fairly easy to ascertain when something is going viral. On the other hand, it can be hard to know exactly what content has the potential to meme. Who could have predicted safes would meme on Reddit prior to it happening? Or that Mitt Romney would utter the phrase "Binders full of women" during the 2012 presidential debate. If, when, and for how long a bit of content will remain viral—how many times it will be shared at its apex, how long it will endure in popularity, and whether it might be brought back after laying dormant for a time—is difficult if not impossible to predict. What we can predict, though, is that its usefulness to a given community of users, and the degree to which it excites the audience, are what will set a meme in motion, keep it moving, and determine its speed of distribution. An urgent demand for a response (in the form of "likes" and shares, forms of redistribution) arises from this exigency, propelling the content. The urgency of this demand, however, creates circumstances in which there is little room for anything but outright agreement or disagreement. Nuance gets ignored as "boring" in the impatient timescape of our virtual world.

RESPONDING TO THE SITUATION

Having looked at some of the prominent exigencies of mimetic communication, the manner of response in this rhetorical situation also merits some inquiry. Hall's discursive model of communication (1999) emphasizes audience members' interpretive process. He used the term "hegemonic" to describe a situation in which an audience member understands and agrees with the message he or she has received. Hall called an audience member's disagreement with such content "oppositional." In other words, one might agree with a message or comprehend but disagree with the content one is consuming. A "negotiated" reading falls somewhere in between the two extremes. In the binary, hyper-real environment of the internet (discussed more in the next chapter), negotiated interpretations are rare. Negotiation takes time and thought, which interrupts the flow of data. In other words, although negotiation may be more aligned with people's rational thinking about issues, it is not exciting enough to contribute much to the experience of viral communication.

If we take a conceptual step back from the experience of excitation, we can see social media audiences process their media content with rapid reception, recoding, and redistribution. This differs significantly from the linear encoding and decoding process of traditional broadcast media. The information's origin is somewhat irrelevant to the social media experience, as the main purpose of consuming such media is to recode the content and recirculate it as a representation of the self. As I described previously, recipients acquire

it with the same exigency, and are compelled to respond in their turn. Law's concept of the "immutable mobile" (1986) is a fitting description of the flow: The content is set in motion somewhere earlier in the cybernetic system, and is in some way slightly changed by every user that receives it and passes it along to his or her own social network. The original information remains at the center of the meme, but can quickly become obscured and altered so that it is unrecognizable as the original content. The information has been turned toward a different purpose than it was encoded to represent. The rapid cycling through Hall's discursive model brings overlap in every production/reception cycle. Eventually there will be no one new left to send it to within a given collection of social networks, at which point the meme may become dormant (though possibly subject to a revival at any future time), or flourish in a different, remotely connected area of the network.

Innis' (1964) analytical paradigm contrasting literacy with orality can also help us understand how the exigency of memetic communication alters things. Real-time, interactive hypermedia reproduces the immediacy of Innis' description of orality, as does the permanency of digital data (explained in chapter 10). At the same time, ubiquitous accessibility and extreme portability within the global digital network reflect the space-binding concept of Innis' literary tradition. The product would seem to be oxymoronic: "literary orality." Such immediacy coupled with the reliability of textual authority may add to an acceptance of easy answers to deep questions, communicated through trite and openly biased sources. Since, as mentioned before, users are flattered into believing they are all connoisseurs, mastery of the machines and process of memetic communication are all that is needed to displace expert knowledge with popular opinions. "Anti-vaxxers" and "flat-earthers" are both examples of online communities that believe in their own construct of "expertise" above objectively reliable sources of information (see chapter 5). This also creates issues in people's everyday life experiences (explored in chapter 5), notions of truth and fact (chapter 7), and the stagnation of community (chapter 8). Most relevant here, though, is the sense of urgency provoked by real-time conversational "turn taking" that mimetic communication invokes. Conversation analysis showed us many decades ago that phrases in conversations demand response, and gaps in conversation are something that people feel a need to manage. Whether it is a social condition or a biological evolutionary response, what we know for sure is that most people feel actual physical discomfort (aka physical excitation) when the alert on a phone goes off, until they can check their messages and respond (Lin and Peper 2009; Park, Salsbury, Corbett, and Aiello 2013). The oral nature of real-time communication is thus experienced as both social and physiological exigency. The aforementioned ubiquity also creates a situation of urgency.

The constant connectivity of audience members combined with the ubiquity of the technology maintains a continual state of urgency. Instantaneous, always accessible telepresence (a feeling of being able to access all space and time) has erased formerly obvious physical and virtual world distinctions. The consequence is that we actually can participate as individuals in social media almost any time and place we happen to be. We add our prosumerist agency to memetic reproduction even while standing in a grocery checkout line.[3]

The final observation I will explain about urgency from ubiquity comes from the proliferation of communities, which will also serve to transition us to the next chapter. During the dawn of what he called the "electronic age," McLuhan theorized we were creating a "global village" (1995), a global electronic network in which we would perform ritualized social activity. His idea of "electronic tribes" was picked up and is now often referred to as "neo-tribalism," but the essence of the idea remains the same. While we can participate with one another on a different electronically mediated temporal and spatial scale than previously, "the instant nature of electric-information movement is decentralizing—rather than enlarging—the family of man into a new state of multitudinous tribal existences" (McLuhan 2013). We are not just one big global tribe. Instead, there are many tribes in the global village, and most people belong to many virtual communities all at the same time. We may pass content among and between our communities, such as reposting content from Reddit onto Facebook. But we curate and edit that content to represent ourselves how we want to be known in each of those communities. Constant effort is needed to manage and juggle those multiple identities through our online performances and aesthetic selections. In the physical world we ritualistically mark our passage from one community space to another with symbolic acts. However, we symbolize our numerous virtual presences with a different ritual: the prosumption of data tailored to the various digital spaces in which we dwell. This increases how individuals can contribute to the growth of memes. At the same time, it has some profound effects on the way we go about our everyday lives in a world conceptualized as discrete.

NOTES

1. https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/1aenk5/a_friend_of_mine_moved_into_a_former_drug_house/.

2. See McLuhan's "Extensions of Man" in McLuhan, 1995.

3. Such as the "26 Random Acts of Kindness" meme that swept the USA after the tragic massacre at Sandy Hook, NJ, on Dec. 14, 2012. (see http://www.katiecouric.com/features/sandy-hook-promise)

Chapter Five

Living the Discrete Life

This chapter is about the way individuals create virtual worlds for themselves using their content preferences, selection and rejection of messages, and the filtering of unwanted messages or interactions. This brings about Consequence 4 of memetic communication: Social media audiences create their own virtual environments in which their prosumption of memes makes it appear as if the world aligns with their individual, discrete tastes and beliefs.

The 2016 US presidential election was a remarkable moment in American history for many reasons. It was the first time a woman won the primary round of elections to make a run for president. It was also the first time a presidential candidate used social media to directly communicate with his or her supporters as a normal, everyday activity. Donald Trump's frequency of interpersonal social media interaction had been unprecedented in political campaigning. In so doing, he moved (if not removed) the line between a politician's traditional support base of political activists and a media star's fans. The former reality TV star and real estate tycoon masterfully enacted many of the techniques and tactics outlined in the previous two chapters, to strategically craft a media meme as an avatar for himself, and maneuver toward the White House. His strong personal brand identity, and his production of a steady stream of content ready to blossom as memes resonated with enough voters to hand him the majority of Electoral College votes.

All of this would have been futile, however, if there weren't already an audience habituated to cultivating their own virtual worlds, who found Trump's content useful for reinforcement of their own preexisting beliefs and logics. For example, the *Washington Post* ran a story called "Finally. Someone Who Thinks Like Me," profiling Trump supporter Melanie Austin, who views the world as a deceptive, angry, and cynical place (McCrummen 2016). Her primary source of information is social media, and she does not

trust the mainstream media for information. As a result, she has constructed a self-validating mediascape for herself that nurtures and feeds what, for many, seem like paranoid fantasies. Like other Trump supporters interviewed in other media outlets, she simply dismisses any information that does not align with her worldview as false, irrelevant, or intentionally deceitful.

Azarian (2016) identifies this memetic communication phenomenon as the Dunning-Kruger effect: Audience members do not know that they don't know the truth, and they are unwilling to consider something different from what they already believe. This is because they believe they know the truth, given the work they have put into finding and disseminating media that supports their idea. As Azarian puts it, they are "under the illusion that they have sufficient or even superior knowledge." The depiction of Ms. Austin by the *Washington Post* seems so extreme as to be a caricature. However, only the distance from mainstream views is extreme, not her media use itself. Most social media users are phenomenologically doing almost exactly the same thing, whether their views align with the mainstream or not. In other words, there is nothing to be smug about in analyzing audience members this way, since we are all prone to the same Dunning-Kruger effect. Bill Gates once commented on such unawareness of one's unawareness by joking, "It's possible, you can never know, that the universe exists only for me. . . . If so, it's sure going well for me, I must admit" (in Isaacson 1997).

With the control we have over our social media content, we are empowered as audience members to set our own media agendas. This means that we decide for ourselves what issues get discussed in our lives. There is some probability, though, that our decisions are often made in ignorance of what else we might be discussing. This would in some regard be because we are disposed to the motivations discussed in chapter 4, emphasizing feelings and excitation rather than focusing strictly on rationality and facts. In traditional media, news reporters, editors, producers, and other gatekeeping "experts" make supposedly dispassionate decisions about what information is of public importance. In social media, these decisions are guided by our own narrow self-interests. Reviewing agenda-setting theory can help explain how we limit our ability to overcome the Dunning-Kruger effect.

The idea of agenda setting goes back roughly a century to the early days of mass media. Lippman's 1922 book on the topic, *Public Opinion*, continues to be a popular reference even in the present. Working with the premise that the audience's perception of reality is skewed, he explained that since audience members do not themselves experience what is being reported, our understandings of events are mediated by other people's opinions (Lippman 1998). So the opinions a mass audience holds about an issue originate in the opinions of the news source. We trust mass media to judge what is important for us to

know. This is how the media's "agenda" gets set: (1) the mainstream media pick certain programs and information items they think will be of interest to their audiences, then (2) that guides what most of us find a need to discuss with one another. In this traditional media configuration, audience members are somewhat forced to deal with one another's opinions and thoughts that inevitably arise in our discourses about different topics.

As agenda-setting theory aged, it incorporated the findings of other relevant communication researchers. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet's selective exposure theory (1944) showed that people generally look for media that reflects their already-existing attitudes and beliefs, rather than seek alternative perspectives that might challenge them. McCombs and Shaw's seminal 1972 article, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," explained that in addition to reinforcing and amplifying existing beliefs and ideas through selective exposure, media content can also introduce new ones. Goffman's (1974) frame theory complimented agenda-setting theory, explaining its process also entails unspoken decisions about how to portray the world that shape audience members' ideas about what is normal, what is natural, what is excluded, what is emphasized, and what is ignored. Gitlin (1980) explained frames as unspoken, unacknowledged, "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretations, and presentation, of selection [and] emphasis." In spite of their hidden nature, frames are used to organize how we think of the world, both for audience members and the journalists that embed them in their stories. Our unprecedented control over social media content has given us audience members the power of agenda setting and framing.

In our social media environment, we audience prosumers are our own mass media gatekeepers, framers, and agenda setters. This means that we are responsible for what we will be exposed to in our media feeds. We tailor our media consumption to our tastes in several ways. We tweak our preference settings in our various interfaces, tailor our subscriptions and friends lists, and unknowingly feed data to the cookies and bots that then serve us back ads and other content suggestions that are most likely to appeal to us. The base-level criteria among these various content adjustments is our preexisting attitude, and minimizing any challenges to it: agenda setting in Lippman's original definition. This constant fight for our personal status quo is explained by Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (1957), which I will discuss in greater detail further on. However, before turning the discussion in that direction, it is helpful to understand how it is that, as Gal, Shifman, and Kampf put it, "in an arena ostensibly free of formal gatekeepers, participants tend to police themselves, toeing the line with conformist norms" (2016, 1698). Foucault described that the policing of ideas happens through control of discourse.

VERNACULAR DISCOURSE

Zhao Ding (2015) has made the case that memes are a form of "vernacular discourse." Referring to Ono and Sloop (1995), Ding explained that vernacular discourse is composed of "cultural syncretism and pastiche" (24). Cultural syncretism is constructing alternative rhetoric in opposition to mainstream discourse. This construction requires reusing fragments of mainstream discourse to mount a challenge to the dominating order. The resulting vernacular discourse is pastiche. Ding explained that internet-media-based vernacular discourse has revolutionary potential, justifying the claim that internet memes are "a powerful new form of vernacular expression in the digital era" (Ding 2015, 25).

Recalling the description of discourse from chapter 2, the first element is most salient in the discrete experiences of memetic communication: Discourse gives rise to the creation of its own reality (Krippendorf 2009). This happens through the agency of individuals who act within their own communities, institutionalizing, policing, and justifying the existence of its ideas and consequences. While this discursive process may be unavoidable as a cultural norm, it doesn't mean everything in every discourse is what we want to be taken as normal.

Racist, sexist, oppressive, incongruent, false, and illogical beliefs permeate all levels of discourse in American culture. This is obvious when we step back and understand discourse for what it is: a living, writhing corpus of statements and signification struggling for dominance. Netizens immersed in cyberculture may find it difficult, if not impossible, to gain much perspective on the discourses they are participating in since most virtual spaces require immersion in order to use them. As explained in chapter 3, twenty-first-century media audiences expect to be able to appropriate and change the meanings of signifiers instantly and at will. We experience our participation as a form of playful self-expression rather than the construct/maintenance of a social norm or idea. And as explained in chapter 4, we have a very real, strongly felt compulsion to do so as part of our everyday regimen of survival. The individual expends a great deal of thought and effort constructing spectacular representations of whom they wish to be seen as, which only deepens their commitment to their expressed ideas. People are so mired in the ways they have represented themselves that a challenge to the ideas they've expressed is experienced as equivalent to an attack on their basic personal identity. A Facebook conversation I participated in about vaccinations can illustrate this point succinctly. First, some background.

What is widely known as the "anti-vaccination movement" (anti-vaxxers) began in 1998 with a London press conference. A doctor claimed that the proliferation of the measles vaccine correlated with a rise in cases of autism in children, based on a study of only twelve children. He was implying that something in the vaccinations caused autism. Not long after that, the doctor who made the announcement both lost his license to practice medicine and had his research article discredited and retracted from the journal that had published it. Numerous studies of hundreds of thousands of children had disproved the original study's results. As overwhelming as the evidence against the statement is, and as brief as this media content's moment in the public eye was, it was still enough for a willing and passionate audience to grab hold of and rehash it. Anti-vaccination became (and continues to be) a cause célèbre to many people distrustful of the medical establishment. To anti-vaxxers, the fate of the doctor and discrediting of his research only fed the credibility of their paranoia against big pharma and the role government regulation has played by requiring vaccinations.

Anti-vaxxers had used the internet to stay connected and share information from 1998 onward. Their discourse kept the idea slowly germinating until the anti-vaxxers meme leaped into popular culture with the 2007 release of a book by actress Jenny McCarthy. Based on nothing but anecdotal evidence, McCarthy claimed her child's autism was caused by a standard mumps/measles/rubella (MMR) vaccination given to almost all children born in the developed world. McCarthy spread her claim, promoting her book on Oprah Winfrey's show. This thrust the meme into the mainstream and added momentum to what had been a small fringe movement. Anti-vaxxers grew to such a proportion that in 2014, California's Orange County experienced an outbreak of measles, a disease that was declared eradicated in the year 2000 thanks to a global vaccination effort. The state reinforced legislation requiring vaccinations as a condition of public schooling, but the anti-vaccination movement is anything but dead.

In what has been among the most extreme cases, a Canadian couple was found guilty of causing their infant son's 2012 death from meningitis by denying him treatment that would have easily cured his sickness. The couple was sentenced in 2016 after a trial in which it was revealed while their child suffered for two weeks, they eschewed vaccination and treatment with modern medicine in favor of home remedies such as smoothie concoctions and echinacea prescribed by a naturopath.[1] Even after being found guilty by a jury and sentenced, the parents still do not believe they were wrong to refuse vaccination.[2] The anti-vaxxers meme has powerful implications for society's

general health. The aforementioned Facebook conversation shows convincing devout anti-vaxxers to abandon their belief may require a great deal of patience, time, and overwhelming evidence that will be challenged through every logical fallacy in the playlist.

On Sunday, October 9, 2016, I read a post on my Facebook feed:

> I'm one of those people who strongly believe vaccinations had everything to do with my Juvenile/type 1 diabetes diagnosis.
>
> There is no other way I could've contracted this condition. Many people shoot me down because I refuse to get vaccinated. Well, if vaccinations really work, then you should go ahead and get yours because your [*sic*] are protected, right? Smh. . . . I call bull shit.
>
> Now the medical industry has a customer for life. How wonderful

The conviction expressed, along with the stated history of having to defend the belief to others, shows how strongly this person considers the sentiment part of his or her identity. The posting was accompanied by a sensational graphic of a baby surrounded by needles, promoting VacTruth.com.

The replies that followed were mainly the original poster's (OP) supportive friends, who commended his or her bravery, strength, and wisdom. A few people posted anecdotes describing how they or someone they know (friend, child, etc.) were diagnosed with a disease a short time after receiving a vaccination. A few replies also countered. For example, one reply stated, "Well, I never got a hep b vaccine until I was an adult, and I got diabetes at age 8." One person asked why the OP believes what he or she does, and what exactly led hin or her to his or her belief. This set off a reactionary response in which the OP called that person an asshole, and invoked numerous very obvious logical fallacies—most apparent, drawing a conclusion in the absence of an alternative explanation. The OP tried to turn the tables by telling the respondent it was his or her responsibility to explain the cause of diabetes if it is not from vaccinations. The respondent persisted, explaining that he or she would really like to know. The OP finally responded with the following (numbering in original):

1. I have had t1d for 28 years, after receiving vaccinations as an infant, I became very ill, I never got better and was later diagnosed with type 1 diabetes.
2. There is something called the DOC (diabetes online community) many parents have stated that their children developed flu-like symptoms after being vaccinated and when they didn't get better, t1d developed.
3. Vaxxed is a great documentary to watch.
4. Until there is an answer, any theory could be true.

Figure 5.1. The Dunning Kruger Effect. Flat-earthing, the Dunning Kruger Effect, and anti-vaxxing are all used to point out problems with rationalism and logic in our online worlds. *Source*: "Flat Earth Imgflip," creator unknown, copyright creative commons, reuse with attribution, Photo credit: Imgflip.com. Found at http://www.thepinsta.com/flat-earth-imgflip_yuw9q9x4IDaMu%7Cqb%7CXElbhNVq*yz-ByJHCfoUw*HPoaM/7I1JYzWHTnlgoOoFewYIYlnr2507hviLrsDWoVtg4aigSiSnNcTL2ScJhOlJ4xSba1MRdtuS0YZABlMullv4ng/. "Trump Dunning Kruger," creator unknown, found at https://memegenerator.net/instance/74028599/donald-trump-smiling-the-first-rule-of-dunning-kruger-club-you-do-not-know-youre-in-dunning-kruger-c. "Flat Earth Society," creator unknown, snip from Facebook feed. "Anti-Vaxxer Arguments," creator unknown, snip from Facebook feed. "Missing 90%," Reddit screen shot snip, found at https://www.reddit.com/r/Showerthoughts/comments/6xfd2y/im_missing_90_of_the_internet_because_google/.

5. I stand with any person with autoimmune disease and autism. These two conditions have skyrocketed in the past 30 years. Scientist can't figure out why. Or can they?
6. I strongly believe that the government, FDA and pharmaceutical industry work closely together (conspiracy theorist?) for the reason that sick people are a great investment . . . money, population control, etc. You'll probably ask me if the world is flat for this argument as well.

I'll close by saying, my thumbs aren't as powerful as my voice.

While it is tempting to pick apart the reply as an exercise in identifying its numerous logical fallacies, what is more intriguing is how a person can consider them all together as proof in favor of his or her position. The answer is in

the collusion of these points to discursively assimilate them into a worldview (correlated line by line):

1. The OP suffered a tragedy (onset of Type 1 diabetes) at a young age that correlates with what is another traumatic event for many children (getting a vaccination by needle). Correlation is given false equivalence with causality.
2. The OP is part of an online community that reifies the story together, making it serve as his or her origin myth. It is now part of his or her collective identity.
3. Other media products are circulated as further "proof" that his or her belief is true, and he or she thus have referent iconography outside the community to point to as objective reality.
4. Any alternative explanation is rejected out of hand as mere speculation. The parsing of "answer" from the concept of "theory" is taken as an invalidation of anything called a theory (although any answer to a medical problem is most definitely presented as a theory).
5. Blind loyalty to his or her community stands in place of engagement with alternatives.
6. A misunderstanding of the necessarily close relationship of the regulating institution with the industry is touted as proof of corruption and misdeeds.
7. Power (i.e., "voice") is more important than accuracy.

As an example of vernacular discourse, this person (along with other willing participants) has demonstrated all the previously mentioned criteria to create his or her own reality, using his or her agency on social media to justify, institutionalize, and police the discourse he or she instigated. We can easily find other similar examples in the "flat-earther" community,[3] the "anti-pasteurization" movement,[4] and the higher profile "anti-GMO" community.[5]

To those outside the communal discourse, the beliefs espoused by these aforementioned online communities might make it seem like what they are doing is irrational and belongs to a fringe element. Not so. The process affects us all on social media. Since we are discrete users, it is difficult for us to see it as such, because we tailor our online communities in much the same way to exclude what we do not want to see. We take what we have chosen for ourselves to see as an affirmation of the world the way we believe it to be.

Living in our self-curated world is likely harmless most of the time, so long as it doesn't seriously conflict with the world as it actually is and inhibit our abilities to survive on a day-to-day basis. However, when extreme events happen, such as the case of the infant death mentioned above, the world as it is steamrolls into individuals' conceptual spaces and demands to be dealt with. Cybernetically, we already understand this as a breakdown in the sys-

tem that demands a response. However, most individuals are not conceptually prepared to deal with reality in this manner. Instead, problems are seen as intrusive, and prodigious effort goes toward isolating and trying to expel the nuisance from the system entirely.

As already stated, information is divorced from its origin in virtual environments. Audience members' pastiches of media representations stand as their virtual presences, reflecting how users believe people should think and behave in the physical as well as virtual environments. Their online actions thus carry with them physical world consequences. Social problems get compartmentalized as isolated incidences, blamed on individual bad luck, to be simply ignored and dismissed, or quite often appropriated and reinscribed as irony and sarcasm (explained further in chapter 9). Prodnik (2014) wrote, "Digital inclusion policies tend to individualize problems that are in fact social in their nature" (35). None of these responses solve the problems for the people who must live with them, just as the anti-vaxxer movement fails to address and solve the problems of autism and diabetes, even while it revives problems with easily prevented diseases like measles and rubella. Similarly, social ills such as racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, etc. remain unsolved everyday problems. Instead, the sufferers may become further isolated and shunned for pointing out these problems in the more mainstream communities they try to participate in. Consider, for example, blips in "unfriendings" on Facebook have coincided with every major #BlackLivesMatter event. In fact, racist, sexist, and other politically offensive posts are among the main reasons for offended parties to terminate social media connections with their online community members.[6] With every purge of dissimilarity, the user's media world becomes an ever-greater reflection of the individual's greatest desires, hopes, and fears. As I mentioned above, this is a cumulative process, but over time the effect seems to be inevitable.

Klapper's (1960) phenoministic theory showed that traditional mass media rarely have direct effects. Rather, social and psychological influences (family, status, education, group membership, etc.) maintain much more swayed over an individual's thoughts and behavior. In the milieu of influential elements, media is a contributory agent, as discussed above in agenda setting. Klapper's research showed that the way crime and violence are depicted in media does not seem to be the main reason for such behavior. Instead, to understand the causes we need to think of mass media as a reflection of behavior, not its motivator. Phenoministic theory suggests that social media is not creating the behavior described above. It is facilitating the construction of discourse and making it more visible. Social media audience members may acquire their discursive agenda through media, but their beliefs and logics are affirmed socially. Social media has given them the awareness that they may

not be alone. In the circular process described above, they experience their engagement with others who hold the same beliefs and ideas as confirmation that their own thoughts are correct.

Returning to a cybernetic overview, it is important to consider how the digital virtual environment leads to discrete experiences. Technically speaking, a binary computer operates through electronic pulses that set off switches in such a way that specific hard-wired circuits are turned on or off. These pulses are represented by the zeros and ones we popularly think of as digital code. Binary code is also known interchangeably as discrete code, since each actual digit (a "one" representing an electric pulse) is separated from the next one by a zero (representing space between the pulses). Discrete code presents no more and no less than one digit of value at a time (hence the term "digital"). This stands in contrast with analog information, also known as "continuous" because it reveals everything that exists between intervals. There are no spaces or breaks in between values. For example, we can express 1/3 perfectly as a fraction, but not as a decimal, since "0.333 . . ." cannot reflect a logic of finitude. An analog clock's hands indicate both the numbered intervals on the clock face as well as all the moments and spaces in between. A digital clock, however, can only display one full value at a time, hour/minute/second, as if each moment is frozen in time and there is nothing before or after each digit. By flooding our senses with enough discrete digits, we can experience an "approximate aesthetic" which creates a simulation of an analog experience (Munster 2002). Since our sense perception is analog, it is easy for us to interpret a digital simulation as an aesthetic reality. For example, our high-definition television screens are essentially a very large collection of very tiny electric lights. We see the picture from a distance as if it were a solid entity, but when we examine it up close, we see the truth: The only solid thing in a TV screen is the material that comprises it, not the image. The machinery we use to access our social media is conceived and constructed on the premise of deceiving our analog senses, achieved through an onslaught of discrete information that we cannot possibly process or contemplate one bit at a time. However, this is just the beginning of discrete everyday life.

In writing *Digital Culture*, Gere (2008) explained that digital culture preceded actual digitality. The beliefs and logics needed to create digitality had to be first created and popularized. The ability to think of the world as a collection of discrete information is essential for the kind of engineering that goes into the physical construction of our world. Even with our sophisticated cybernetic understanding of the interconnectedness of all systems, every component of a system is conceptualized as an entity unto itself to assemble the complex machinery of our current world. Just as photography went from being the visual capture of analog light waves to the digital simulation of

mapped information, media audiences have transformed from analog masses of people sharing the exact same media moment into collections of individual "users" each having their own discrete media experience. This doesn't mean people cannot act together. They often do. It does mean, though, that the way the multitude dwells as a community is vastly different than it was in the past. We may drop in and out without fuss, on a moment's impulse, however and whenever we see fit. And every media experience is evaluated for its use and worth from the aforementioned, very individual sets of criteria.

In this virtual environment and digital circumstance, discrete ideas are revised and compartmentalized in thoughts and conversations that fit better with one's own pastiche. Revision is not to make things more objectively accurate (unless accuracy is the goal of the pastiche). This invokes a reframing strategy that promotes a sense of legitimacy for its use, rather than an emphasis on understanding. As reported by Shelton, Lo, and Nardi (2015), social media users justify self-managing their image as more important than accuracy: "It feels more legitimate if I cite that it's a publication instead of people talking on the internet" (14). The authors explain, "many users do routinely compartmentalize their activities on Reddit from their social life beyond the website" (5). This means users often keep what they disclose in online communities separated, to manage an appropriate identity within each membership.

When explaining the concept of virtual environment, I have often had to clarify that although we may have numerous virtual identities and experiences, there is only one reality. There is not a virtual reality that stands apart from the "real" world. Even so, the popular idea persists that our virtual world is somehow disconnected from our everyday reality. This example of discrete logic in everyday life typifies the compartmentalization Shelton et al. describe. The discrete nature of virtual life, the removal of bodies to disparate, discretely isolated interfaces (i.e., phones, tablets, laptops, etc.), and the "segmentation" of social identities as if they are not all analogically connected are all aspects of living the discrete life. This ignores the interconnected nature of the cybernetic system within which we users are living. Yet, it still exists, and the characteristics of cybernetic participatory epistemology manifest their effects in discourse. Xu, Park, Kim, and Park (2016) observed that compartmentalization leads to an emphasis on the cultural similarity between users in social media, rather than diversity and exposure to new experiences. Less similarity was shown to correlate with less interest and awareness, demonstrated by less interaction. Thus social media communities function as discrete social units rather than fluid, dynamic, interconnected public spaces.

Yet another discrete behavior can be observed online as disinhibition, in the confessional use of meme posts (Shelton et al., 2015). On Reddit in particular, the anonymity acquired through sock puppet accounts allows indi-

viduals to communicate about issues without having to worry about managing the whole of their virtual identity. The narrow parameters of sub-Reddit threads make for very focused conversations among, for the most part, very like-minded individuals. This makes disagreement unlikely. When combined with anonymity, users may make statements and express viewpoints that would seem outlandish or even offensive in other online communities in which they participate. The comparison to a confessional fits in this situation, as the resulting "confession" is from an anonymous user to other anonymous users, who are joined together temporarily to witness one another's revelations. Shelton et al. explain, "Relatively anonymous media sites including Reddit emphasize the use of media and relative anonymity, giving rise to a culture of disinhibition and open disclosure" (2015, 11). Be that as it is, such communities and moments comprise only a discrete fragment of a netizen's everyday world. Such fragmented experiences are easily compartmentalized and kept discretely away from the other communities one might circulate in.

What I have described in this chapter up to this point creates a world of constant confirmation bias for oneself. Like a carefully nurtured ecosystem, every element of an individual's social media experience feeds back into itself to sustain what might be likened to a protracted self-fulfilling prophecy. An individual's world seems to be more and more like what he or she has consumed in media. Gerbner's cultivation theory explained that audience members are likely to change their values and beliefs to match what they consume most in media. The greater their consumption, the higher the congruence between beliefs and media depictions. Gerbner described the result as "Mean World Syndrome," where an audience member comes to believe the world is much more violent and mean than it actually is. The steady consumption of a specific worldview in media cultivates a perspective of the world that matches the content, hence the name "cultivation theory." In keeping with this theory, neuroscientist Bobby Azarian (2016) explained the Dunning-Kruger effect facilitates the cultivation of a world full of fear, terror management, and high engagement. Gerbner's premise accommodated agenda setting theory as well, since the editorial choices of mass media were still outside the purview of audience members. Since the role of agenda setting resides in the hands of individual audience members in social media, they are each cultivating their own worldview. It is no wonder, then, that one might find a statement such as the following regarding stem cell research:

> Kass defends his "science fiction" informed position on stem-cell research and cloning "With a doctrine that he calls 'the wisdom of repugnance,' and which states, basically, that if you find something repugnant—if you don't think it's right—then it must be wrong." (Groopman 2003, 226).

The topic of stem cell research is beside the point here: Groopman is seeking to mock Kass for his logical fallacy, but, like the communities discussed above, the integrity of the argument really does not matter to the insular community Kass is interacting with. Kass' community has its own self-sustaining discourse, and community members will unproblematically invoke the "wisdom of repugnance" whenever it is helpful to their community maintenance.

To challenge and make changes in this condition returns us to cybernetics and its offshoot theory, cognitive dissonance. The minimization of cognitive dissonance—discomfort with information contrary to one's beliefs and attitudes—sustains the motivation to police the discourse and expel disagreement from our social media communities. Since people are generally motivated to return a disagreeable state of dissonance to a pleasant one, the task would be to make some discomfort and eventual acceptance cognitively desirable. This happens regularly in the case of education since learning frequently makes students feel uncomfortable. Individuals can reduce dissonance by adding to their reasons to agree with the different viewpoint, eliminating the disagreeable idea, and increasing or decreasing the importance of these variables.

Outside of purely rational arguments, which seem to be somewhat irrelevant in the circumstances described, attitude change is typically the focus of advertising and marketing. Convincing people to change their attitude seems to be an easier approach than appealing to reason. Even so, the way people have most recently behaved is the most difficult attitude to change; recent behavior has a fresh trail of justification supporting it. In our social media world, driven by emotion and excitation, reduced to memetic communication, and dominated by the prejudices we serve back to ourselves, we can be easily roused to moral panics over things that would typically be of no concern.

NOTES

1. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/03/18/a-toddler-got-meningitis-his-anti-vac-parents-gave-him-an-herbal-remedy-the-toddler-died-now-his-parents-are-on-trial/.

2. https://news.vice.com/article/this-anti-vaxxer-dad-convicted-in-the-death-of-his-son-is-going-jail.

3. http://www.theflatearthsociety.org/.

4. http://www.realmilk.com/.

5. https://gmo-awareness.com/ and http://www.nongmoproject.org/.

6. http://www.cudenvertoday.org/facebookunfriending/, http://mashable.com/2011/12/19/friend-unfriend-facebook/#o4FUD_tpjqqO.

Digital Moral Panics and Mass Hysteria

The fifth consequence of memetic communication is digital remediation of moral panics and mass hysteria. Resulting from these phenomena are massive over-reactions, and their hugely disproportional effects that have become normal consequences of memetic communication. Viral distribution of both positive and negative memes have changed both the rewards and the stakes for situations that might have gone unnoticed in the past. Two effects especially stand out: overly exuberant charity, and virtual mob behavior similar to media-inspired moral panics and mass hysteria of days gone by.

Up to this point, I have defined memetic communication (chapter 1), described the cybernetic process that nurtures and facilitates viral content (chapter 2), explained how individuals repurpose content and push it forward as a consumer-cultural act of identification (chapter 3), looked at the exigencies that arouse audience excitation and ravenous consumption/redistribution (chapter 4), and the discrete nature of social media experiences (chapter 5). Altogether, in the first five chapters, I describe an apparatus that is operating full bore to splatter whatever content gets caught in it around the global media network, something like how we might imagine paint thrown into the blades of a high-speed fan. We can imagine a God's eye view of this being a terribly messy situation. And like a mess of splattered paint, the entire situation adds to a sense of panic and hysteria. In the world of memetic communication, the spinning fan blades are constantly fed a stream of paint. There is nobody to clean up the mess it makes. So in lieu of janitorial staff, us netizens (citizens of the internet) dash from one crisis to another, trying to put a world that is morally paradoxical into some type of order. The combined energy of the online multitude creates massive waves, which catapults every cause de jour to previously unimaginable orders of magnitude, far beyond what would have seemed sensible even just ten or fifteen years ago. From our God's eye view,

we witness unrelenting moral panics and mass hysteria as an everyday norm in memetic communication.

MEDIA, MORAL PANICS, AND MASS HYSTERIA

A moral panic occurs when a group of people from the general public raise concern over a shock or perceived threat to cultural norms and sensitivities. The amount of fear and panic over the issue gets exaggerated, facts distorted, the issue misrepresented, and the entire situation is prone to embellishments and mischaracterizations. Stanley Cohen used the term "folk devil" to name a stereotyped, caricatured focal point of expressed moral anxiety at the center of moral panic (Cohen 2011). The cause of the outrage may be imaginary or real. Either way, it is (in cybernetic terminology) amplified to proportions that push the limits of the system. Once set in motion, a moral panic typically grows and spreads until it meets a formidable enough opposition to slow it down or stop it. Media often (but does not have to) plays a central role in the spread of moral panic (Critcher 2003).

Mass hysteria happens when a group of people presents the same hysterical symptoms and behavior. There does not have to be an identifiable cause to trigger it, though there might be. With mass hysteria, people are joining in and acting out specific behavior, whereas a moral panic focuses on halting a perceived societal or cultural trend. So more concisely, hysteria is the spread of symptoms, and moral panic tries to stop something people think is bad.

Mass hysteria may manifest as a physical malady, such as a psychosomatic outbreak of a skin rash among a group of people, fainting, or some other physical tick. Moral panic and mass hysteria may coexist as different dimensions of the same social phenomenon since mass hysteria is often set off by rumors and fears. A global example of mass hysteria occurred leading up to the year 2000 when the Y2K Bug in computer operating systems raised the tremendous fear that the global digital infrastructure would collapse, resulting in chaos and anarchy that would destroy the world as we know it and take humanity with it. In a state of mass hysteria, people around the world prepared for a worst-case scenario, stockpiling supplies and preparing for a post-apocalyptic world without computers. In some extreme cases, entire communities built underground bunkers or other secure complexes, stocked to sustain the inhabitants for years to come.

Media has long been bound up in the spread of moral panics and mass hysteria. Its role has been twofold: panics about the effects of exposure to a given medium (i.e., the devices), and panics about the ideas spread through media. Moral panics about print media came along with the printing press in

the West, and the popularization of the novel, which was accused of making people antisocial and lazy. In the twentieth century, America experienced "a similar moral panic with the popularity of comic books and magazines. Photography, film, the phonograph, LP records, radio, television, and even the telegraph all had their moments as moral panics. In the digital era, transistor radios, personal computers, laptops, pagers, Walkmans, cell phones, the internet, compact discs, DVDs, smartphones, and—perhaps most relentlessly—video games have all been the inspiration of one or several moral panics. For example, the notion that radio waves traveling to smartphone antennas were causing brain cancer was a popular myth through the late 90s into the mid-2000s. In the late twentieth century, some people blamed the quick edits in music videos for the shortening of attention spans. Each in their turn, the transistor radio, the Walkman, and then texting on cell phones and smartphones have all been causes of panic over a supposed antisocial "disconnect" of audience members. These types of consequences are attributed to the effects of the introduction of said media devices into our culture. This kind of moral panic has been dubbed a "technopanic":

> "Technopanics" are the real-world manifestations of fear appeal arguments. A "technopanic" refers to an intense public, political, and academic response to the emergence or use of media or technologies, especially by the young. (Thierer 2013)

In contrast, "cyberpanic" describes moral panics that arise and are given voice in cyberspace.

Moral panics over challenges in cultural logic, ideologies, and beliefs have accompanied media development through the ages. The popularity of romance novels, for example, was called a corrupting and immoral influence on their readers. Jazz, rock and roll, and rap music (most prevalently among other genres) have all been panicked about as destroyers of the minds of youth and popular culture in general. Print and film pornography (and later, online) continues to carry the blame for degeneration of morals, and the rawest form of exploitation of women.[1] Almost every kind of content suggesting gayness is present and normal in our culture has been the target of a protracted moral panic that spans decades, and still serves as a rallying cry for a very vocal anti-gay minority in America.

There is no shortage of possible media and issues when it comes to criticizing morality. Both the medium and the content can be targeted, sometimes even at the same time. As a continuous, fluid process, Cohen (2011) explained, "With historical incorporation: 'the intense preoccupation with the latest media fad immediately relegates older media to the shadows of acceptance'" (XX).

One way of judging if something is a media moral panic or not is the volume of evidence supporting the core issue. If evidence is weak or non-existent, it may be the center of a moral panic. The notion that media can have such strong moral effects on the audience precedes agenda-setting theory, relying on a direct effects/magic bullet theory model that we know is not supported by research. Cohen (2011) describes the moral panic cycle as starting with exposure to content from a given medium, which, secondly, is thought to incite a behavior. When there is a failure of supporting evidence linking the cause and effect, vocal advocates overcompensate with loud appeals to taken-for-granted concepts of "common sense," not rationality. Authoritative voices (judges, experts, professionals, political figures) help sustain moral panics with their widespread exposure and repetition. Logical fallacies such as "slippery slope" arguments seem to make sense in such circumstances (i.e., if we allow this, what happens next will be even worse), and organizations compete in blaming one another. Media argue justifications of their role and position in the controversy, while competing organizations typically fight to regulate and limit the capabilities and content of the media under attack.

The internet and social media have brought about a perfect storm of media, content, and mass participation to seed and sustain numerous moral panics. Social media form a confluence of technopanic (from increased use of the technologies), cyberpanic (from the facilitation and rapid spread of content), and sometimes mass hysteria (from dissemination of a specific behavior or symptom). Almost every social media platform could provide examples, though Facebook seems continually entangled in numerous moral panics at any given moment. Its size and ubiquity, its economic weight, its interface and controls, its policies, its collection of personal information, and its relatively open access to all types of communities, organizations, and individuals have all been assailed (often through Facebook itself) by the very people who comprise its audience.

One of the most recurrent and persistent moral panics on Facebook (and possibly the internet as a whole) is privacy. Panics over Facebook privacy have come as both technopanics and cyberpanics. It is common to be confronted several times throughout the year by a message in one's newsfeed, reposted by a well-meaning friend, warning that Facebook is set to pounce on your personal information and take legal possession of all your data, including personal photographs. Such messages typically contain some sort of instruction about how to protect oneself. A popular "self-protection" suggestion is reposting a legalese-sounding notice of content ownership on one's wall/newsfeed, which is thought to prohibit Facebook from using your content without your permission. The result is a meme that has survived for many years on Facebook, cycling through dormancy to resurface several times

with slight revisions (a consequence of memetic communication examined in chapter 10). The meme has no basis in fact since the terms of service are a binding contract between users and the company that supersede all other legal matters. Facebook has publicly stated many times that per their terms of service, ownership of content has always remained with the users, and will continue to. Even so, the panic persists.

As I mentioned, the privacy panic on Facebook has taken the guise of both cyberpanic and technopanic. As a cyberpanic, privacy has been at the center of numerous crusades for ownership of user-generated content, company policy, governmental regulation of content, individual user responsibilities, netiquette, and several other cultural change goals. Technopanics have reared up with tangible trends of security and privacy preference lockdowns, user misinterpretations of actual security improvements from the developers, and in extreme cases, people closing or deleting their accounts entirely.

Facebook has also been a medically stated cause of mass hysteria (also referred to as mass psychogenic illness, or MPI). In 2011, numerous young women in Leroy, New York, exhibited the same symptoms of a nervous tic and stuttering (Bartholomew, Wessely, and Rubin 2012). This type of mass hysteria did not stand out as unusual until a woman in another town started showing the same symptoms. The spread of the symptoms through the girls' social media posts (Facebook in particular) was determined the cause of the contagion. Since the 2011 case, several more mass hysteria episodes spread through social media have popped up. Of the 2011 incident, Bartholomew et al. wrote:

> The Leroy case may mark a new transformation in the dialectics of MPI. This is the first case in which, to our knowledge, those affected have been able to "put their case" directly to the wider public. (2012, 511)

The common practice of Googling symptoms has elevated hypochondria to a new level and has resulted in numerous people misdiagnosing and mistreating themselves instead of seeking qualified medical care. However, mass hysteria outshines these images and videos of people presenting actual symptoms, making these individual incidences seem minor alongside broader cases of mass hysteria.

Our social media environment is proving a fertile ground for panic and hysteria. Twenty-sixteen even brought an unfounded nation-wide panic over "creepy clowns" said to be attacking people and trying to kidnap children (Romano 2016), raising paranoia about anyone seen in a clown costume out of a perceived "appropriate" context. Stepping back from the fray, these panics and hysterias have tended to be categorically two sides of the same coin in terms of their motivations. Both sides seem backgrounded by a belief among

individuals involved that they are participating in doing good. On the one hand, overly exuberant charity brings disproportional reward for an incident, issue, or actor deemed worthy of help (typically financial) by a mass of individuals. On the other hand, virtual mobs erupt to attack and root out alleged perpetrators of crimes or other morally reprehensible acts, with the intention of bringing justice to bear. The combined agency of so many people connecting online means the consequences of virtual mob justice, however, may often be disproportionally far beyond the weight of the perceived offense.

It is important for me to again distinguish between a virtual mob, which is a chaotic and unorganized group of people wreaking havoc without any definite end goal, and online vigilantes and bullies. The line may not always be so precise in lived experiences, but for this book, vigilantes and bullies differ from mobs in that they are organized, goal-driven, and deliberately destructive. I deal more directly with the consequences of virtual vigilantes' and bullies' uses of memetic communication in chapters 11 and 12. For the remainder of this chapter, I will contend with the two specific genres of moral panic and mass hysteria I have previously mentioned: overly exuberant charity, and virtual mobbing.

OVERLY EXUBERANT CHARITY

Social networking was combined with online financial tools in the early 2000s to create methods of soliciting and accepting donations from individuals. Many people are now familiar with the concept of crowdfunding associated with companies such as Indiegogo (est. 2008) and Kickstarter (est. 2009). The concept of crowdfunding as an online business model began with Artistshare in 2003, a platform that facilitated public fundraising for artistic projects, such as music and film. Before Artistshare, fundraising efforts online tended to be ad hoc and without institutional structure, unless the structure and technical support were provided by the organization doing the fundraising on their own site. Artistshare and other crowdfunding sites that came after provided platforms that ensured easy to use, secure transaction environments for any group or individual cause that met their basic terms of use. This meant that musicians, for example, could easily solicit donations from their fan base to fund their next studio project or live tour. Indiegogo and Kickstarter opened things up even more, by allowing almost anyone to start a fundraising campaign for almost any reason. Instead of having to go door to door, make phone calls, do mass mail outs, throw events, or canvass in public locations, people could now ask for money directly from the people they communicated with most online. In the era of memetic communica-

tion, this has produced some interesting and somewhat inconsistent results. Overall, this method of collecting donations has become known as viral philanthropy. In line with how content haphazardly leaps to viral status the way I described previously, it seems the success of crowdfunding depends in large part on how useful the issue and its excitation factor is for its potential audience, rather than how dire or truthfully in need people and organizations are. In other words, how likely a cause is to go viral and become a meme.

One of the clearest examples of overly exuberant charity happened with a 2012 Indiegogo campaign for a bus monitor named Karen Klein. A video entitled "Making the Bus Monitor Cry" of teens bullying the aged Klein to the point of tears went viral on YouTube. She revealed in an interview afterward that she had worked hard all her life and never even had a "real" vacation. In response, a viral philanthropy campaign entitled "Let's Give Karen—The bus monitor—H Klein a Vacation!" erupted out of Reddit, with a stated goal of five thousand dollars. However, the campaign collected over half a million dollars within just a few days, and over $700,000 by the time it ended. The viral success of the YouTube video inspired thousands of users to donate, resulting in an absurd amount of money for someone who was, in essence, harassed on the job to a far lesser extent than many thousands of people endure on a daily basis with no acknowledgment at all. Meanwhile, the bully received disciplinary action from the school board and made a public apology. Even so, the bully also received death threats, adding a second disproportional response to the incident reflecting some aspects of virtual mobbing (discussed below).

What Karen Klein went through was difficult and painful for her, and the viral video of the incident no doubt added to her embarrassment. Nobody would fault any one individual for empathizing with her situation, person to person, and trying to do something nice for her. However, the combined efforts of the individuals comprising her viral audience very clearly exceeded what we might think of as a reasonable response. A look at Indiegogo's and Kickstarter's most successful campaigns shows that this kind of exuberance has become somewhat common in our era of memetic communication.

The Karen Klein campaign finds itself in interesting company as one of the top in the "Community" category of crowdfunded campaigns on Indiegogo. As of this writing, it sits at number four, after an MTV-sponsored campaign to rebuild the New Jersey Shoreline that brought in just over one million US dollars after the devastation of the 2012 hurricane.[2] Following the Klein campaign is a fundraising effort for the families of two Canadian soldiers who were killed while defending against domestic terrorism,[3] which raised $393,450 CDN (approximately 295,000 USD).

$150,000 is sure to be a welcome show of support by the families grieving the loss of their loved ones in the line of duty. However, Klein received

more than twice as much money than the families of the two dead soldiers combined, to do with whatever she pleases. The arbitrary nature of these "successful" campaigns appears even starker when contrasted with the top-earning campaign in the "Community" category on Indiegogo: a campaign to create rare brews of beer by the California company Stone Brewing that raised over 2.5 million USD.[4] One might wonder what exactly is meant by "Community" on Indiegogo when a clearly profit-driven initiative tops the category, but at the same time, the ranking shows plainly the digital mob's philanthropic concerns: alcohol. The second highest Indiegogo "Community" campaign is a Greek bailout fund that raised close to 2 million Euros. We might assume most of the contributors to that campaign were Greek citizens or investors, seeking to help calm the turbulence of a national debt default. At the time of my research, only two of the top ten community campaigns on Indiegogo were bona fide grassroots initiatives that did not have some direct institutional nonprofit or corporate involvement.

Even the most successful community crowdsourced campaigns are still a drop in the bucket compared to the big online fundraising players. Indiegogo is one of the big crowdfunding companies, and when we look at the field it plays in along with Kickstarter a more complete picture emerges. At the time of this writing, the first, third, and fifth most successful crowdsourced campaigns all belong to the same smartwatch company, Pebble Time,[5] bringing in a combined total of more than 45 million USD. Nestled in the number two spot is an organization with plans to make a very fancy 13 million USD cooler. Other top campaigns include a beehive design that got over 12 million USD, an everyday wear jacket with almost 10 million USD, and a board game that raised close to 9 million USD. The numbers are so high that an online crowdsourcing campaign must bring in more than 1.6 million USD just to rank in the top 100. Altogether, this mishmash of examples shows the arbitrarily whimsical nature of crowdfunding. The success of these campaigns says little about social media users' tangible priorities, but a lot about what is important to their audiences: content that is useful for sharing.

The Karen Klein campaign might look like an anomaly when contextualized alongside these far less humanely imperative campaigns that dwarf its earnings. But still, it did happen. And it does raise the question of how much money it takes for a charitable campaign's fundraising to be disproportional to the issue it is meant to address. In other words, the total does not have to be so freakishly large to stand out. Considerably less money can still be disproportional, and often is. For example, raising $30,000 for someone having trouble with a $3,000 veterinary bill is still highly disproportional, not to mention extremely selective. Or giving an American kid over a thousand dollars to buy and eat an $8 burrito while charting his enjoyment of the ex-

perience is an absurdly disproportionate cause to donate to while at least 13 percent of the world's population is undernourished.

Disproportion can also happen in the other direction. Countless very worthwhile causes, such as surgery, education, and opportunities for impoverished youth, receive no funding at all. Their funding problem is, simply, that they do not provide sensational or useful enough content for the social media audience to passionately push it out and make it go viral. As I explain in chapter 13, if a message is not aesthetically useful in this era of memetic communication, it is not likely to be noticed at all. On the other hand, a moral panic meme that has succeeded due to sustained viral replication, attracting charitable giving and tangible acts, has been human trafficking.

At first glance, the human trafficking meme seems like an airtight example of a positive social media effect. The term itself is, for most, synonymous with sexual slavery (Berlatsky 2015). Sexual slavery fits a category of issue that no public figure would dare state anything but condemnation for, while enthusiastically expressing support for the multitude of women commonly assumed to be exploited in the complex global human trafficking system. The moral panics this issue inspires has encouraged a monsoon of charitable support throughout the world, with close to $700 million in the USA alone:

> In all, 50 of the most prominent anti-trafficking organizations in the United States are estimated to share around $686 million—an amount that would place them approximately 184th on the UN's ranking of nations by GDP, right above Samoa. And that . . . could be a very low estimate. (Moore 2015)

As a charity issue, "human trafficking" appears to be a very successful moneymaker. Unfortunately, the evidence presented to the public regarding the extent of the problem seems wildly inaccurate according to numerous fact-checkers (see Berlatsky 2015; Davies 2009; McNeill 2014; Moore 2015; Somin 2014). First, "human trafficking" is a much broader term than "slavery." The United Nations defines human trafficking as:

> Recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. (United Nations 2012)

The definition is so broad that seemingly anyone forced to do something unsavory in their job under threat of termination or through deception might fall under these terms. This is quite different from forced labor and "modern" slavery:

> Forced labor refers to situations in which persons are coerced to work through
> the use of violence or intimidation, or by more subtle means such as accumu-
> lated debt, retention of identity papers or threats of denunciation to immigration
> authorities. (United Nations 2014)

In fact, it was (and may still be) common practice for English language
schools in South Korea to hold onto their foreign teachers' official documents
(passports, original diplomas) during their time of employment when I was
a teacher there myself in the early 2000s. Does this mean I was in a forced
labor situation? According to the UN definition, yes. Even if we take that to
be the case, it is an incredible leap from teaching middle school English to sex
slavery. And yet this is the common conflation in popular parlance. The final
leap required for moral panic is the assumption that any human trafficking
of women entails forced sexual labor or sex slavery. This assumption flies in
the face of the evidence:

> The United Nation's International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates, world-
> wide, a forced labor population of 21 million people—11.4 million women and
> girls and 9.4 million men and boys—4.5 million of which, or 21 percent, they
> suggest are victims of forced sexual exploitation. These are not hard numbers;
> they are estimates. But they are the bedrock on which the global anti-trafficking
> movement is set. (Moore 2015)

So even if we are to take these numbers at face value, the number of victims
is roughly one-fifth of the total of the most extreme popular misconception
of human trafficking. However, even on top of this dose of cold reality, the
numbers themselves are highly questionable.

McNeill is thorough in her debunking of what she calls the "statistical
malpractice" taking place in the name of human trafficking. She calls the
approach to compiling human trafficking statistics "one sided." McNeill
goes on to highlight several credible reports in developed nations that found
little to no evidence of human trafficking whatsoever. Despite this, the ap-
propriation of the issue by the charity industry has led to the recirculation
and continuous embellishment of statistics. Incorrect information leaps from
one website to many, into new reports, which are quoted in special televi-
sion and magazine stories, and so on. With each subsequent embellishment,
the estimated number of people being trafficked seems to climb higher and
higher. The extent of distortion vs. reality is such that the Dallas Morning
News embellished an official's guess that up to 300,000 youth may be at risk
of exploitation (with sex being the least likely form of possible exploitation
in the estimate) in the entire USA to claim, "In Houston alone, about 300,000
sex trafficking cases are prosecuted each year," while there were in fact only

two prosecuted cases in the city that year (McNeill, 2014). McNeill's article goes on to explain numerous other methodological and statistical fallacies regarding human trafficking and sex work in the USA. For the most part, McNeill's research reflects many of the same hyperbolic and sensationalist untruths about the issue as a 2009 investigative report on human trafficking in the United Kingdom by *The Guardian* (Davies 2009).

Despite the growing body of evidence showing the issue of human trafficking and sexual slavery are considerably less of a global and national problem than how they are popularly portrayed, the usefulness of the misinformation ensures that the meme will survive. Common sense does not seem to play a role in this media moral panic: If one were to take the inflated numbers seriously, the problem would be much more visible (on every street corner of every major city), and there would be exponentially more arrests and prosecutions for the crime in America. The moral panic carries the day though, since people's primary goal in their virtual worlds is to consume media and curate an environment that reflects their own morals and vision of what life is like, not check facts. The content helps individuals to cultivate mean world syndrome.

The adverse effect is that the real and unglamorized problem of human trafficking remains unaddressed. According even to the distorted numbers, most people who are actually trafficked or find themselves in forced labor situations have nothing to do with the sex industries, and may include nearly as many men as women. It is much harder to rally people's charitable spirit to give money to save, for example, a decrepit middle-aged father of five held captive on a fishing vessel in the ocean off the coast of Thailand. The image conjured by that scenario is neither sexy, memorable, nor typically useful for an average person's newsfeed. What is useful, though, is being a newsfeed warrior, using the power of social media to root out evil.

VIRTUAL MOBBING

Virtual mobbing (a chaotic mob driven by contagion, not an organized attempt to address a situation) stands distinctly apart from a traditional physical world mob, in that the individuals comprising it may not even realize they are part of a multitude attacking a single target. As an individual digital experience (as described in the previous chapter), their activity might seem harmless and isolated to the social media user. And like overly exuberant charity, the user probably believes he or she is doing something good and helpful for society. If it were only one or a few people, they might contribute something useful. However, when the number of participants climbs into the hundreds,

Figure 6.1.   Moral Panic Memes. The top left combines the Bus Monitor Vacation meme (blurred for copyright compliance) with Warhol's "15 minutes of fame" phrase. The graphic at the top right was circulated during the Deranged Clown moral panic. The bottom technopanic images portray Y2K Armageddon on the left, and the Cell-phone Brain Cancer meme on the right. Sources: "Wasco Clown," creator unknown, fair use copyright, found at https://images2.storyjumper.com/transcoder.png?trim&id=35 -2nb0fu4ks3-58i81vavh&maxw=1024&maxh=1024. "15 minutes of collective love," image macro over distorted fundraising page, creator unknown, fair use copyright, found at http://nwn.blogs.com/.a/6a00d8341bf74053ef016767d9c067970b-800wi. "Cell phone use causes brain cancer," creator unknown, fair use copyright, found at https://i.pinimg.com/originals/e9/b4/72/e9b472ee71f690eb74be05bc7312ccf4 .jpg. "Y2K Apocalypse," original image of 1953 nuclear bomb test in Nevada, copyright public domain, found at https://i2.wp.com/hypothetical-ethics.com/wp-content/ uploads/2017/06/y2k.jpg?fit=500%2C415.

thousands, and tens of thousands, anything resembling appropriate proportion becomes seemingly impossible. The experience of Nathan Kotylak, a teenage athlete at the time of his participation in the 2011 Vancouver hockey riot, demonstrates the disproportional effect of online mobs.

Vancouver's hockey riot of 2011 erupted after the hometown team lost the final game of the championship series that year. Disgruntled fans took to the streets and began venting their frustration with vandalism. The police were on the scene but were no match for the thousands of hooligans. Kotylak was

among those who took to vandalism, and he was caught on camera setting a police cruiser on fire. The picture of him caught in the act quickly circulated through social media, the front pages of all the major news outlets, and television news. His life irreversibly changed at that moment.

After being identified, Kotylak was suspended from the Canadian Olympic water polo team. He faced charges and reprimand according to due process. However, punishment congruent with the infraction in a traditional sense was not enough for the online mob. They wanted vengeance. Kotylak's entire family was doxed.[6] His father's dental practice was slandered, and he was forced to close his shop for several days due to death threats and publication of their home address online. While it is obviously not a good idea to flout the law and destroy police property, death threats for an act in which no one was hurt and which was prosecuted according to due process are clearly excessive.

Online mobbing mirrors the bloodlust and lack of objectivity of physical mobs. This disproportional thirst for vengeance is bad enough when the target is guilty. It seems horrific when it is directed at an innocent person who has been misidentified as the perpetrator. Only one of many such cases, Garnet Ford found himself in exactly this circumstance, accused through Facebook of a murder on a bus in Surrey, British Columbia, that he had nothing to do with. Despite the police holding a press conference declaring the man's innocence, he received death threats as the accusations continued. His boss made him take time off work, as the situation was causing difficulties for the business. In turn, he lost sorely needed income with his partner expecting a baby, and a four year old already in tow (Janson 2012).

As we can see, the damage to the targets of these mob attacks can be severe and devastating. Colin Kaepernick's decision not to stand for the national anthem in protest of police brutality against African Americans before an NBA football game caused an almost unbelievable outpouring of mob rage, ongoing for well over a year. Kaepernick had made an informed decision and already had the protections and everyday safety practices in place before acting on his moment of media resistance. His act, however, went viral and memed. Throughout America, people of all ages, genders, and races at all kinds of sporting events replicated Kaepernick's act. Unfortunately, without the same safety precautions and apparatuses, many people were hit directly with bullying and death threats by online mobs. Kaepernick and other athletes are not the only ones to face the nationalist wrath of anonymous outrage. Even children have not been spared the venom of the faceless, anonymous online mob. And it turns out even more escalation has been possible, evidenced in the 2016 presidential election.

None other than Donald Trump was served with a lawsuit alleging he is responsible for inciting a virtual mob to attack political strategist Cheryl Jacobus. Favoring Twitter as his primary medium for communicating with his supporters, Trump took the time to call Jacobus as a "real dummy!" and a "major loser" after she challenged him on air. With a clear target before them, many of Trump's more zealous followers sought to destroy her credibility and directed death and rape threats at her.[7] As is the case with physical mobs, there can be little to no recourse trying to challenge each and every individual involved. Instead, holding a "leader" responsible for the actions of the mob is a method of holding someone accountable for the behavior of those under their influence. With that said, it can be hard to identify a leader in many cases, leaving the victims of such disproportional attacks to pick up the pieces of their lives by themselves, without help from anyone.

Whether a victim or perpetrator, how does one make sense of this set of circumstances and consequences? As suggested in the previous chapter, by believing in the truth of the world one has constructed for oneself. This begs the question of what kind of truth can we have if everyone vehemently believes their own bubble represents the truth of the world we share.

NOTES

1. Which may be true, but said exploitation (i.e. women's sexuality) has also often been used as leverage to bolster a patronizing patriarchal order that is, in many ways, as oppressive as what it claims to oppose.

2. https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/restore-the-shore--29#/backers

3. https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/10/22/tributes-pour-in-for-fallen-soldiers-nathan-cirillo-patrice-vincent.html.

4. http://www.stonebrewing.com/.

5. A product that was never delivered. Pebble Time was acquired by Fitbit in 2016, and its product lines were cancelled. See Levy, 2016.

6. Doxed or Doxing is a specific term used online to describe the discovery and publication of an individual's actual name and identity.

7. Chapter 12 describes in more detail targeted attacks that employ similar tactics.

Chapter Seven

Bitty, Ungrand Narratives

The sixth consequence of memetic communication I have identified is the triumph of philosophical monadism and postmodernism as cultural norms. Digital technology encourages users to create their own highly individualized virtual spaces (see chapter 5) in which they take their own desires to be "truth." Interactions in these spaces are experienced as discrete/disconnected moments by the audience, as if each individual were a Leibnizian monad (Leibniz 1948). This encourages thinking in terms of highly individualized narratives. For individual prosumers, it seems as if all content is merely for one's own entertainment and comes with no "real world" consequences attached to it—a near perfect condition for solipsism. Clever postmodern playfulness (in rhetorical terms, pathos or feelings)—demonstrated through prosumerist appropriation and transformation of media content from one meaning to another—seems more important than intelligence (logos or logic) for uniting people in a "post-truth" society. There are positive aspects of empowering media consumers to manipulate the content they choose, freeing information seekers from the yoke of dominant media gatekeepers such as corporations and the state. However, it also cultivates and maintains a circumstance in which people are not challenged by new ideas. Instead, challenging ideas get consumed with an attitude of sarcasm and irony, which perpetuate and sometimes amplify social problems.

THE POST-TRUTH WORLD

The 2016 US presidential election was a rude awakening for anyone still holding the values of truth and honesty as foundational to American culture. With an unprecedented total of 560 verifiably false statements during his

campaign (Dale and Talaga 2016), Donald Trump's victory on the ballot reflected a cultural turn away from the primacy of truth and fact in decision-making. America is now unmistakably living in the "post-truth" era.

The term "post-truth" has been operative since the Bush administration in the 2000s. At that time, it served as shorthand commentary on the way that George W. Bush approached politics as a game of deception, exemplified by his administration's fabrication of justifications for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. By the 2010s, relentless, factually misleading attacks on President Obama from the American right had become normal. What was more specifically called "post-truth politics" (Roberts 2010) had become an unspectacular part of our everyday experience with government. It is perhaps even an expectation at this point. The inventor of the term, David Roberts, explained post-truth politics is "a political culture in which politics (public opinion and media narratives) have become almost entirely disconnected from policy (the substance of legislation)" (Roberts 2010). Fueled by the UK Brexit campaign and the US presidential election, the term 'post-truth' gained such importance the Oxford dictionary declared it the 2016 Word of the Year.

How did it come to be that we live in a culture that no longer values facts and truth? I suggest that the "post-truth" phenomenon is a logical outcome of the dominance of postmodernism and individual actors' abilities to create their own narratives about the world they live in. Altogether, this reflects the extremely discrete existences of monads described by Leibniz's philosophical monadism, which is one of the foundational logics by which our computers are designed (Kien 2016).

The modern era—characterized by Western rational thought, universal generalizations based on scientific proof, and notions of progress toward a utopic future—has yielded to the triumph of postmodernism. While not itself irrational, postmodern thought must by its own logic accept Western rationality as only one of several possible ways of making sense of things. Likewise, we now understand science is just one among many ways of explaining phenomena, and relativist narratives have displaced universal generalizations.

Contrary to the notion of progress, postmodern culture seems gripped by a notion of returning to a nostalgic past that never actually existed. Gere (2008) explained that digital technology is only part of digital culture. Digital technology was created as a tool to actualize the world in the way it has been imagined in digital philosophy and theory. So just as digitality is a product of digital culture, postmodernism is a product of modernism. It is no accident that postmodernism and digitality fit together in tight yet comfortable reciprocity.

As I explained in chapter 5, the binary code at the heart of digital computer operations encourages (in some ways necessitates) a discrete and individuated experience for users of the technology. In chapter 4, I described how

Figure 7.1.   Post-Truth Memes. Top left shows a 2016 Trump supporter's sign, flying in the face of the 560 verified lies he told during his campaign. Below it is a fake *People* magazine quote attributed to Trump that was widely shared and believed among the American left, showing neither political affiliation is immune to the post-truth influence. The top left sarcastically plays with the "alternative facts" meme, while the image below shows Colin Powell making the case for the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, brandishing a vial of fake yellow cake uranium for visual effect. *Source*: "Trump 4 Truth," created by Marc Nozell, copyright 2016, found at https://www.flickr.com/photos/marcn/24550195529/. "Trump in People," creator unknown, found at https://a1skeptic.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/trump_quote.jpg?w=640. "Alternative Facts," creator unknown, found at https://imgur.com/a/mF6smiF. "Colin Powell Anthrax Vial," created by an employee of the Executive Office of the President of the United States, found at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Colin_Powell_anthrax_vial._5_Feb_2003_at_the_UN.jpg.

emotion drives prosumerism in digital media, displacing logic as the guiding criterion for judging the usefulness of information. And in chapters 3 and 8, I elaborate on how the cultural process of tagging and posting on social media creates an environment of assimilation, toward the formation of digital tribes. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explicate how postmodern methods first came to be desirable and useful tools for Western culture, and how later, when taken to extremes, they have come to facilitate the opposite of what it was hoped they would achieve.

DISCOURSE AND INTERVENTION

When I was an undergraduate student attending York University in Toronto during the 1990s, I found myself constantly challenged to identify places and moments of "intervention" as a means of praxis. Praxis was easy to understand: putting thinking into action, so one's thinking will have an impact on the world. By reading Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) and Foucault's *The Archeology of Knowledge* (2004), I came to understand that "intervention" along with words such as "interruption" and "disruption" were used as shorthand for "challenges to the dominant way of thinking." I came to understand the dominant way of thinking to be a social construct called "discourse." Hence, if one wants to change what society believes, one would need to intervene in the discourse, interrupt it, and disrupt the flow of ideas in order to insert other, more desirable thoughts and ideas.

Lyotard and Foucault[1] gave me an operative map and set of directions to understand how to locate a discourse and how to intervene in it. Foucault conceptualized discourse as a social formation that disperses thoughts and ideas—in his words, a "discursive formation." We can think of a discursive formation as all the institutions, objects, communicative acts, ideas, and choices people make about a specific concept or phenomenon at the center of all these goings-on. Education can serve as a handy model to illustrate what a discursive formation might conceptually look like.

Many educational institutions contribute to what we think of as good and bad education. People and objects circulate within and among these institutions. Objects include everything from books and crayons to school buildings and bus systems. People perform communicative acts that inform how institutions are built, how they work, what they work on, and why they do what they do. Beyond that, communicative acts more generally inform what the populace believes a good education is, what ideas should be taught or not, how institutions should be structured and governed, and how choices should be made. Among these choices are the allocation of resources, and the hierarchy of good vs. bad education. In a capitalist society, it is no surprise that private, expensive education is valued more than cheaper public education, and is thus granted more status. This status helps them receive more attention and funding, contributing more to their performance and prestige, and thereby maintaining the hierarchy. The things people say and do thus create, perpetuate, and justify the dominating order, as do the products within and resulting from the discourse. The system thus cybernetically creates and justifies its own reality.

Much of Foucault's work focused on the way individuals are taught and conditioned to police themselves and defend the selfsame discourses that op-

press them. For example, Foucault explained that the discourse of sexuality in Western thought has been used to categorize and hierarchize people based on ideas of what is "normal" and what is "deviant." This has greatly benefitted those who are treated as normal per the dominant discourse, while those characterized as deviant have been punished and ostracized. One of the most visible interventions in this discourse in recent history has been the legalization of same-sex marriage. This kind of successful intervention demonstrates the potential empowerment that can come of challenging the dominant discourse.

Lyotard charged that modernism used knowledge and a constructed definition of "reality" to legitimize the dominating order of power. This is problematic though since "truth" and "reality" are always contextually defined. In other words, the truth of a situation or phenomenon depends on the position one experiences it from. He called the process of legitimizing certain versions (and invalidating other versions) of knowledge and reality a modern language game (aka discourse). Within discourse, the dominating narrative (or story) about how the world should be is constantly reproduced and repaired through people's communication with one another. So the way Foucault explained it, discourse has the power to cause people to believe certain things, and thereby act out and construct the world according to those beliefs. On the other hand, what Lyotard called "postmodern discourse" delegitimizes the ruling power structure by challenging the story told about it.

Lyotard pointed out that there are many different languages, and thus we construct discourse "locally," within the communities speaking common languages. The language of science is like this: a discourse among scientists, just as medicine is a discourse among physicians. This means that contrary to the modernist notion of objectivity, science is not at all neutral or value-free. Instead, it is laden with the rationality, logic, and worldview from which it comes. To make sense to the participants, a common result of the discourse must be assumed by all before anyone even enters into it. Thus, the discourse they construct is always premised with the agreed upon goal.

In our digital world, science is considered a subcategory of knowledge. Scientific knowledge must have verifiable proof, requires a particular skill set to participate in, and comes in the form of true or false answers. It sits apart from the popular "narrative" discourse of society, compared to which it may seem difficult and dull. Narrative discourse is the common language of society, within which we communicate qualitative explanations and the norms and mores of society. Social bonds are formed in narrative discourse. This is the discourse that constructs and maintains legitimacy, as it is the narrative that dominates all others. So, where the goal of scientific discourse is truth, the goal of narrative discourse is to bind and maintain society; in other words, to dominate. Lyotard used the term "meta-narrative" to describe the "big pic-

ture" story constructed and maintained in narrative. Both of these discourses trade in the currency of that master category, "knowledge."

Lyotard used three indicators to support his argument that we have moved onward from modernity, which fall into the categories of legitimation, language, and narratives. First, the grand narratives formerly accepted as the truth about the universe have lost their credibility, and in so doing also lost their legitimacy. The language that was pragmatically used to demonstrate legitimacy has been subjected to challenges and changes. Finally, the narratives themselves have become scrutinized and challenged. The main takeaway from this is the understanding that we are continually jousting in a "language game," trying to assert a version of a narrative that makes our world sensible and orderly. This means that the notion of a grand narrative that explains everything has given way to a cacophony of smaller competing narratives.

In the 1970s this postmodern explanation of society and power was new and controversial. To many people, it seemed like an absurd proposition to say there was no knowable absolute truth. As we have moved forward, however, postmodernism no longer seems to be an attack on modernist beliefs. Instead, it seems a plausible explanation of what modernity has become, when modernist methods are applied to its own philosophy and theory. At the very least, for my purposes here, it provides a useful explanation for how we find ourselves in a post-truth era. Whether or not postmodernist theory is an adequate explanation for the entirety of Western civilization's epistemic shift, it is a reasonable explanation of what has happened in the digital world and social media.

THE SUCCESS OF INTERVENTION: SIMULACRAL TOTALITY

Lyotard's explanation of the language games we play coupled with Foucault's description of discourse gives us a good picture of the mechanics of how social media communities communicate. I already previously referred to another postmodernist, Baudrillard (2002a), whose theory of simulacra I invoke here to describe our digital landscape as "the desert of the real." The ever-shifting topography of constantly repurposed signifiers creates a textual terrain that can never be understood as truth, since the only truth is that the concept of truth itself is useless for navigating simulacra. When content goes viral and evolves into a meme, we are witnessing the eruption of a new digital organism from the electronic simulacral sand blowing about in our virtual world.

Baudrillard's work came decades before the saturation of Western civilization with digital media. Despite this, his explanation of the world we navigate seems hauntingly resonant with our contemporary experiences. Nashef describes:

the pervasiveness of media, in the form of mobile phones, tablets with their applications and social networking sites, singularly or in unison create and sustain the existence of the hyperreal. They succeed at once through an imagined call for urgency and an implosion of meaning that cannot be contained. This type of media is a priori a form of simulation, and has not only erased the boundaries between the real and the unreal, but has also developed as a site accountable for continual deference of the being-in-the-world, forcing on the latter a perpetual existence in the hyperreal. (Nashef 2016, 1)

To put this statement into context, Baudrillard noted that where in the modern era society was organized around centers of production, postmodern society is organized around simulations.

The modernist method of reproduction through copying original objects has given way to postmodern production of simulations based on imagined objects and situations. For example, the paper maps we once used were copies of our physical environment. To drive was to compare what we saw out the window with a small copy that someone else had already made by looking at the same environment. The paper map seems to have vanished in our current time, replaced by a simulation on small screens whose virtual lines and directions we reproduce with our physical act of driving on the road. The observation of landmarks around us has been displaced by an electronic simulation that, in Baudrillard's description, "precedes" the real physical territory (2002a). Even in the physical act of walking, it is not uncommon to see people's smartphones held before them, texting their awaiting party, the announcement of their arrival literally preceding even the steps they take.

In our entirely virtual environment (aka simulacrum), there is no reality, but rather only what Baudrillard called "hyper-reality" (2002a). Hyper-reality is the product of copying simulations ad infinitum, such that there remains no memory of the original thing. As already explained in chapter 4, the rapid transformation, repurposing, and transmission of digital content is entirely normal in social media, happening at such a fast rate that it can be hard if not impossible to keep up with all the mutations of a meme in real time. In this simulacral context, as Baudrillard argued, authenticity is irrelevant.

Baudrillard explained what he called the "divine irreference of images" whereby we might continue to find things meaningful (perhaps fleetingly, but meaningful nonetheless) in a hyper-real existence. He claimed that power resides in the symbol of its referent, and thus the destruction of the symbol equals the destruction of the power. As an example, we can think of the fury some people experience when they see their national flag burned. The flag is a symbol that refers to the nation's power. Many citizens have sworn an oath of allegiance to defend the flag, and thus experience the destruction of that symbol as a direct attack on themselves. Baudrillard applied this analysis to

the destruction brought by terrorists to the USA through the 9/11 attacks in 2001 (see Baudrillard 2002b). Their targets were highly symbolic, which is an essential element of terror; people would likely not care much nor feel terribly threatened if, for example, a relatively unknown target such as a military research lab had been hit.

The authentic or real existence of most Americans—who are far removed from any real danger of terrorist threat—is irrelevant. The symbols are detached from what they originally referred to and reattached to a different reference. Thus, when a specific place in the nation comes under attack, we are all under attack. The World Trade Center is no longer the symbol of commerce and international trade it once was. Instead, it has been reassigned to refer to an act of extremist terrorism within America. Moreover, the targeting of the Pentagon showed that even symbols of the mighty US military's power are vulnerable to attack.

The final step in the "irrefference of images" is especially relevant to what happens in memetic communication. A symbol must refer to something to have significance, even if what it refers to at the moment it is deployed is not what was originally signified. The space vacated by the referent must be filled somehow. Baudrillard explained that nostalgia is what fills the space formerly occupied by authenticity. Myths are created and tales are told about the symbol, which support the way it is being used in the present. For example, for many Americans, the US Constitution has become a symbol of the romanticized "great" America from years gone by, and relatively few understand the harsh conditions citizens faced even one hundred years ago. Nostalgic fantasy fills the space left open by the absence of what America was really like for most people during America's rise: rugged, brutish, dangerous, and structured around a notion of manifest destiny, outright slavery, or unchecked industrialist, exploitation of labor. This fantasy facilitates deployment of "the Constitution" as a symbol of an imagined utopic America that was used effectively by Donald Trump as a substitute for rhetorical logos (logical argument). But of course, nostalgia by definition cannot be anything but pathos (emotional appeal). Freed of having to scrutinize rationality, our logic-making energy seems to be directed toward verifying whether the story being consumed seems consistent internally, rather than whether it rings true objectively.

THE NARRATIVE PARADIGM AND THE END OF TRUTH

Fisher's "narrative paradigm" (1985) explains that audiences judge credibility based on a story's coherence (how well it is constructed) and fidelity (how believable it sounds). According to Fisher, ordinarily, people who are

not schooled in persuasion and oration use narrative logic to make judgments, not rational logic. This supposedly facilitates greater participation of the masses in politics and therefore contributes to a more democratic society. So as long as a narrative is consistent with itself, it feels believable and true to the audience. In contrast with the ideal image of the citizenry as rational people making logical choices about the future of the nation, it seems instead such moments are rare:

> once or twice in a lifetime, a national or personal crisis does induce political thought. However, most of the time, the voters adopt issue positions, adjust their candidate perceptions, and invent facts to rationalize decisions they have already made. (Achen and Bartels 2006)

In addition to supporting Fisher's theory, the phenomenon described by Achen and Bartels is consistent with Festinger's (1957) "cognitive dissonance" theory.

Festinger explained that individuals will try to minimize the discomfort of challenges to their beliefs and worldview. They do this by avoiding any challenging information altogether or, if that is not possible, ignoring and dismissing it out of hand. On the rare occasion where one cannot avoid being challenged, people might be motivated to change their ideas to minimize the dissonance. For example, if one wished to avoid having to reconcile their polluting behavior with global warming, they could choose not to consume information that contradicts their belief that it is not a problem. When confronted with a cognitive challenge about global warming in a conversation with a friend, they might choose to dismissively change the subject or humor the other party. When pushed to acknowledge the well-documented facts about the issue, they might still try to dismiss it with conflicting stories and rumors they have heard about it (not with facts they have read about). Eventually, if they stay engaged, they might realize there is overwhelming credible evidence that their belief is misinformed. They might then feel the need to make some changes in their mindset and actions to minimize the dissonance within their own cognition.

I chose the example of global warming to explain cognitive dissonance because it was a key component of Donald Trump's post-truth narrative. Whether he believes the thousands of scientists around the world studying the problem are all wrong or not, his public communications about global warming plug into a narrative that people in his support base are very comfortable hearing. His statements that climate change is a conspiracy or myth appease the cognitive dissonance audience members are confronted with in other aspects of their lives. More generally, however, Trump's statements on the issue fit coherently and have fidelity with a broader narrative he came to represent in popular and political culture.

THE POST-TRUTH NARRATIVE (OF TRUMP)

It is tempting to credit Trump with the ownership of post-truth politics. That, however, is like crediting the conductor of an orchestra with ownership of music. The extent of the conductor's role is to guide the orchestra to a stunning crescendo. Trump is a skilled conductor, a master of media orchestration, but no one person can own a discourse. Nor is post-truth politics only an American phenomenon (Haner 2016). By its very nature, discourse requires the participation of many people in many different locales. It involves institutions and communities. The myths that circulate to constitute the narratives in various parts of the electorate required to become president require time, space, and consistency to rise to dominance. The media meme we know as Donald Trump is a product of the cybernetic media apparatus that the embodied person called Donald Trump is situated within.

Trump's mastery over the media apparatus seems to be almost reducible to his mastery over sarcasm and cynicism. He continues to demonstrate his cleverness to his devotees by repurposing narrative elements into the format they judge to be correct. For example, his "crooked Hillary" label, and his "election is rigged" commentary continued to circulate long after the concession by his rival. The recasting of Clinton and his amplification of paranoia over a rigged electoral system were both coherent with the broader narrative that the US political system is corrupt and unfair, and seemed to ring true with the worldview the Trump campaign exploited. He made it easy for his audience to judge his clever manipulation of signifiers as demonstrations that he is smart and in control.

The mastery over media audiences is to never truly challenge them. Media seduce the audience into believing they have an expert's understanding of the world, which encourages their acceptance of what they believe they have discovered through their media use as the truth (Sontag 2001, 97). In accepting the media representation of the world, audience members are also accepting an assumption that all things are universally equal, and thus none are more right or wrong than any other. Virilio similarly stated that on the production side, global economics demands "absolute conformity of all goods without any cultural exception" (Virilio 2002, 63). He theorized that the political system has become a contest between politics and media, creating the "virtual democracy" conditioned to respond to the "optically correct" rather than the "politically correct" (Virilio 2002, 31). The judgment of what is "optically correct" for American media audiences, and thus for the content creators, is what supports their preexisting narrative paradigm.

In the wake of Trump's election, the American news media took a sudden reflexive turn. Numerous right-wing media outlets speculated about the

regretful roles they played in the creation of Trump the candidate. Their fascination with themselves did little to change their behavior though, as there has not been a discernable shift in how the US commercial media apparatus operates. Instead, it is very much business as usual, and as time has gone on, their role in creating Trump the president has been long forgotten.

There is a bifurcated view of the function of media in American culture. On the one hand, media is described as a pillar of democracy, with a responsibility to investigate public figures and hold them accountable to the electorate. On the other hand, the role of media content within the media industry has little to do with democratic ideals and everything to do with cultivating audiences for sale to advertisers. The narrative of reflexivity fits nicely with a preexisting popular "blame the media" narrative paradigm: As explained in chapter 6, there never seems to be a lack of media-related moral panic. Audience members across the spectrum may find fidelity and coherency in this contribution to the narrative: From the left or the right, media has failed by not "doing its job," or has a corrupt "left-wing bias," and is, either way, responsible for destroying democracy. Media's reflexive mea culpa may have been useful to the audience for a short while, but ultimately the media companies must achieve their financial targets or die. The tuning out of audience members from this thread of the 2016 election story signaled the moment that the "self-reflection" narrative ended.

A Stanford study found that the students they surveyed (digital natives) have a hard time distinguishing between fake and real news (Stanford History Education Group 2016). In comparison with traditional expectations of media consumption, this sounds horrifying. When contextualized by Baudrillard's concept of the "hyper-real" though, the question might arise as to why they would distinguish between real and fake in the first place. As mentioned previously, there is no conventional reality in simulacra. Thus, *Washington Post* writer Margaret Sullivan can make a statement that would have seemed absurd just one year earlier: "It's time to cross another bridge—into a world without facts" (Sullivan 2016). Her statement came as a reflection on a statement made by Trump spokesperson Scottie Nell Hughes, that "there's no such thing, unfortunately, anymore, of facts" (in Sullivan 2016). We might be tempted toward a kneejerk reaction to such a flouting of the laws of sound rationality, but it bears keeping in mind that this is only an update on the belief. As far back as the Bush administration, an unnamed conservative informant explained:

> The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something

about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore." (Reported by Suskind 2004)

Such statements are no longer preposterous or absurd but instead are now understood to reveal the horrible extent to which Western civilization has evolved beyond the need for such concepts as truth, reality, and fact. These concepts describe a bygone era: the modern era. What matters now is the ability to participate in a narrative paradigm, facilitated by media. Which narrative paradigm? Whichever one you find yourself in. So long as you find yourself consuming and reposting a steady stream of memetic communications that affirm your worldview, you can be assured you are in the right hive.

NOTES

1. Of course, there were others as well, such as Fairclough (2004), and the relevant authors of cybernetics in chapter 2, but these two authors in particular resonated with my thinking at that time.

Chapter Eight

All in the Hive

The seventh consequence of memetic communication I have identified concerns the nature of borders and territories in virtual communities. Social media communities differentiate from one another by focusing internally on what members discursively agree upon. The more intensely they look inward to construct their identifying criteria, the more solipsistic they become. Such communities may stop communicating with the world outside themselves about important issues altogether, and become dismissive of information that does not support the myth they have created about themselves. The effect is siloing, the construction of the community upward, building on top of the foundational arguments without expanding outward or connecting with others. The thought process has been described as the "hive mind," in which community members behave more like bees in the service and maintenance of the hive rather than working to join other groups with similar goals and find greater power through expansion. Hives are virtual territorial spaces that seem to be worlds unto themselves. The silo serves as an echochamber, in which the ideas from within the community bounce around, are reproduced and heard over and over. As Del Vicario describes, "information related to distinct narratives—conspiracy theories and scientific news—generates homogeneous and polarized communities (i.e., echo chambers) having similar information consumption patterns" (Del Vicario 2016, 554). Ideas do not spread beyond the silo, and the hive does not benefit from new ideas and perspectives from outside itself. Communities both online and offline cannot help but become self-absorbed in this self-referential situation, succumbing to a mentality of groupthink. In this condition, the community is not open to challenges or influences that might under normal circumstances improve the strength of their community and lead to new intellectual breakthroughs.

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Since the beverage Pepsi-Cola came to market in 1898, consumers have been asked to pledge allegiance to the soft drink, or its slightly older competitor, Coca-Cola. What is known as "the Cola Wars" intensified notably in the 1960s and 70s, as the two global brands sought to differentiate and carve away market share from each other.

When the Apple home computer went on the consumer market in the 1980s, the brand war it would fight against IBM hardware and Microsoft (MS) software (which combined to make the personal computer, or PC) had a well-established precedent in the Cola Wars. The "Apple vs. Windows" brand war continues in the present. A new front in the tech brand war was also opened up against Apple by Google with their Android operating system. And so it is that in this world of unprecedented technological change and wonder in which more people are communicating with one another around the globe than ever before, we can divide most audience members into Apple people, PC people, or Android people. This sorting of people into tech tribes is no accident. It is a carefully cultivated phenomenon that brands can latch onto called "neo-tribalism."

Maffesoli conceptualized "neo-tribalism" as resulting from "a spirit of excess, of shared passions and rituals" (Bradford, 227, in Todd 2012). This stands in contrast with the modernist value of individualism. Maffesoli explains

> individualism, instrumental reason, the omnipotence of technique, and the "everything is economics" no longer arouse the adherence of former times, and no longer function as the founding myths or as goals to be attained. (Todd 2012)

What does arouse "adherence" and function as myths and goals is people's excitement when sharing in an orgiastic experience of consumption. McLuhan predicted such a phenomenon in his description of "retribalization" in the "global village" we have created through electronic communication. As he described:

> These new media have made our world into a single unit. The world is now like a continually sounding tribal drum, where everybody gets the message all the time. A princess gets married in England and—boom boom boom!—we all hear about it; an earthquake in North Africa; a Hollywood star gets drunk—away go the drums again. (McLuhan 1960)

Sometimes the global village comes to the rescue of individuals and communities. For example, a Reddit community member was saved from a medical issue—testicular cancer—he did not even know he had. He thought he was posting a funny, inconsequential story about how his urine tested positive in a home pregnancy test that he had taken as a joke.[1] However, other users recog-

nized that as a symptom of cancer and suggested he see a doctor immediately. The result was early diagnosis and treatment, likely the happiest ending one might hope for in such a situation.

While McLuhan seems to have been spot on in many regards, merely adding a plural "s" to "global village" would have given his words even more resonance with the world we live in today. Dialectically, we cannot have tribalism without various tribes to differentiate among. As described in chapters 3 and 5, people construct social identities for one another in an effort to belong and participate in the world. The tech brand wars, for example, are only possible because of the differentiation between identities based on branded products. Although he could not have seen it very clearly from his intensely technological-determinist vantage point in the 1960s, McLuhan seemed to have premonitions about the divisions that might arise from neo-tribal formations, predicting "discontinuity and diversity and division" inevitably resulting in "maximum disagreement and creative dialog" (McLuhan 2013). He listed tribalistic harmony, love, discord, and conflict as the most likely characteristics of such a society, rather than tranquil uniformity.

Conflict, discord, love, and harmony (and much more) are all part of the emotional rollercoaster of memetic communication. However, rather than uniting people across differences, it seems instead to rally divisions such that communities become isolated and distant, even suspicious of each other. There seems to be little motivation for it to be otherwise. McLuhan's technological determinism may have led him to overlook motivation and agency in crafting the social aspects of electronic worlds. Instead, he worked with the assumption that whatever the technology might decree shall come to pass.

As a social media platform, Facebook has little to no business competition in the non-Chinese market. It seems on the surface to be a shining example of the metaphor of the global village, in which disagreements and arguments are inevitable but trivial facets of the same community. On the other hand, the platform and its various applications facilitate many subcultural identities. These virtual communities exist side by side within social media platforms, but to say they coexist implies a dialectical relationship that doesn't seem to bear scrutiny. Instead, the stronger people are connected to one another, the less likely they are to learn anything new from each other.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, and Adamic's research shows that weak social network ties produce more new information for users to consume. Stronger social media connections result in more individual influence, but less new information gets shared. The weaker social ties are the main disseminators of new and unique information (Bakshy et al. 2012).

One might think stronger relationships would result in more trust and risk taking among community members. Where this might be the norm in

traditional social groups, virtual communities seem to have an aspect of performance built into them that encourages pleasing and entertaining (and never potentially offending) one's social media audience ahead of pushing out new and factual information. Offending "other" people outside one's own audience, though, is an effective way of uniting within. The effects of this on entertainment seem to produce smudged lines between subcultural community formations similar to what we see in traditional genre-based groups. With political content and issues of power, however, the boundaries between communities are much more pronounced. In studying the use of Twitter for political communication, Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, and Bonneau found that "information was exchanged primarily among individuals with similar ideological preferences in the case of political issues (e.g., 2012 presidential election, 2013 government shutdown) but not many other current events (e.g., 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, 2014 Super Bowl)" (Barberá et al. 2015, 1531). Their research showed even conversations about national tragedies would quickly become polarized.

This result seems consistent with the findings of Alexandru's (2016) study of House Republican and House Democrat tweets during the 2013 government shutdown. Alexandru found discourse about the shutdown on Twitter created separate political communities that discussed what they thought was wrong with the other, without actually engaging with one another. Conover et al. (2011) found that retweeting (i.e., forwarded messages) rather than originally composed messages intensified the divides, resulting in segregation based on partisan loyalty. They found very little connection between users on the political right and left. On the other side of the coin, "user-to-user" networks in which individuals posted their own unique thoughts and information resulted in significantly more interaction between people with opposing political ideologies. I suggest this may indicate the rhetorical impact of a strong spokesperson with whom it is not possible to argue (described in chapter 4), and whose tribe is predisposed to rally behind against the moral panics they feel endangered by rather than allow challenges to the information.

The impact of a strong leadership figure is also important for maintaining community cohesion. A beloved or feared leader compensates for damage the community might sustain from the introduction of new and contrary information. In a classic study, Abramowitz (1978) found people are much more likely to change their position on an issue to align with their preferred candidate's stand than change their candidate to align with their original stand on the issue. The legends of larger-than-life figures Steve Jobs (Apple) and Bill Gates (Microsoft) likewise contributed to convincing people to stay loyal to their brands during times when their respective companies were confronted by realities too harsh for their enthusiastic members to readily accept.

The snapshot of our global villages emerging from the above seems more aligned with Hobbes' (1998) description of what life is like in its natural state. To modify his famous quote for the digital world, life in social media seems solitary, nasty, brutish, and xenophobic. Communities seem to judge new information with "the wisdom of repugnance" described in chapter 5: If you do not like something and find it repulsive, then it must not be right (Groopman 2003, 226). For those steeped in a tradition of evidence-based decision making, this approach to evaluation comes across as horrifying. However, it is completely consistent with the post-truth world described in the previous chapter.

A further issue encouraging distance between virtual communities seems to be a practical limit on people's ability to maintain a number of relationships. Dunbar (2010) explains that 150 seems to be the limit for most people regarding the number of meaningful relationships one can maintain, and any beyond that number are likely just voyeuristically consuming your online content. So the practical issue of how many social connections a person can really maintain may motivate groups to look inward, rather than seek more connections outside one another. Without interaction, as Dunbar explained, there is only voyeurism. Thus, the relationships of various groups online might simply be voyeurism. With such distance between them, insular social network communities can almost completely disconnect from one another, such that prevalent issues in one might not even be mentioned in another (Manjoo 2016a). People's own stories to one another within the community become the cause, effect, and explanation of all that happens.

There is cybernetic terminology to describe such communities. Insular communities as described here are in a state of "operational closure." Krippendorf describes:

> when A causes B, B causes C and C causes A, then A, B and C are said to be involved in a circular causality. A circle has no beginning and no end. Seeking to explain A, for example, requires one to go first to C then to B and back to A which was to be explained. Thus each participant in a circle ultimately explains itself via others and the whole resists manipulation from the outside. Similarly, when the communication paths through an organization lead to behaviors in an environment whose consequences are seen or fed back into the very communication paths that led to them, the circle is closed, open only to perturbations from its environment. Thus, social organizations explain themselves or constitute themselves the circularity of their own communication paths. Decisions made inside mark an organization's autonomy. (Krippendorf 1988, 26)

The Apple computer ecosystem is an example of operational closure. Since its inception, Apple has used only its own software on its own hardware, unlike other hardware companies that licensed the Windows operating system.

Apple has maintained this kind of operational closure throughout its history as a company, inventing its own operating system for the iPhone, iOS, that integrates the device with their OSX computer software. Both systems sync with their iCloud account management and cloud storage system. The closure of the Apple digital ecosystem is so complete that users must acquire all of their software and hardware from the company or its verified licensed affiliates. In other words, there is no "outside" of Apple. Once you are "in," it becomes the facilitator and limit of its own entire digital world.

There may be some bandwagon effect (see Leibenstein 1950) with individual users absentmindedly adopting the attitude that "other people are doing it, so I'll do it too." This element alone does not take into account the rationalizations users go through and the work put into mythologizing the tribe and its history. In this regard, Janis' (1988) concept of "groupthink" seems to be a stronger explanation of the pressures individual decision makers may be put under. Janis explained groupthink as a social phenomenon in which "concurrence-seeking becomes so dominant in a cohesive ingroup that it tends to override realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action" (333). Groupthink may account for the interactive policing of the discourse that produces operational closure. Altogether, the result is a "singularized" (i.e., seemingly unified into one entity) alliance of users organized around and together with digital artifacts. This actor-network theory label, alliance, is useful in conceptualizing how dynamic and yet distinct online groups can stand tightly next to one another on a social media platform, while still maintaining a condition of insularity. Law (1992) explained "singularity" is the appearance of an area in which there is network consolidation. This makes it seem as if that area of the network is a single entity distinct from the rest of the network surrounding it. Each singularized part of the network appears then to be working toward its own single goal, or on toward a singular motivation.

In sum, singularized virtual communities become a comfortable refuge for users, where they are safe to fraternize with one another by adding to and augmenting their discursive narrative rather than having to fight off constant challenges. Manjoo (2016b) describes:

> Twitter, during this campaign, really did become a second home for me. Sure, it was a home strewn with hot garbage, a haunted house that often pushed me to question my sanity. And one that did little to edify our democracy, that turned every campaign story into a moment for a sound bite or a joke, that promoted the soul-destroying notion that campaign news is best experienced as a kind of spectator sport of warring sides rather than something substantial that, you know, matters to the country and stuff. So it wasn't a great home. And it's likely best we all take a break from it for some time. And yet, I'm not unproud of it, to be honest with you. (Manjoo 2016b)

The notion of a comfortable home resonates with the embodied experience unpacked in chapter 3. Since excitation is such an essential element of individuals' virtual experiences, it stands to reason people would want to spend much of their time and effort in a virtual environment where the stakes are not always absolute. In other words, where emotions may rise to righteous indignation, but will not result in one's own self-destruction.

Baily's (2001) description of "digitally assisted subjectivity" also helps us understand the process of choosing what elements become part of the community narrative. Even with the flexibility to alter and augment identity in virtual spaces, people typically choose to reproduce the embodied significations they deploy in their physical world. For example, rather than transcend traditional body identities of race or gender, users instead emphasize them, even exaggerate them, to underscore their belonging in the community. So instead of creating something new on the blank canvas at their behest, virtual communities reconstruct and augment traditional hierarchies.

Bormann's (1985) symbolic convergence theory explains that groups find cohesion through dramatic negotiation. This happens when members create and adopt a mutually agreed upon self-understanding and self-description. Wordplay and metaphors, for example, form a symbolic reality for the group when group members apprehend, amplify, augment, and build upon them. The emergence of a symbolic identity then shapes the trajectory of the group, directing the group members' agency toward the tasks needed to achieve the agreed upon goals. In politically oriented social media groups, the goal first and foremost is to construct and maintain a useful narrative. Anything or anyone that doesn't contribute to that narrative will be treated as an attack on a group's symbolic convergence. Hence, there is much care taken to keep the group's discourse free from challenges and interlopers. In social media groups, individuals themselves take on authoritative roles, ensuring conformity and policing behavior/discourse (Gal, Shifman, and Kampf 2016, 1698).

Along with the reconstruction of traditional hierarchies, virtual community norms are structurated just as they are in traditional communities (Wiggins and Bowers 2015, 1886). Gidden's structuration theory (1986) describes how during initial phases of group formation, members bring their past experiences to bear in forming the structural and dynamic norms of the new group. The sum stock of ideas and behaviors held by the individuals is sorted through, and through a negotiation process, the group decides which ones to entrench to form the new group's culture.

In all these ways described above—digitally assisted subjectivity, symbolic convergence, and structuration—cultural norms and mores from the backgrounds of all individual members make their way into the new group. Hence it is that in 2016, we saw a sophisticated repackaging of a

racist meme resurface in the form of "Three Bad Skittles." The meme re-vises an anti-Semitic metaphor from the 1938 German children's book *The Poisonous Mushroom* which states, "Just as a single poisonous mushroom can kill a whole family, so a solitary Jew can destroy a whole village, a whole city, even an entire Volk [nation]." In its 2016 form, Skittles candy replaces the mushroom signifier, and Syrian refugees take the place of Jews. As Gettys (2016) points out, the choice of Skittles as a signifier invokes the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin, an African American teenager who was shot in the apartment grounds where he was staying when returning from the corner store with a bag of the candy for his younger brother. His killer was acquitted of the charge of murder by the invocation of Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law. Upon announcement of the verdict, the first #BlackLivesMatter tweet was sent out and quickly trended to the top rank-ings, which led to the meme and the campaign that turned into a nation-wide civil rights movement.

Among fascist "Alt-Right" (aka neo-Nazi) social media users, the "Three Bad Skittles" meme invokes a myth of a formerly white-dominated, seg-regated "great America" that reflects the racist white nationalism of Nazi Germany. It presents a contemporary event—the Syrian refugee crisis—as if it were a clear and present danger to the nation, and at the same time takes a swipe at the #BlackLivesMatter movement by lumping African Americans into the bag of undesirables. The media apparatus as a whole played its predictable part in disseminating the meme beyond social media and into popular culture, and the content was successfully used to bolster both fascist and anti-fascist groups throughout the nation, either in agreement or condem-nation of the message. While most people on both sides of the issue would likely understand the meme is xenophobic, racist, and offensive, neither side is directly challenged by the other to think differently about how they judge the appropriateness of the content.

CULTURAL CAPITAL IN MEDIA COMMUNITIES

When imagined from the outside, tribalistic, siloed media communities seem somehow complete and impenetrable. This belies the amount of work being done inside of them to keep the hive in order, both technically and socially. There is a constant drive to acquire what Bordieu (1986) called "cultural capital." Cultural capital is symbolic, acquired with the intention of display-ing rank and status within a cultural system. It is both the currency and am-munition deployed during actual struggles over class and conditions within the cultural system it is operating. It works to legitimize and reproduce the

Figure 8.1. Poisonous Mushroom. The "Three Bad Skittles" meme erupts in 2016, an evolution of an anti-Semitic metaphor from the 1938 German children's book *The Poisonous Mushroom*. Translation: "Just as a single poisonous mushroom can kill a whole family, so a solitary Jew can destroy a whole village, a whole city, even an entire Volk [nation]." *Source*: "Three Bad Skittles," creator unknown, reposted to Twitter by @DonaldJTrumpJr, found at https://twitter.com/DonaldJTrumpJr. "Three Bad Skittles," creator unknown, reposted to Twitter by @WalshFreedom, found at https://twitter.com/WalshFreedom. "The Poisonous Mushroom," created by Julius Streicher (1938), found at https://www.ushmm.org/propaganda/assets/images/500x/cover-poisonous-mushroom.jpg.

preexisting relations and conditions that form the platform upon which a hive/siloed community is built. As such, cultural capital is insinuated into every interaction within the simulacral community space.

Bordieu explained that culture uses its own economic logic. For example, charisma is an ideological construct that gets attributed to specific signifiers. Certain tastes in aesthetics are reified as if they are natural, while others are eschewed as artificial or fake. Upbringing and education shape what we take to be our cultural needs, and education instills cultural practices as naturalized behavior. There is a "hierarchy of arts" within culture that reflects the way we are educated to assign value to cultural artifacts. For example, in our contemporary world, the in-person "experience" of art is valued above studying art or encountering its image as a reproduction, although relatively few take the occasion to encounter "high art." What is valued most is the idea of a privileged experience, which might be rarely if ever sought out by average people. For example, although ballet tickets for any given night are likely easier to get and carry more prestige than NBA basketball tickets, the vast majority of Americans have no interest in acquiring that kind of cultural capital. Fine art is not seen as useful currency in the social arenas the average person circulates in, and is typically associated with a more privileged and educated outsider.

Communicating with the symbols of cultural capital circulates their coded significance, which maintains the social order. The alignment of the social order with popular cultural knowledge depends on an acquired fluency in the symbolic language. This fluency itself reflects higher status within the cultural hierarchy, as the acquisition of the culture's coded language is a de facto acquisition of cultural capital. Inversely, the inability to communicate well with the codes of cultural capital results in exclusion from the discourse, and alienation from the mainstream. Not dissimilar from Lyotard's (1984) and Foucault's (2004) explanations of the function of discourse, cultural capital is used to police what are taken to be legitimate and illegitimate ideas, artifacts, and activities. Taste (or what is considered lack thereof) becomes a tool to further order culture through categorization. Everyone within a culture must participate in the system of cultural capital, and the ability to classify is yet another indication of an individual's status. So here we get to the heart of the matter for digital hives: identity.

The circulation of cultural capital happens through objectification: seeing people as mere objects rather than fully developed humans with depth and personality. The dynamic is fueled by deploying simple, stereotyped labels of "others." Bourdieu explained that there is only objectification and no objectivity. We turn people into objects conceptually and do not see them for who they are with any neutrality. Consistent with cybernetics, no group or group

member can be positioned outside its own system of classification, so every aesthetic is interpreted as an object/artifact laden with meaning, and never as objectively value-free. According to Bourdieu, television generates cultural effects particular to its characteristics as a medium, which resonates in many ways with the technologically determined aspects of our current hybrid media environment. For example, traditional mass media must pamper the masses to be successful, and at all costs avoid offending the audience for fear of losing them. The limit of how far into discomforting or challenging content can go is thus set by the audience. The result is homogenized content from which challenging political overtones are virtually eliminated. As he put it, television is "perfectly adapted to the mental structures of its audience" (1998). This seems to be the same process in social media communities, albeit with much smaller communities than in the mass media days of old. With this as a normal condition in popular culture, it becomes easier to understand how ritualized communal experiences of digital fantasy have come to displace the values of truth and fact. This is not to say that the machinery must be operated this way, but rather that we choose to operate it accordingly to fulfill this outcome.

Much has been said since 2016 about "fake news" and the role of journalism in post-2016 election discussions and programming content. It may be that memories of the old model of journalism prevail in the media system's collective consciousness, as the industry struggles to prove its relevance, though one might speculate their real challenge is not in convincing the world of their credibility. Rather, the job is much more daunting: to convince the world to believe in truth and fact once again. Nonetheless, I suggest the traditional journalistic apparatus can be instructive regarding some of the internal workings of digital hives. If we substitute "social media user" or "audience" for "journalist" in Bourdieu's work, we end up with an accurate description of the way individuals operate within their digital hives.

In Bourdieu's time, journalism was perceived to have a monopoly on large-scale information. He described journalists as wishing to be seen as intellectuals, but of course, they are not. Their traditional role has been gatekeeping, controlling who rises to prominence as public figures. With social media, every individual user has taken on this role for him- or herself. In the past, journalists dominated public intellectualism. Now the audience is in control of it. The status and respect granted to such figures, though, has little to do with the intellectual merit of the person. Instead, judgment of a "good" public figure has been based on the ability of that spokesperson to reflect the audience's shared set of values and beliefs, and keeping their attention. It has been journalists, and now social media community members, not experts, determining what is of public interest, guided by the audience

community's shared values and beliefs. Bordieu observed that the television industry puts great effort into pandering to the tastes of its audience, so their products reflect the lives and opinions the audience already has. TV is more about voyeuristically consuming the exhibitionist activities of the characters than acquiring information. Likewise, with social media use. Community life in simulacra can be nothing but exhibitionism and voyeurism.

The ease with which content launched by Donald Trump could be adapted across platforms with absolute clarity, regardless whether a community is in agreement or disagreement, led to a cacophony of voices trotted out within each of those spaces to produce entertaining debate. Ultimately, although such content keeps audiences engaged, the status quo within each community prevails. This is because the discourse of television is focused on television itself, and similarly the discourses of social media communities are focused on themselves as well. The expression of a "view" about an issue is more important to audiences than the facts about what is actually occurring in society. So media "personality" (aka acting) always triumphs over boring journalistic or scholarly ability.

Where in the past journalists stood in judgment of scholars and politicians, we now have the audience adjudicating veracity. In this circumstance, alignment of conclusions with prejudices and already-held convictions is judged "good" intellect. Thus it is that a single discredited publication over twenty years old is still judged more credible by anti-vaxxers than volumes of scientifically vetted, evidence-based medical research.

To make it more palatable for media consumption, intellectual work is also personified. The audience's perception of the person presenting the work is more important than the findings, no matter how urgent and rigorously acquired the facts may be. Hence a dismissive, entertaining, off-the-cuff remark from polished climate change denier Donald Trump stating "global warming is a conspiratorial ruse by China" carries more credibility for his audience of devotees than the 97 percent of scientists worldwide who boringly insist it is one of the greatest problems facing the survival of humanity. In one utterance, Trump pushed the media agenda in general from how we should deal with global warming to a mock "debate" about whether it even exists.

In the twentieth century, agenda setting became the primary goal of communication with journalists. This was accomplished by emphasizing what audiences find interesting and useful to discuss, instead of what is necessary for a well-functioning society. In the past, this was achieved through conversations among "specialist" pundits and talking heads who could be relied upon to banter entertainingly about issues, using language the common people would understand and use. Focusing on "human interests" that reflected audience member's preexisting knowledge, beliefs, and stereotypes

would ensure the content was palatable for consumers. And because journalism depends on advertising revenue to survive, its dependency on mass audience consumption meant it could not tolerate or risk anything unpopular. For this reason, Bordieu had hope that removing the factor of competition could rescue journalism. He thought the industry could be restructured to create a news apparatus that would better serve the public, rather than pander to sensational tastes. Unfortunately, this is very much how online communities work, and the results are not what Bordieu envisioned at all.

Social media communities are not organized around a profit motive, even if their parent companies are. Instead, they are intensely organized around the principle of self-interest. Zappavigna describes this as ambient affiliation:

> typographic conventions such as the hashtag that increase the "loudness" of their discourse by increasing the likelihood that their words will be found. This, in turn, increases the probability that user's production of texts over time will be actively "followed" by others. In other words, it creates the possibility of ambient affiliation. Here we affiliate with a copresent, impermanent, community by bonding around evolving topics of interest. (Zappavigna 2011, 791)

This type of community building has clearly not led to a better quality of information consumption (i.e., more factual and rigorous), nor better service to the public interest (i.e., emphasizing what is needed instead of what is palatable). Instead, empowered consumers have cultivated communities that eschew difference and cherry pick data, if not invent it outright. Community success does not look like a humanitarian utopia. Instead, it looks more like a chaotic eruption of incompatible worldviews viciously slaughtering anything that seems different from themselves. As an enthusiastic Alt-Right supporter wrote on 4chan in celebration of what they considered their victory over non-white/male America, "We actually elected a meme as president" (Ohlheiser 2016). Instead of progressive revolution, a revolt within virtual communities looks a lot like the virtual mobs discussed in chapter 6, though with the difference that they are undertaken with the explicit goal of repressive control. This was the situation with the Reddit Revolt described in appendix A.

One of our grandfathers of critical theory, Herbert Marcuse, described technology as "a social process" that creates a dominating "technological rationality" (1982, 141). He theorized that technology relinquishes self-interest to control outside oneself, making it achievable only by "adjustment and compliance" (Marcuse 1982, 146) rather than one's rational judgment and autonomous effort. Technological rationality is instrumental, always working toward efficiency and making critical protest seem irrational. It dominates individuals' social worlds, erasing human autonomy by assimilating individuals into the apparatus.

Marcuse posited that technology strips individuals' dignity by transforming them into a generic crowd. This reduces the individual to a "standardized subject of brute self-preservation" (150). A person becomes a tiny, homogenous power, with self-interest being his or her only available means of expression. Individuals become just one of many expendable tools in a technological toolbox. Specialization in roles drives standardization among people (making people generically the same) and division between them (keeping people divided into specialist identities). Truth then consists of technological and critical categories. Technological truth is values that "hold good for the functioning of the apparatus" (Marcuse 1982, 146) (i.e., the rationale of efficiency). On the other hand, critical truth is autonomous, objective, and not friendly to the apparatus. Technological truth adapts critical truths and assimilates them for its uses, rendering them impotent. So "difference" and critical forces become part of the technological apparatus, yet retain the label of "opposition" as if they are performing a subversive role (Marcuse 1982, 149). The way virtual communities appropriate and repurpose content toward their own unique ends are examples of this.

Marcuse explains that in spite of the assimilationist drive, technological rationality affirms critical rationality in at least two ways. First, technology "implies a democratization of functions" (152). That is, there is a democratic, cooperative aspect to the way systems are operated. However, hierarchical private bureaucracies may grow out of them that enforce division. Democratization is undermined by such divisions.

The second critical rationality depends on the success of the system. A technical triumph over scarce resources would bring about the realization of people's true selves, free from "the hard struggle for life, business and power" (160). People could then live their lives on their own terms. Marcuse was hopeful society would achieve this realization of individual autonomy, although this would be possible only through technological evolution.

The functioning of social media communities illustrates the democratizing effect of the technology. Within the limits of the virtual sea of simulacra, people have precisely the individual autonomy Marcuse theorized. What they do with that autonomy, though, does not seem to produce the fearless euphoria of modernist fulfillment he might have hoped for. Instead, shot through with fear, paranoia, anger, and motivated by a postmodern epidemic of solipsism, fulfillment of critical rationality has revealed our "true selves" might not always be so great after all.

FROM HIVE MIND TO GLOBAL BRAIN:
WHAT WE WILL (HOPEFULLY) BECOME

From his vantage point at the beginning of the electronic age, McLuhan waxed utopic about the electronic tribal future:

> Tribal man is tightly sealed in an integral collective awareness that transcends conventional boundaries of time and space. As such, the new society will be one mythic integration, a resonating world akin to the old tribal echo chamber where magic will live again: a world of ESP. The current interest of youth in astrology, clairvoyance and the occult is no coincidence. Electric technology, you see, does not require words any more than a digital computer requires numbers. Electricity makes possible—and not in the distant future, either—an amplification of human consciousness on a world scale, without any verbalization at all. (McLuhan 2013)

Dismissing the optimism of a globally synced human consciousness may be tempting. We find ourselves contending with very different conditions on an everyday basis here in the future that McLuhan thought he was describing. However, there may be some elements of an "amplified human consciousness" lurking in the shadows of our virtual silos.

Contrary to much of the negativity and constant crises dominating many people's social media feeds, the human condition has probably never been as good as it is in the present moment. Heylighen (2002) finds himself in good company pointing out that despite pessimism and relativistic individualism, objective statistics show that humanity is doing rather well on a global scale. He explains that the role of describing an ideal world, "utopia," is to facilitate the creation of a shared worldview: to produce an encompassing philosophy providing clear goals and values, a positive vision of the future, to motivate people's agency toward a common project, thereby enriching their lives with meaning. Similar to the assumptions of Marcuse and McLuhan, Heylighen envisions achieving the realization of full human consciousness through technological development.

The "global brain" is the emerging intelligent network composed of people, computers, knowledge bases, and communication links, connected all together into a single system. Heylighen believes the global brain can be conceived as an evolutionary step, similar to how we humans evolved out of animalistic society by inventing more complex, higher levels of organization.

He believes the global brain will achieve a point of symbiosis such that it will become an organ of humanity plus the whole of Planet Earth. As described in chapter 4, electronic media have made it possible for ideas to disseminate, mutate, and evolve in a matter of days, and sometimes even hours. This phenomenon is a concrete example of the global brain in action. So in this regard, utopic sentiments aside, memetic communication is analogous to the processing of thoughts in our organic brains.

The World Wide Web allows us to access information on the internet. The system as a whole is held together by associative organization. In practical audience-friendly terms, we encounter the global brain through links and search results that connect to pages relevant to and associated with the previous one. So Heylighen considers the web a vast associative memory for our civilization. In keeping with Marcuse's technological rationality, Heylighen explains the system adapts to the way it is used, reorganizing links to reflect users' preferences. It becomes more efficient by assimilating the total knowledge and desires of its users. The web "thinks" through the work of agents located throughout it.

Heylighen provides examples of how navigation and coordinating transportation can be controlled by the global brain to help create utopia. Many of these functions are already in full use, such as global shipping logistics. Perhaps more in line with audience members' everyday experiences, Heylighen points out that sorting, recalling, and sifting through billions of information items that otherwise are unintelligible and inaccessible requires vast technological support. Used this way, the global brain works toward utopia by producing economic fluidity, less waste from unsold goods, transportation becomes more efficient, inequality is reduced, misunderstandings and conflicts are less likely, authoritarianism is reduced, and we see more collaboration among users. This all comes with the caveat that technology is merely the global brain's infrastructure, and it is up to people to come to agreement and act for the betterment of the planet. This is an important caveat since it puts responsibility for the human condition directly back onto human agency. As 2016 showed us, Heylighen's type of utopic wishing is far from a foregone conclusion. It may take several more evolutionary steps before the global brain can step out from the shadows and shine a light on a clear path to utopia.

Since Heylighen considers the ultimate test of utopia to be whether or not people are happy in this world, we can put to rest any thoughts that we are close to achieving such singularity of purpose in the near future. However, he is confident the global brain will work to build a utopia since it will bestow humanity with health, wealth, safety, knowledge, freedom, and equality. In keeping with the definition of "hives" I previously described, Heylighen defines the "hive mind" as a collective within which members think and act

the same way, lacking personal identity and autonomy. Evolving from such hives, silos of thought—which later become echo chambers—are a collective intelligence through technologically facilitated unification. This collective intelligence is the supposed means to overcoming the challenges our current divisions are inciting. The autonomy and diversity of the myriad people contributing to its intelligence distinguishes the global brain from the hive mind. So like Marcuse, McLuhan, and many other media theorists, Heylighen suggests we focus our effort on this socio-technical goal. Meanwhile, we face a somewhat daunting task in weeding out fiction from fact, since, as shown in the next chapter, irony provides an incredibly effective camouflage for bigotry and hate speech.

NOTES

1. https://www.reddit.com/r/fffffffuuuuuuuuuuuu/comments/12kihx/pregnant _man_rage/.

Chapter Nine

Ironic Camouflage

The eighth consequence of memetic communication explains how people of diametrically opposed values in the physical world come to coexist in virtual communities. The nature of social media combined with the postmodern sensibility of irony allows bigots, racists, fascists, etc. to hide out among consumers of "ironic" content, giving cover to their real beliefs and intentions.[1] In this era of "hipster racism"[2] and user-generated mass content, individuals' media ethics and the ethical decision-making abilities of fellow internet users are challenged by the enabling characteristics of the media apparatus at their disposal. There are at least two kinds of hiding out. This first kind is "lurkers," who are people hanging around with others who behave similarly but for different reasons. For example, imagine if we were to throw a stereotypical bearded lumberjack into a group of bearded hipsterish office workers dressed in flannel. The lumberjack could likely just sit at a desk talking on the phone, and it might look like he belonged alongside the others. His reason for being there and his motivations would be entirely different though. Sincerely acting out offensively under the guise of irony is the second type of hiding.

When scrolling through my Facebook newsfeed one morning, a posting from a good friend who happens to be a medical doctor jumped out at me with the headline, "I Didn't Vaccinate My Kids and the One Who Lived Turned out Fine" (Luberto 2017). Being early enough in the day for a cheap laugh, I took the bait and read through the piece which contained such statements as:

> Would you rather take advice from me, a real mother who raised five kids and still has one wonderful, beautiful teenage daughter? Or would you rather listen to the BIASED media, or worse, the corrupt doctors?

And:

> At best, doctors are snake oil salesmen trying to pump our kids full of vaccines they don't need. At worst, they are actively trying to kill our children.

More for my friend's entertainment than my own, I commented:

> Yes, almost everyone who dies in the developed world was vaccinated for something in childhood. What greater evidence do you sheeple need?

I imagined him getting a smile out of my little contribution and turned my attention to other matters.

Three hours later (according to the post times), someone from his friend list replied to me:

> Based on what data? 100 years ago every family lost someone and would have given right arm to have privilege of a vaccine.

I replied, explaining it was meant to be a joke and that the sarcasm was apparently lost—a banal misunderstanding between strangers. However, noteworthy because it is not without precedent.

INTENT AND INTERPRETATION

What I have described here is a miscommunication issue that occurs countless times every day. Theoretically, Stuart Hall's "discursive model" (1999) of communication explains how humorous messages such as this can easily backfire. When received by an audience member whose "structure of meaning" does not align with that of the person who created the message, he or she may decode and interpret the message with a much different understanding than what was intended. In the above instance, he or she brought an "oppositional" reading to the message. This is because he or she understood the literal meaning of the message and took it at face value. There are several reasons he or she might have missed the humorous intention of the posting, including esteem for the doctor who posted it, unfamiliarity with the anti-vaxxer phenomenon, the inability to identify "fake" and "real" articles online, and several other factors that I will explore below. Most important for this chapter, this example shows how easy it is for satirical content and "fake news" stories to circulate and construct an environment of suspicion and misperceptions. The empowerment of the prosumer to create and distribute content however they please, plus the decontextualized nature of how audiences consume such texts on social media, combine to create a terrain of hyper-real spectacles

(explained in more detail in chapter 13). In this milieu, it can be difficult to parse truth from lie, fact from fiction, and satire from serious commentary. This presents the American political public sphere with an interesting, if not sometimes dangerous, dilemma.

People have used satire to express dissatisfaction and point out absurdities throughout human history. Some of the earliest satire in Western literature appears in ancient philosophical and dramatic texts over 2,700 years ago. The literary form surfaces in the ancient Greek Aesop's Fables. Voltaire's eighteenth-century critique of Leibnitz's monadism, *Candide*, stands as a classic in the philosophical use of irony. And the USA has an especially deep and long-standing relationship with satire as a form of political engagement and criticism. Samuel Clemens' (aka Mark Twain) writing is among the more famous and popular of early American satiric political critiques, although Seba Smith (in the voice of Major Jack Downing) is recognized as America's first popular media satirist (Miller 1970).

Since those beginnings, various popular media programs and formats have been celebrated as methods of socio-political criticism available to the masses. For example, in a typical exploration of what has come to be known as "racial humor," Timmerman, Gussman, and King state:

> humor about race and racism can function not only to generate laughter through
> satiric rejection of long-held racist stereotypes in the American context but also
> to encourage new perspectives. (Timmerman et al. 2012, 169)

There is little doubt from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* onward, the use of satire in American culture has worked toward this goal. However, satire as a genre of memetic communication faces a challenge both in interpretation as described above, and in distribution, as described in chapter 8. That is, many satirical memes get created to be shared within digital hives, not as a means of persuading members of other digital tribes to subscribe to a new worldview. Instead, people may take such memes literally, resulting in communication of their exact opposite intended meaning. Another auto-ethnographic moment may help demonstrate this.

In the throes of the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011, an image macro contrasting the dramatic arrest of an Occupy Wall Street protester with the seeming banality of a Tea Party rally at which people were openly carrying loaded assault weapons popped up on my Facebook feed. Thinking I was voicing my politics in support of the Occupy Wall Street movement, I re-posted it. I also added commentary:

> A clear demonstration of how the armed tea party is institutionalized as part of
> the state's hegemonic apparatus (i.e., polices rather than is policed) while the

unarmed 99% are refused movement from the subaltern strata due to its oppo-
sitional reading (i.e., disagreement with) of the state's policies (i.e., are policed
rather than police).

Predictably, my online tribe of friends "liked" the post. It was just another
ordinary Facebook post with everything progressing as usual, until one (a-
typical) friend whom I knew to be a Tea Party supporter also "liked" the post.
He had liked my post and commentary because he agreed with the version
of reality it portrayed. Interpreting it literally, he did not find the post a chal-
lenge to his already-held perspective at all. The intended irony meant nothing
to him, as if he had not recognized its satirical intention at all.

   Socio-political irony and sarcasm may be useful content to unite neo-tribal
digital communities. However, memetic communications deflate the power
of these humorous devices to challenge the beliefs of the exact people and
issues they are meant to confront. There is no reason the audience consuming
such content could not include both the "ironic" and the "literal" interpretive
members. In such mixed audiences, irony functions as camouflage that hides
the literalists from critical view.

   As established in chapter 3, digital memetic texts are part of a postmodern,
simulacral world. This world comes with its own augmentations of ironic
forms. Shuster (2011) demonstrates semiotically that "bi-paradigmatic irony"
is a unique type of sign that operates in postmodern texts. The result of this
evolution of irony is no less than six different types of irony a message can
play upon. This leaves a huge opening for multiple interpretations of the same
text. Content genres are used by media programmers to construct audiences
that they can sell to advertisers. With all these tools of irony at their disposal,
we can end up with quite a mashup of individuals into one group, all lured
to assemble around a piece of content for various reasons. Their reasons and
interpretations do not have to align with one another at all. With multiple
significations emanating from one postmodern sign, consumption of the sign
may be the only commonality between audience experiences.

   Sienkiewicz and Marx (2009) explain that comedic devices such as hipster
racism and ironic racism "casually reproduce the external markings of racist
beliefs in the service of comedy with what is presumably an ironic tone" (5).
They go on to explain that people use such racist content "paradoxically,"
to "testify to the creator's ultimate lack of prejudice" (5). There is an abun-
dance of comedy programming such as Family Guy, American Dad, Robot
Chicken, South Park, and many others that use bi-paradigmatic irony to ap-
peal to a variety of audience members' tastes by employing ironic racism. In
this era of the fragmented audience and highly specific niche content, it seems
any method of attracting eyeballs is in play. The Comedy Central program
Tosh.0 is a particularly good example of the issue, since the program content

is mainly the rebroadcasting of internet memes, overdubbed with sarcastic and snarky commentary.

Many viewers see Tosh.0's sarcastic appropriation of internet memes and the irony with which they are presented as humorous. They understand the context (or exigence in rhetorical terminology). They thus find Daniel Tosh's subversion and play with the signifiers obvious and entertaining. Such people laugh with the program and the absurdity it portrays. On the other hand, many people may also consume it by laughing at the victims of the jokes, especially a segment he called "Is this racist?"

Tosh.0 operates in two time zones. It must, in order to construct the irony it presents. One is the contemporary postmodern era, in which many believe issues of race, gender, class, ableism etc. have become minimal, trivial, or even transcended and left behind. This allows them to consume the content as ironic representations of a time gone by. However, this ironic play of signifiers requires recognition of a brutal twentieth-century modernist history (the second time zone) backgrounding the present moment, which emboldens and empowers audience members that find humor in laughing at the foibles of "the other." This allows individuals with attitudes of bigotry, superiority, and prejudice to lurk and hide out among the "ironic" audience. So why don't the "ironic" interpreters of the content call out the "sincere" consumers? If the ironics are aware the sinceres exist at all, and can somehow tell who is laughing at rather than with, there are several reasons people might choose not to engage the bigoted element among the audience. At the top of the list is the felt need to belong.

IRONY AND DIGITAL COMMUNITIES

As I elaborated in the previous chapter, it is more important to audience members that they demonstrate belonging to their tribe than to fight a lonely battle against unknown silos of contrarians. Even when criticizing overtly offensive content, individuals mainly work to bond with like-minded friends through supportively congruent statements to one another, rather than confronting the offenders. Irony has several attributes that make it an especially useful tool for uniting people within digital communities. Sorea (2007) explains how people use irony for polite "off-record" communication and to preserve one's "face" in a conversation, or to inflict damage on an oppositional target. The use of irony rather than a direct verbal attack inflects enough ambiguity that there is uncertainty about any offensive or malicious intent. The speaker can easily pivot and claim he or she was or was not serious and quickly smooth things over if the result of the statement is not what he or she was hoping for.

People can also withdraw exaggerations with a claim that their statement was obviously meant to be ironic and hyperbole (aka a joke).

Irony is also a social adhesive that helps stabilize daily routines and maintain relations through playfulness, sarcasm, and keeping conversations lively. "Getting" someone's sarcasm shows intimate familiarity with his or her true thoughts about something, while deploying sarcasm among friends demonstrates trust and playfulness. Sorea shows that ironic statements help maintain in-group solidarity (24), arouse in-group amusement, and consolidate affiliation (25). Making an out-group the target of sarcasm strengthens internal cohesiveness against a hostile outside world. Altogether, sarcasm seems to model the cybernetic schematic I described in chapter 2 perfectly.

This is all fine and well if we consider everyone participating to be part of the same in-group. However, irony is a poor choice of frame (method of presenting information) for community building, because it allows—and in some cases forces—those not "in" on the joke to make literal interpretations. Frames can limit how we interpret information presented to us in media, similar to how a picture frame presents us with the demarcation of a picture. Frames organize social meanings through hierarchizing, emphasizing, and downplaying aspects of information in its presentation. Since whichever individual prosumer creating his or her messages decides what his or her community will view from him or her and how they view it, to some degree he or she influences how we can interpret information. He or she tells us what he or she wants us to think about, and how he or she wants us to think about it. In order to do its job, sarcasm must be framed as a serious statement. Particularly with new group members who have not yet acquired enough familiarity with the group culture and other group members, irony and sarcasm can easily be misunderstood as offensive and out of place. The digital media world is a challenging environment for ironic framing, since there are almost no additional cues outside of the message communicated to give additional context. The cues that are available tend to rely on building a history of experiences within the community and between group members.

The absence of robust framing material in virtual space is part of the nature of a simulacral zone. In addition to facilitating the rapid repurposing of content by prosumers, this also allows one virtual tribe to quickly steal from another and ironically repost content as evidence of their own group's enlightened authority on a topic. However, as described above, it can still be difficult to know who is and is not in on the joke. The Spiral of Silence phenomenon further complicates the anonymity of online life.

The Spiral of Silence theory explains that individuals are less likely to express their opinions if they are the minority (Noelle-Neumann 2009). This is because they fear rejection and isolation by the majority for their differ-

ence of opinion. It can be hard to guess if one is in the minority without the contextual cues of physical world communication. Thus, the default option is silence, rather than seeking further contextual clarifications. Such confusion may increase the likelihood that "serious" and literal interpreters of ironic messages are lurking among the in-group members.

As I have described, irony (and sarcastic irony as a subgenre) follows certain rules that strengthen in-group cohesion and galvanizes differences between groups in competition with one another. These rules are always in one way or another aggressive toward competition. The deployment of irony and sarcasm can "politely" minimize the accomplishment of an opponent (e.g., "They got lucky this time"), or take a jab at them when they fumble or trip up (e.g., "We all knew they couldn't handle it"). Inversely, it can be used to minimize a mistake made within the group (e.g., "Did you forgot to turn your brain on this morning"), and belittle the competition when a group perceives they've scored a point or "one-upped" them (e.g., "You gonna go cry now?").

Deployment of irony is aggressive, so when directed at a group member it is a form of ribbing. More commonly though, irony is deployed more as a chorus of mockery of an external out-group member or team. People also use it to express a failure of what was expected. In the case of "ironic racism," what is expected is that someone might know better than to be racist, but he or she was racist anyway, which means he or she was knowingly racist and hence it was intended as a joke. Or someone was expected to behave stereotypically, but did not. In either case, it is hard to imagine how these examples would be attempted as jokes without irony, which subtly demonstrates how irony does not make either of the uses funny unless the victim is considered part of the in-group. In other words, ironic racism depends on the inclusion of its victims in the group to contextualize its punch line: "An ironic comment about stereotype-violating behavior can activate the implicit stereotypic expectancy in addressees, and thereby communicate stereotypic expectancies" (Burgers, Beukeboom, Kelder, and Peeters 2015, 439).

Irony can also be used to control conversations, either by directing participants toward a new thread of discussion, or possibly shutting down unacceptable discussions. Dori-Hacohen and Livnat (2015) describe this as similar to the establishment and policing of norms in the political public sphere. Using irony as a tool allows the conversation to continue flowing, even while challenging the thoughts and positions of its participants.

With such a wide range of uses in so many possible situations, it can be challenging to neatly tuck the concept of irony into a definition of a rhetorical device. Instead, Pálinkás (2014) suggests we treat irony as "a mode of thought." Pálinkás goes on to state, "irony cannot be explained in one single definition but rather it should be treated as a matter of folk psychology"

(2014). This approach suggests we consider irony to be more or less a state of mind. We could even push this notion so far as to claim irony is a state of being in virtual space, aligning it with the assessment that postmodern texts are always playful and ironic. The source of irony would thus move from the intention of the content producer and onto the environment of consumption: The simulacrum is an ironic environment.

The nature of virtual texts is an important factor in understanding how memetic communication lends itself so easily to ironic intention and interpretation. To sum up what I have explained up to this point in this chapter, intended meaning is composed of overt and covert messaging in a normal face to face situation. However, audience interpretation is the fulcrum for meaning (i.e., Hall):

> the hearer will try to infer the speaker's main intended meaning, based on . . . the context/common ground, the logical/commonsensical connections between meanings, the co-text, the discourse framework, as well as the additional (prosodic/paralinguistic) cues. (Kapogianni 2016)

Apprehending the meaning intended by the speaker is the primary purpose of the listener, but he or she will also acquire subtler messages through inference. Inferred messages may be of more significance to the listener since he or she brings his or her own discursive goals to the conversation. In practice, this reflects the old trope that sometimes (perhaps even often?) people hear what they want to.

Understanding intended irony can be difficult given the nature of ironic communication I have described above. When combined with our virtual experiences, it can intensify the difficulty in discerning the intention or attitude of the speaker, given the absence of nonverbal and contextual cues. Yus explains:

> According to relevance theory, irony comprehension invariably entails the identification of some opinion or thought (echo) and the identification of the speaker's dissociative attitude . . . it is also essential for hearers to identify . . . the affective attitude that the speaker holds towards the source of this echo so that an optimally relevant interpretive outcome is achieved. (Yus 2016, 92)

The crucial component is the ability to detect incongruity between what is understood and what is intended. The attitude of the speaker is the vital factor for the listener to be able to interpret content in this way. Unless a speaker has a "dissociative attitude," deceptions, jokes, and lies will be difficult if not impossible to detect (Yus 2016).

Discrimination and oppressive power relations are communicated subtly as well as explicitly, but they are never accidental. The addition of a cue

such as "hehe" or "lol" may clarify the intended humor, but regardless of the intention, the use of irony recreates and reinforces an "affective–discursive order" (Malmqvist 2015). Context is crucial in determining the success of irony. Without adequate context, the audience will interpret the overt message unironically. In other words, they will make a literal interpretation of the message unless they have reason to believe they should interpret it ironically. Creating the right context is not easy either. It depends on several circumstantial factors, and on the expectations the audience has of the speaker. If he or she has been ironic before, he or she can be expected to be again. However, anyone receiving his or her message cold, without any prior contact or context, is very likely to interpret it at face value (Fein, Yeari, and Giora 2015). Sienkiewicz and Marx (2009) describe a networked world in which context is an assumed element of the text.

Contemporary networked, cross-platform media products reference and hyperlink to the context they are meant to be situated in. For example, ironic

Figure 9.1. Memetic Irony. These ironic memes created for sarcastic consumption must carry histories of oppression and pain into the present to function as satire. *Source*: "Irony Strikes the KKK," creator unknown, found at https://funnyjunk.com/ funny_pictures/1225962/Oh/. "Hipster Sexist," creator unknown, found at https:// www.bitchmedia.org/post/hipster-sexism-is-sexist-feminist-magazine-irony-culture-racism-sexism. "Irony, It's a Bitch," creator unknown, found at https://i1.wp.com/moti vateusnot.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/demotivational-poster-155.jpg?w=640. "Confederate Flag," public domain, found at https://imgflip.com/i/npojc.

racism in the cartoon South Park is intended to be critically engaged by the audience, given its supposedly obvious linkages to current events in news and culture. Sienkiewicz and Marx explain that South Park and other content like it fit the definition of "discursively integrated media," which positions it as a vector of entertainment intersecting with marketing, news, and politics (2009, 6). South Park's complex connections to other media texts situate it within numerous other discourses. It is up to the audience members to actively forge their own relations among and between these fragments of discourse to make up the whole, and ultimately choose to participate from the unique position they occupy. Optimistically, Sienkiewicz and Marx explain the result of this complex system of interrelated content demonstrates the systemic nature of discriminatory issues. Such a system depersonalizes oppressive behavior, as it is not possible to narrow down the problem to individual instigators in this scenario. They see this as a good thing, because it encourages a systemic approach to addressing these issues. However, it bears pointing out that the individual nature of online prosumerism makes it very much an issue of individual behavior. As I will explain in chapters 11 and 12, a critical mass of knowing individuals who choose to push an agenda through literal messages disguised as irony can, in fact, make quite a difference online and off.

There are several dangers to the uncritical acceptance of ironic texts as the status quo. Comedic exaggeration of discrimination and oppression make such matters seem acceptable and even fun (Sienkiewicz and Marx 2009). Plus, such content does nothing to actually combat systemic racism. Such messages only inherently serve as criticism for audience members that are already critically minded. They exclude real difference and preclude real change because they are only operating with already established discriminatory, hegemonic tropes and stereotypes. The result is that ironically oppressive texts appropriate the status quo of suffering and oppression for opportunistic gain. Most overtly, they are exclusive, asserting the very same power dynamic into whatever space they enter. They demarcate spaces as unwelcoming to any suggestion that the status quo is not a free and equal world for people of color, women, people with disabilities, and the myriad other differences comprising this civilization's hierarchy of desirability.

NOTES

1. Trumpism, in spite of being said to reveal the truth behind the polite veil, actually amplifies this phenomenon.
2. The attempt to use racism as irony and satire, accompanied by the claim that in a "post-racial" society, it should be obvious that the racism is intended to be humorous and not harmful. See Lim, 2012.

Chapter Ten

Immortal Misinformation

The ninth consequence of memetic communication is the immortalization of misinformation. With no way to fully delete false information from the internet once it has spread, there is no proportionally corrective countermeasure to false information. Rather, both correct and incorrect information can live alongside one another in the digital world. This inability to scrub false records has had terrible effects on individual lives, and further encourages distrust of any information that does not mesh with our worldviews.

How many of the 9/11 hijackers entered the USA through Canada? How many of Hillary Clinton's emails incriminated her in illegal activity? Where can we find hacked celebrity photos online? Can I still view the first web page ever made? Is global warming even real? If/when/after Obamacare is repealed, will my Affordable Care Act benefits improve? When can I expect my money from that Nigerian Prince I have been helping? Do all online discussions eventually invoke fascism and Hitler?

Answers to these and seemingly any questions are all easily found in quick web searches. The quality of answers may vary substantially though. And that is not even considering the suspect nature of such leading questions in the first place. This brings us back around to one of Mike Goodwin's insights from way back in the early 1990s: Dilution of credible and important information online has the potential to cause catastrophic effects. Another important element of this problem has also arisen over time. The effects of informational dilution are amplified in memetic communication due to the seeming permanence of digital information, making it difficult and maybe impossible to delete incorrect information.

The permanence of digital information sets it apart from previous electronic media. This permanence increases ever more as our digital networks interconnect and spread to always-increasing proportions and greater sophistication.

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This seems to disrupt some traditional notions of how we can and should treat electronic information and one another. To understand this aspect of memetic communication, it is helpful to revisit the theory of Harold Innis briefly.

Innis (1964) described the rise and fall of civilizations and empires as bound up in the evolution of media technology. As a newer medium displaces a previously dominant one within a civilization, along with it comes a new regime that masters the new technology which displaces the former. So, communication technologies are always bound up in social tensions and power dynamics. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, he found it possible to divide media into two main categories differentiated by its functional ability to connect people through time, or conversely, across physical distances. He further developed this time/space rubric to include numerous factors under each of these two types of media (see figure 10.1). For example, he described time-binding media as heavy, permanent, slow, and requiring experts to access information. Meanwhile, space-binding media had the opposite characteristics of being light, temporary, fast, and broadly accessible. Innis described the movement from a more "oral" culture to a more "literate" culture as a typical civilizational evolution, which would lead to its ultimate demise since the tide of change becomes too much for the old culture to bear. At that point, the old civilization collapses and a new civilization takes its place, or the remnants of the old civilization simply disperse and possibly fall dormant. Then that new civilization would in its turn become vulnerable to the opposite-binding media.

Innis' theory changed the way people thought about communication and power. In one example, he explained that as the oral culture of ancient Greece gave way to the literate civilization that underpins Western thought, it brought such a change in the way people thought and went about their daily affairs that it became unrecognizable as the same people. The story-tellers and bards such as Homer who were once the repository of history and knowledge got displaced by written texts (by authors such as Plato and Aristotle) that almost anyone could have access to. Information that was once flexible and adaptable became static and debatable. The need for expertise gave way to a need for general knowledge. And as such, the Greek civilization gave up its gods and religion for philosophy and human-made laws.

Presently, in many ways, we are still living in a literate civilization. Our laws are still written down and promulgated. Our legal interpretations are still written in texts and published in law libraries. However, at the same time, or at least since the mass adoption of the internet and all things connected to it, our civilization has become ever more dependent on our electronics to provide authoritative information. Social media has been a useful political organizing tool, playing a vital role in the "Arab Spring" phenomenon of 2010 that saw popular uprisings throughout the Arab world, including the

change or overthrow of governments in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, and the start of the Syrian conflict. More recently, people have used social media to organize protests across America against the policies and executive orders of the Trump regime. The "disruption" of the global status quo could signal a shift in Innis' time/space theory. Even the election of the "Tweeter in Chief" Donald Trump would seem to support such an assessment, as he was considered a long shot candidate and was constantly underestimated throughout the election cycle.

A casual consideration of these circumstances might assume that Western civilization is suddenly getting more oral in its communication, which is upsetting the literate power structures we have relied on for so long. However, there is an element of permanency that is out of place with Innis' model. Social media is also neither slow, heavy nor does it require deep expertise. Plus, digital communication has what I consider "unbinding" qualities as an ironic, simulacral text (see figure 10.1). I argue that this means that social media and the resulting memetic communication is not just a simple composite of Innis' time/space continuum, but rather an entirely new mode of communication. This does not contradict Innis' theory in any way. Instead, it stands as an important paradigm for understanding the present media moment.

I have already explained the unbinding qualities of irony and simulacra in previous chapters, so I will not go into detail about their consequences here. The combining of time and space binding characteristics are my interest in this chapter, especially the permanence of digital communication. The addition of permanence is not hard to conceptualize with digital text. But the juxtapositions and contradictions of text being both durable and fragile, oral and literate, adaptable and inflexible, communal and individual, are all counter-intuitive to our intellect. These counterpoints reflect aspects of the irony and playfulness inherent in postmodern texts.

The permanence of digital information was not apparent in the nascent digital world. Back when data was mainly stored on cards, then magnetic tapes, then disks, then drives, it seemed like data storage media had a shelf life. Data seemed temporary, fragile, and singular, something to be protected from harsh elements such as magnets, fingerprints, and the breakdown of plastics over time. It was conceivable that most information stored in such ways was unique and special. In the present, though, with the innovations of automated back-ups and distributed data storage, potentially every connected computer can be part of the global online storage system. Cloud computing and data storage in the 2000s, coupled with an explosion of smartphone use and ever cheaper and larger storage media, led to the widespread duplication of almost all data. Extensive redundancy of data through the syncing of numerous devices is now taken for granted. In other words, unlike days gone

INNIS' TIME/SPACE CONTINUUM

Time Binding	**Space Binding**
Heavy	Portable
Durable	Fragile
Oral	Individual
Communal	Literate
Adaptable	Inflexible
Experts	Generalists
Low Detail	High Detail
Iconic	Textual
Permanence	Temporary/Changing
Slow	Fast

←*Singular/Unique | Reproduced/Common*→

Pyramids, Oral Historians, Monuments, Tablets, Fine Art, Hand Copied Texts, Printed Books, Newspapers, Magazines, Pop Art, Movies, Radio, Television

Memetic Communication
(not heavy, not expert, not slow)

Time Binding	**Space Binding**	**Unbinding**
Durable	Portable	Ironic
Oral	Fragile	Simulacral
Communal	Individual	
Adaptable	Literate	
Low Detail	Inflexible	
Iconic	Generalists	
Permanence	High Detail	
	Textual	
	Temporary/Changing	
	Fast	

Figure 10.1.   Unbinding Media. The top image illustrates Harold Innis' media time/ space binding continuum, putting time binding media characteristics in the left column, space binding media characteristics in the right column, and examples of media across the bottom. The lower image remaps these characteristics to show memetic communication's time/space binding and unbinding qualities.

by when accidental deletion of data precipitated disaster, we now normally expect to be able to recover data easily and quickly, since it is stored in numerous places around the web.

The redundancy of data brings an element of permanency to online information. Digital archives, orphaned websites, abandoned virtual servers, web search engine caches, the WayBackMachine, peer-to-peer networks, and an

unstoppable cybernetic churning of information throughout the system show us our digital past over and over again. Facebook highlights this with special "anniversary" posts to show us what we were doing a year or even five years ago. The remainder of this chapter will illustrate some direct and indirect consequences of this informational permanency.

DIRECT CONSEQUENCES OF DATA PERMANENCY

Numerous instances of injury to individuals and society demonstrate direct consequences of informational permanency. One of the more painful consequences for families and parents has been the seeming immortality of deceased loved one's virtual presences. It is not hard to understand how upsetting it could be to go through the tragedy of burying and grieving a family member, only to have Facebook or another online source suddenly pop a picture of him or her into your virtual world. The website DigitalDeath.com explains the need for a pre-mortem digital plan, "Because on the internet, you can live forever . . ." (Digital Death 2014). Most established digital businesses have processes in place to remove profiles and user accounts of the deceased. Many of them, however, require a survivor to submit a request for deletion. Hence a good number of dead people continue to be counted among the living online. It was estimated around 1 million American Facebook users died in 2016 alone (Carroll 2016). Another statistician estimated at the present rate, the dead could outnumber the living on Facebook by the year 2098 (Brown 2016). There is widespread recognition that these numbers will continue to increase. What to do about it remains a problem.

Aside from the practicalities of this data storage issue, the repercussions of virtual immortality online extend beyond the immediate moment. The old offline con of stealing dead people's identities is one such problem. In these cases, family and friends of the deceased are impacted beyond just emotional damage by the longevity of the deceased's information. Once enough vital information about a person is collected, it may be possible for a criminal to gain access to the deceased person's immediate family's digital world, and carry out activity that destroys bank accounts, reputations, and any other digital vulnerabilities. Though very damaging, this kind of crime can usually be halted through a lockdown of an individual's information, and a report of the stolen identity to authorities. This is not effective in cases of living victims of identity theft though. Living people still need to use their accounts and information despite security breaches and theft.

Over thirteen million US cases of identity theft were reported in 2016 alone, totaling $15 billion US dollars (Insurance Information Institute 2017).

Defrauding the government is the most common form of crime committed with stolen identities in the USA, followed by credit card fraud, then utility and phone company scams (Insurance Information Institute 2017). Thieves most often steal personal information by gaining access to existing accounts of various types (most frequently, bank accounts), although criminals do frequently set up new accounts with stolen identities as well (Harrell 2015). People under fifty are at risk, but the most targeted demographic of identity theft are people over fifty (Harrell 2015). Around half of identity theft victims find they can stop the further use of their credentials within a day or so, most often by putting a "freeze" on their accounts through a credit reporting agency (Harrell 2015). It is now common for credit cards and other financial tools to have fraud insurance built into their products, so apart from the time lost, for many people, it is now relatively easy to recover lost money and fix up maxed-out accounts. But with that said, there are still millions of people who do not find it so easy to fix up their accounts and move on. For some people, the false information generated in their names lives on for years. Plenty of victims do not even realize what has happened to them for up to two years (Harrell 2015).

Victims of identity theft must overcome emotional trauma and temporary disruptions in their lives. Additionally, as I mentioned, the longevity of digital data has become a recurrent problem. One complication is the need to individually address each institution a fraudster has visited with stolen credentials. It can be hard to know the full extent of a thief's virtual travels. The fraudulent information may remain on a business's server indefinitely, which then might upload the fraudulent information to one or more other institutional systems. So even when a correction has been made on a specific server, it might get overwritten with fraudulent information yet again.

The personal repercussions for this kind of digital theft and resulting fraud can devastate lives. For example, the real Marcus Calvillo has lived in an identity purgatory for decades following the conviction of a sex offender who had stolen his identity. Mr. Calvillo's name continues to be associated with the crimes of the offender despite years of efforts to clean up the data. The theft has cost him jobs, loss of savings, relationships, and even brought about his mistaken arrest and incarceration (Hegemen 2015). Although the legal records were corrected numerous times, the fraudulent linkage to the crimes of the actual offender periodically recurs, to disrupt whatever gains he may have made in the meantime.

In another exemplary case, a man named Dave Crouse of Chicago lost close to a million dollars from fraudulent transactions made in his name, and spent over $100,000 trying to correct the problem (Waters 2010). Years later, with his credit destroyed and his financial life in tatters, his Social Security

number, and other vital information are still being used by fraudsters attempting to open accounts and make transactions in his name. There are thousands more such cases added to the total of the devastation wrought by identity theft every year.

The longevity of identity theft by an unknown criminal is already a terrible consequence of memetic communication. When coupled with heinous intent, the destruction of an individual's informational world penetrates the most private moments of his or her life. Revenge porn, hidden camera porn, and surveillance porn are all part of a crime category called involuntary pornography. In all cases, the nature of the digital environment once again facilitates a seeming immortality of the images, regardless of how much effort one puts into scrubbing the internet of the content. Hence memetic communication results in the fairly easy retrieval of involuntary pornography from all around the internet. Even a judge, Lori Douglas, was unable to clean the internet of revenge porn images distributed by an angry ex-boyfriend (Welch 2016). The images ultimately cost her position on the legal bench, and years after the investigation ended, it is still possible to easily find them with a Google search of her name.

Hacks of celebrity photos (with women by far being the most targeted) have been exponentially more widely distributed, as their celebrity nature makes them instantly memeable. Insidious picture trading between individuals online, coupled with the use of involuntary porn to drive traffic on websites, means if a celebrity's phone or computer is hacked, whatever is stolen will almost definitely remain forever in the public domain. Jennifer Lawrence, Kate Upton, Kirsten Dunst, Kim Kardashian, and many dozens more celebrity women suffer ongoing victimization as their hacked nude photos continue to live on and circulate throughout the digital environment.

Yet another devastating consequence of memetic communication comes in the form of false accusations. Misidentification of innocent people as criminals has led to dangerous situations ripe for mob violence. The Reddit Boston Bombing online "sleuthing" incident is especially illustrative of this problem.

Very quickly after a terrorist's bomb detonated near the finish line of the Boston Marathon in 2013, a sub-Reddit group "Find Boston Bombers" was set up to facilitate exchange and mass analysis of whatever available images of the scene could be found. Within hours, a massive amount of photos with commentary were being posted and exchanged. For the most part, Reddit "sleuths" would carefully scan pictures of the scene they had downloaded, marking them up with arrows and speculations. When "suspects" were identified, additional Reddit users would look for them in other photos to find incriminating clues.

I witnessed this process on Reddit firsthand, though I did not participate in any of the discussions. The phenomenon took a negative turn when, con-

trary to the rules of the sub-Reddit, the community started to name names
and "doxx" people (i.e., post whatever personal information about them
they could find). I was obviously not the only one observing what Reddit
and social media users in general were doing. The *New York Post* took the
extraordinary step of publishing pictures of men who had been incorrectly
identified as suspects by social media users (Celona 2013; Evans 2015). A
total of four innocent men were publicly accused of the bombing on Reddit
and in mainstream news; two had their names and photos published. Track
coach Yassine Zaimi and sixteen-year-old student Salaheddin Barhoun of the
Boston area had been at the marathon and were wrongly accused on the front
page of the *New York Post* of being the "bag men" who delivered the bomb
to the site of the attack. Barhoun later explained he was terrified after learning
of the accusation upon his return from an overnight trip. He turned himself
in to the police, who discussed the issue with him and sent him on his way.
Zaimi virtually disappeared and has kept a low profile since, and police have
publicly explained he was never a "person of interest." For their part, the
Reddit "sleuths" had collectively and erroneously concluded that yet another
"ethnic" looking marathon attendee, Sunil Tripathi, was responsible for the
attack. Part of the stated justification for their conclusion was Tripathi's at-
tendance and then disappearance after the bombing, as though the only "inno-
cent" course of action would be to make oneself personally available for the
general public's perusal. After the actual suspects were identified, the errors
made in haste on social media became starkly visible. Tripathi's body was
recovered a couple of days later, with an autopsy revealing he had taken his
own life for an unrelated reason, which explained his sudden disappearance.

Barhoun and Zaimi later sued the *New York Post* for defamation and settled
with the newspaper for an undisclosed sum. The *Post* published retractions,
and though there seems to have been some effort to remove the images they
published of the pair from around the internet, it memed early and quickly.
Hence it remains quite easy to find images of the front page from numerous
sources. The FindBostonBombers sub-Reddit was closed. Reddit administra-
tors and Redditors began to reflect on what had happened in their community.
Reddit publicly apologized. And it would seem that the entire incident is
forgotten. Only it is not.

The FindBostonBombers fiasco lives on in at least two ways. First, despite
the court settlement, the various proclamations of mea culpa, and the in-
nocence of the falsely accused, the misinformation about them continues to
reside in the virtual world. And as such, the impacts of the incident continue
to haunt Barhoun and Zaimi. Not only is everything they do now potentially
notable to the public, but they are also dogged by an unease that will likely
never go away. That is, they live with the knowledge that at any moment

someone might recognize them from the *Post* pictures and harass or even harm them.

A second way the FindBostonBombers meme found longevity is by its import into the /r/conspiracy sub-Reddit under the title "Boston Bombing Possible False Flag?" Here the pictures from the FindBostonBombers phenomenon have found a new life as evidence of a government conspiracy. In this new scenario, the pictures have been repurposed, though the technique remains the same. The new interest is in discovering evidence that the bombing was actually an elaborate plot carried out by the powers that be to distract and scare the general public. Depending on which strand of the theory you follow, the supposed end-game was to slip another government initiative through under the radar while public attention was diverted, or to justify or cover for a larger covert government operation in the Boston area that required a public-facing smokescreen. The conspiratorial thread constitutes an ongoing affront to victims and the families of dead victims of the attack. And like the *New York Post* photo, it keeps the faces of innocent people associated with the tragic event. Even so, given the nature of the digital media system in which the content lives, it is likely to continue to exist for many years to come.

Digital longevity is thus a direct consequence of memetic communication as illustrated by these and numerous other incidences. There are also indirect consequences brought about by the durability of memetic communication.

INDIRECT CONSEQUENCES OF DATA PERMANENCY

The durability of digital information adds to the uncertainty of facts, lack of credibility, and looping (getting stuck in time, having to go over the same data issues repeatedly). I will explain each of these in turn here.

The combination of our digital world with unprecedented levels of literacy throughout the globe allows average people to access immensely more detailed information than ever before. Even so, truth and facts have become assailable, contested concepts (as described in chapter 7). Adding to the philosophical/relativist crisis of truth is the seeming immortality of "alternate facts." Even with an abundance of facts at our fingertips, the way we access information facilitates cherry-picking data so that almost any idea can be supported with digital proof of some sort. As I described regarding the FindBostonBombers debacle, once the data memes and takes up residence in virtual space, it becomes just another bit of digital code alongside all else, of no greater nor less relativity than any other string of code. It may be rediscovered and potentially revived or repurposed at any time. With enough passage of time, it may be possible that such an abundance of incorrect digital items exist that the truth

about something becomes suspected to be false or even overshadowed completely. Either way, its simulacral detachment from its origin is complete, and there is no longer any need to consider the truth of its origin. This feeds the second indirect consequence, which is the erosion of credibility.

Credibility with the general public is hard won, and difficult to maintain. As I explained in chapter 4, the persuasiveness of digital data depends a lot on its ability to excite the audience. Meanwhile, the credibility of the source can be easily spoofed (i.e., made to look reliable), and its logic need only maintain coherence within the narrative it is operating in (since objectivity is no longer of concern in a postmodern environment). This emphasizes the narrative, the function of which I discussed at length in chapter 7. After the severing of signification from truth, perhaps the most damning aspect of this narrative process is time itself. Every addition to the narrative adds to the extension of allied statements that seem to support whatever perspective one has adopted. The growth in the volume of information becomes a flag that signals at the heart of this data is an important issue, regardless of its "real-world" consequences. Rhizomatically, such memes attain a reproductive capacity much like weeds in a garden. They may not stand out as significant, detrimental, or invasive until they have already taken over a portion of the garden, and damaged or displaced under the surface what was intended to grow there. When this happens often enough in our informational environment, we get assailed with incorrect information and corrupted data in spite of our best efforts to curate a healthy and credible infosphere. In such a circumstance, credibility constantly needs defending, which feeds back to take a toll on the perception of facts. The cybernetic loop sustains itself in this way.

The constant re-eruption and recirculation of data produces a temporal looping effect. The "Nigerian Prince" scam I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter is an example of this. Known more specifically as an "advance fee fraud" or a "419" (the Nigerian legal code for fraud), many different versions of this scam have been incessantly circulating through email almost since the inception of the World Wide Web. The classic version of this is the sending of spam emails en mass claiming to be from a Nigerian Prince or other high-ranking, affluent figure located in an exotic and obscure location, whose fortune (varying from many thousands to hundreds of millions) is in danger from one peril or another. The email makes a plea for assistance, promising a sizeable part of the said fortune as compensation. The email asks the recipient to send several thousand dollars (a minuscule amount compared to the reward awaiting them) up front to facilitate the transfer of funds and shuttle the necessary people around to make the transaction. This is the goal of the scam since there is no fortune to be transferred in the first place. The objective all along has been to acquire the "transfer" funds with which the "Prince" absconds.

Known originally as the Spanish prisoner scheme, this scam is said to have originated in the 1800s (Whitaker 2013) through regular mail. The Nigerian Prince angle was popularized in the 1970s. By the 1990s, the medium of choice had evolved from letters to faxes, then to the popular form we have seen in email since the infancy of the World Wide Web. For such an old and well-known ruse, it is surprising that criminals were able to use it to defraud almost 13 billion USD in 2013 alone (Ultrascan AGI 2014). Since moving to the internet, the total global take from the 419 scam online is in the ballpark of 100 billion USD. And even as I write this, I count half a dozen email attempts in my spam folder from the past twenty-four hours, all trying to lure me in with the promise of a huge payoff for a small upfront "transfer" fee.

The 419 enjoys longevity because it works. But it has also spawned numerous mutations and jokes about the Nigerian Prince. As a meme, it is perhaps more robust than it has ever been. Yet every time one of those emails arrive, it is presented as if brand new. For all its success, this kind of endless loop is relatively harmless once one realizes it for what it is. However, other information is also subject to this seemingly endless cycle.

As covered in chapter 6, moral panics and technopanics are common recurrences in social media. Anecdotally, I can say I expect to see one or two pass through my social network every month. A similar memetic looping phenomenon is part of business as usual on Reddit, where the same content pops up at monthly or semi-annually intervals (see karmadecay.com for numerous examples). As with the 419 scheme, this kind of endless looping seems benign when so loosely distributed and already familiar to users. It still creates an odd sense of time though, encouraging a sense of déja vu for users when reviewing their social media feeds. At the same time, it encourages distrust of content or even embarrassment if one unwittingly engages with a recirculating post. However, even these consequences are relatively mild when contrasted with the individual experiences of identity theft the way I explained it in this chapter. These victims seem condemned to indefinitely relive the false accusations and inconveniences now associated with their identities. In light of these and other cases of online immortality, there is a movement afoot to assert the right to be deleted.

THE RIGHT TO BE FORGOTTEN

In a case of accidental misidentification, NYU communications professor Kerry O'Grady was mistaken for someone of the same name who posted commentary critical of Donald Trump (Holly 2017). In a scenario typical of the current state of online politics (discussed in the next chapter at length),

O'Grady was targeted and attacked with an avalanche of derogatory, hateful and threatening messages by Trump supporters. O'Grady is a communications professor and was well aware of what was happening, but still powerless to stop it. When faced with such an assault, replying to every commenter to inform them of their mistake is both exhausting and perhaps even impossible. Her virtual misidentity is thus subject to the same immortality outlined previously in this chapter. The identity becomes part of a collective memory for those who participated in the attack on her.

Swiatek observed that memeplexes "can help societies not only engage in acts of remembrance, but also help guide their future behaviors and attitudes" (2016, 129). By appropriating images or phenomena, a frozen moment or snapshot is created in the community memory. Horsti exemplified this phenomenon with the creation of a community identity through "a subcultural 'memory freeze frame' crystallizing the contemporary Islamophobic ideologies articulated in connection to race, ethnicity, nation, gender, and sexuality" (Horsti 2016, 1). In other words, as explained in chapter 8, the community symbolically apprehends the moment to circulate as part of its own myth, contributing to internal cohesion. This kind of communal appropriation of symbols makes it difficult for one individual to regain control of their identity.

Although theoretically doable, in practice it may be impossible to delete certain types of information from the internet permanently. Even so, there are movements afoot to restore some control to individuals over the digital information associated with them. In 2013, the State of California created a law that gives teenagers the right to have digital information removed (Alexander and Ho 2013). Similar to laws facilitating removal of information for domestic violence and sex crime victims, the burden would remain on the victim to request removal. Even such a small step in the direction of informational control for individuals has contributed to a trend.

Google has been one of the more notable targets of campaigns to curate online information. In 2014, a European Union court ruled that the company must facilitate requests for removal of personal information as part of the right to be forgotten. In the same time frame, however, an American court ruled that Google's search results are protected under freedom of speech laws. This is not to say the company will not remove inaccurate information from individuals or institutions. Recode.net reports, "Google kicked 200 publishers off one of its ad networks in the fourth quarter, partly in response to the proliferation of fake news sites" (Townsend 2017).

While two hundred publishers might seem like a substantial culling of bad information, it represents a minuscule percentage of the thousands of news sources operating in the USA. And pushing information out of search results is much different from removing these sources from the digital world

altogether. It makes them harder to find, but in so doing, makes it harder to target for deletion.

   "The right to be forgotten" sounds like a refreshing victory for individuals at first glance. As we come to understand its highly cosmetic effect though, it becomes apparent it is merely the first step in a long journey to restore control of information to individuals. On this note, it bears pointing out that this chapter has dealt only with publicly available information. When we take into consideration how the National Security Agency has been collecting and archiving every bit of digital information it can, both nationally and globally, it becomes apparent that we are unlikely ever really to restore control of information to individuals. In this era of "Big Data," we may need to look at a different approach to information control. It may be that, problematic as it may be, some clues to our informational redemption may arise from a deeper understanding of online politics and activism, the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter Eleven

Memetic Politics and Armchair Activism

In this era of memetic communication, "armchair activists," "internet warriors," and "hacktivists" create a sense of political engagement for themselves, with little or no impact on the world. This is the tenth consequence of memetic communication. Instead of helping, their online activities can obfuscate and muddle issues, distract attention from them, and drive problems further underground. These prosumers engage in a battle for aesthetic dominance in which the appearance of quick victory evidenced through media domination is the goal, rather than engaging in prolonged work on the ground that results in meaningful physical-world change.

The internet was a brand-new thing when I was a teenager, represented in popular culture by movies such as *War Games* and *Weird Science*. The World Wide Web was not invented until several years after my graduation from high school. Too much a musician to concern myself with console games and sports, most of my "wasted youth" was spent jamming with other young wannabe musicians, hanging out playing pool, and watching movies. Even with a creative outlet that entailed yelling/shouting (aka singing) and making a lot of aggressive noise, my band of angry boys sought other outlets for our Gen X teen angst.

As despicable as it was, a game my friend Mark and I were particularly good at was selecting a middle-aged man to antagonize until he lost his temper. It did not matter what was said—truth or lie, fact or fiction—since the point of the game was to goad the targeted guy until he lost his cool, making him your victim. Mark once explained the magic of that moment to another friend:

> Once you get them to lose their temper, they've cracked. Then you've controlled them. And . . . you know . . . you own them. And it feels good, like you have power over them.

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I remember those words distinctly to this very day, because they perfectly expressed the moment of "winning" this game that our victims did not realize we were playing until it was too late. And years later, having perfected the technique in physical, face-to-face encounters, I was psychologically well-prepared for the remediation of this game onto the internet. Online, it became known as "trolling."

When two trolls are battling in an online forum (i.e., abusing and goading one another), it is called a flame war. Provisos against trolling and flaming are among the earliest iterations of netiquette (the general etiquette and norms that internet users expected one another to follow in the early days of the internet), going back to the 1980s. In the past, sometimes more than two people might get in on the battle. But most often a single troll would take control of a forum by becoming the focus of attention instead of the original poster (the "OP"). In a flame war, the posts quickly devolve into an exchange that has nothing to do with the OP, and the conversation such as it is, deteriorates into baiting and name calling.

Flame wars typify the exchanges that motivated deployment of the Godwin's Law counter-meme described in chapter 1. Online political discussion and activism have gone through several notable developmental stages since that time, growing in scope and scale along with the World Wide Web. Numerous politically motivated strategies and tactics have been invented through the years, to some extent effecting socio-political change around the globe. However, for all the good intentions and innovations, now a quarter century later, it seems an army of loosely associated trolls—some paid, some not—and their virtual robots has come to dominate digital politics.

A VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERE

There was once a time when people hoped the internet would be an emancipatory democratizing force, as a new forum for public debate, information sharing, and as an on-the-ground organizing tool. To greater and lesser effect, all these visualizations came to pass. Unfortunately, with the evolution of social media and memetic communication, it seems the issues of public debate and information sharing may have peaked and fractured into the solipsistic communities described in chapters 8. This is not to say some features of a virtual public sphere do not exist, but that it is so fractured and communities so siloed that its ability to unite a general public in discursive unity seems hard to imagine. On the other hand, I can also state that certain aspects of social media enabled a type of political action online that has had a powerful impact on American politics. Although anyone opposed to President Trump might be

loath to admit it, in many ways his surprise success was due at least in part to masterful use of social media and memetic communication.

The idea of a virtual public sphere has been theorized almost since the inception of the World Wide Web. Some have argued flat out that the internet is a public sphere (Boeder 2005; Khan, Gilani, and Nawaz 2012; Ubayasiri 2006), building their theories on the work of Habermas (1989). Habermas described a healthy public sphere as essential to a well-functioning democracy. He explained that such a public realm of discourse would need to be open and freely accessible to anyone in society, and all would participate on equal footing with everyone else. Nothing would be excluded from public discussion, and decisions made through public debate would be based on the merits of arguments. Unanimous consensus would be the cherished goal in public sphere debate (Habermas 1989, 36–37). This imagined realm of engaged citizenry seems like an excellent description of the politicized public we would all love to have. Unfortunately, several factors hold back the internet and social media from being this perfect space.

Allow me to remind you that virtual communities rely on exclusion as one aspect of their identity (see chapter 8). Community members are almost never on equal footing with the rest of the community, as unchallengeable hierarchy reigns (see chapter 6). Groupthink (chapter 8) and the emphasis on pathos (chapter 4) all but ensure logical merit will have little to do with the success or failure of an idea in virtual space. And finally, virtual shunning and banishment ensure discourse will be policed in such a way that unanimity or consensus are meaningless, since dissenting voices are merely removed from the community. Scholars such as Van Dijk (2012), Dean (2003), and Papacharissi (2008) have described the internet not as a public sphere itself, but rather a space with certain features of a public sphere. Claassen nicely summarized this analysis:

> the normative expectations of the media's contribution to democracy at too high a level. The media is best conceived, not as part of the public sphere itself, but as only having a supportive role toward that sphere. (Claassen 2011, 67)

It is safe to say the internet and virtual tools have had and continue to have some influence on public discourse and political outcomes. Of course, there is always a lingering question of how much influence these media have had on developments and results. Though empirical, judging such events is often interpretive and not quantifiable. In sketching the history of online politics, I will trace both a slow evolution of how available tools have been used, and how the nature of online political communities has changed with memetic communication.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ONLINE COLLECTIVE ACTION

Cyber-Zapatistas

A collective of indigenous Maya farmers of Chiapas, Mexico, known as Zapatistas, are frequently credited as the first revolutionary movement to successfully use the postmodern global communications network as an effective form of resistance. One of the earliest examples of online collective action, a globally distributed array of netizens called Cyber-Zapatistas came into being in the mid-1990s in support of the Zapatistas. The Zapatistas burst onto the global stage with the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on January 1, 1994. NAFTA required the abolition of collective land holdings and community farming in Mexico, which threatened to destroy the Maya way of life. Rather than conform to the imposition of neoliberal policy, the Zapatistas mounted a symbolic armed resistance, taking over several towns and engaging in several armed skirmishes with the Mexican army. It was clear from the start that the small and under-equipped Zapatista army (a significant number of soldiers carried fake wooden arms) was no match militarily for the Mexican forces. After a short time, the Zapatistas retreated into the jungle to live in what became known as communities of resistance. However, before retreating, the Zapatistas had managed to unleash an aesthetic of revolution that quickly swept through the global media apparatus.

From the very first, the Zapatistas and the de facto leader, Subcomandante Marcos, demonstrated a media savvy (and perhaps the luck of the news cycle) that would both save them from annihilation through a global public awareness, and create the template for activism in our globally networked era. The first aspect was perhaps as much due to providence as timing, since, on January 1, 1994,

> Not a plane crashed. No tsunami came. No princess died. No president had any sexual escapade. Nothing happened on earth. The media was empty. They had nothing to present us. So, on January 2, we had a thousand journalists in San Cristobal. CNN was projecting Zapatistas. We had beautiful images with the ski masks and all the emotion. It was perfect for the news. Six hours a day, CNN was presenting Zapatistas. (Esteva 2005)

Maccani (2008) further explains:

> From Mexico's southeastern state of Chiapas, the Zapatista cry of "¡Ya Basta!" ("Enough is Enough!") quickly traveled around the globe not only through the corporate media but, unfiltered and direct, over the Internet as well. A virtual army of volunteer translators and web-junkies ensured that anyone who wanted

to could engage directly with the communiqués, stories, and letters of the Zapatistas. In the same moment that the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect, the EZLN—in image and word—and the poverty of southern Mexico were catapulted into the consciousness of people around the world. (Maccani 2008)

Part of the success of commodifying the image of the Zapatistas had to do with the masks they wore, and their luck and skill getting the image freely publicized as quickly and widely as possible. The distinctive black balaclavas and red kerchiefs the Zapatista soldiers covered their faces with created a powerful aesthetic that was helped along by the image of the charismatic Subcomandante Marcos. Not since Che Guevara had there been such a romantic image of the Latin American revolutionary[1]:

> With the cold war's end, revolution in Latin America seemed suddenly to have been infused with a hip, ironic self-awareness . . . Marcos had already become something more than an outlaw hero—he had become the first postmodern guerrilla comandante. (Golden 2001)

The commodification and mass distribution of the Zapatista's revolutionary aesthetic demonstrated a new awareness of how the global media apparatus could be subverted for revolutionary purposes. The label "postmodern" became attached to the Zapatista movement, acknowledging the importance of the image they were careful to maintain. Whether they intended to or not, and whether it was true or not, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) became branded as postmodern revolutionaries in popular media, and the meme of masked, wirelessly networked, horseback-riding, proud Fourth-World underdogs fighting on behalf of the common people against corporate tyranny went viral around the globe, both in popular and alternative media. People began to use and perpetuate the images for their own purposes, making it seem like the Zapatista phenomenon had taken on a life of its own in the global mediasphere.

As noted above, an important aspect of the Zapatista's identity was anonymity, preserved in the wearing of masks. First inspired by a practical need to remain hidden from authorities, the mask aesthetic became mythologized as part of the egalitarian ideology of the movement, known as Zapatismo:

> The masks are a symbol not only of anonymity but also egalitarianism. The masks are very symbolic to the Zapatistas. Despite the reality that the Zapatistas took over all the major cities in the highlands of Chiapas on Jan 1, 1994, this was not their first choice—culturally they feel that dialogue, not violence is the best way to find solutions. At that time, they say, they gave up "the word" (or

their voices) so that they could be heard and, by wearing masks, they give up
their faces in order to be seen. (Schools for Chiapas 2008).

One masked Zapatista explained further: "With my mask, I'm a Zapatista
in a struggle for dignity and justice. . . . Without my mask, I'm just another
damn Indian!" (in Schools for Chiapas 2008). Thus, in addition to the practi-
cal added security brought by anonymity, the Zapatista mask served as an
emblem of the fiercely communal and indigenous identity of the freedom
fighters. This emblematic use was not just a shallow claim made up after
the fact. Instead, it reflected the structure of the Zapatista resistance, which
was informed by a communal council of elders, and clear ethics that were
announced to the world through regular communiqués and updates. Such
information was forwarded through postings to the World Wide Web, which
were almost instantly delivered to a global audience through a network of
numerous list-servers. The Spanish writings of Subcomandante Marcos and
the other Zapatista leadership would be quickly translated to English[2] and
forwarded online to numerous other list-servers and email lists of solidarity
groups. The global network of what came to be described as Cyber-Zapatistas
became vital to the ongoing struggle of the "low-intensity war" in Chiapas.

While much ado was made about postmodernism and the technological
savvy of the Zapatistas, Subcomandante Marcos explains that he and the
indigenous guerrilla army on the ground were anything but that. Rather, the
global Cyber-Zapatista movement awoke and collectivized without much if
anything beyond the unwitting input of aesthetics and written content from
the people on the ground in Chiapas:

> they began to say that the EZLN was the first guerrilla group of the 21st century;
> that Supmarcos was a cyber guerrilla who, from the Lacandón Jungle, would
> send into cyberspace the Zapatista communiqués that would circle the world . . .
> could count on satellite communications to coordinate the subversive actions
> that were taking place all over the world . . . but . . . even on the eve of the
> uprising our "Zapatista cyber power" was one of those computers that used big
> floppy disks and had a DOS operating system. . . . We learned how to use it from
> one of those tutorials . . . that told you which key to press. . . . Besides using it to
> play Pacman, we used it to write the "First Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle,"
> which we reproduced on one of those old dot matrix printers . . . (Marcos 2013)

Debunking the myth of the "cyber guerrilla," Marcos explained:

> I had one of those light, portable computers (it weighed six kilos without the
> battery) . . . 128 kilobytes of ram, a hard disk with 10 megabytes . . . and a
> processor that was so fast that you could turn it on, go make coffee, come back,
> and you could still reheat the coffee . . . before you could start to write. . . . In

the mountains, to get it to work, we used a converter attached to a car battery. Afterwards, our Zapatista advanced technology department designed a device that would let the computer run on D batteries, but the device weighed more than the computer and, I suspect had something to do with the PC expiring in a sudden flash. . . . And you think we had internet? In February of 1995, when the federal government was pursuing us, the portable PC was thrown into the first stream that we crossed. After that we wrote our communiqués on a mechanical typewriter lent to us by the ejidal commissioner of one of the communities that took us in. (Marcos 2013)

Regarding the frequently published images of Marcos wearing a headset, mythologized as putting him at the helm of a global communication apparatus, he explained, "It was a walkie-talkie with a reach of some 400 meters, max, on flat land" (Marcos 2013).

Many of the communiqués from the Zapatistas were delivered as printed material to news organizations,[3] which would then publish them electronically as well as in print. These were the electronic publications that were forwarded throughout the global Cyber-Zapatista network. Marcos made it clear that this crucial aspect of the Zapatista resistance had no direct connection to the jungles of Chiapas at all:

A young student in Texas . . . created a web page and simply named it "ezln." This was the first webpage of the EZLN. And this compa started to "put up" all of the communiqués and letters made public in the press on that site. People from other parts of the world who had found out about the uprising through photos, recorded video images, or in the newspaper, went to that site to find our word. And we never knew this compa. . . . We don't know what became of this compa. (Marcos 2013)

From these humble beginnings, the Cyber-Zapatista network grew to hundreds of sites connected to thousands of supporting organization websites, in dozens of countries and many languages. The constant across all these web presences was the masked aesthetic, denoting revolution, and connoting the Zapatista ideology (Zapatismo). The Zapatista meme was thus not just an aesthetic that could be easily appropriated and played with, but also an emblem, and its reference to a larger body of moral, ethical, political, and even mythical ideological imperatives was carefully maintained.

The Zapatistas themselves made it known that, while global inclusion of oppressed peoples was central to Zapatismo, not all resistances fit the criteria for alliance with the Zapatista movement as an expression of Maya culture and values. For example, their main declared enemy was the ideology of neoliberalism. Liberal politics, consumerism,[4] and libertarianism do not find a comfortable fit with the Zapatista resistance. Colonialism and neo-

colonialism were and still are prolonged programs of oppression against in-
digenous cosmology, using racism to divide and conquer not just the people,
but to carve the land itself into discrete packages. Thus, worldviews that
cannot give up notions of individualism and private property, and embrace
humble collectivism and subjugation for the greater good, cannot fit the social
norms of Zapatismo. Additionally, many Marxist, Socialist, and Communist
organizations found it possible to ally with the Zapatistas as brothers and
sisters in arms, but difficult to reconcile their structural and often hierarchi-
cal democratic/vanguardist approach to politics with the intensely communal
consensus model of decision making in the communities in resistance.

On the other hand, for those who sought to embrace Zapatismo and apply
it in their local communities of resistance throughout the globe,[5] it acted as
a prescriptive code of behavior in many respects (Khasnabish 2008). The
Zapatista code of conduct made it possible for individuals and organizations
to ally with their cause without any confusion regarding acceptable behavior
and expectations of outcomes. If there was something to be mutually gained
by working together, the parties involved could clearly identify boundaries
and terms of participation for themselves and other stakeholders. The area of
mutual overlap could be defined and respected. When that particular mission
was accomplished, all parties were free to move along to their next activity,
together or separately. Sometimes alliances could be enduring, and other
times, quite temporary.

One such alliance that was crucial to the early success of online Cyber-
Zapatista activism was formed around the nexus of a collective called the
electronic disturbance theater (EDT).[6] They called their mode of operation
"hacktivism," and their tactics and strategies provided a crucial schematic
for the way hacktivism would be articulated moving forward from that
historic moment. EDT chose to contribute their cyber-expertise to the Za-
patista resistance by creating and distributing software for use in coordinated
denial of service (DNS) attacks on Mexican governmental websites. EDT's
method made it very easy for any individual to participate in the campaign
as armchair activists, by just downloading their program and hitting the start
button. The simple principle behind the DNS was to overload servers with
information requests. The programs they distributed were simple scripts that
would make connection requests thousands of times a minute from any online
computer running the code.

This basic method has continued to be the most popular tool for mass-par-
ticipant online activism into the present moment, perhaps most notoriously
with hacker groups and individuals identifying as members of the Anony-
mous collective. However, there are some significant differences between the
online activism carried out in the name of Anonymous and that which was

"Zapatista" oriented. Some of the more important differences will become evident further on. However, for this section, the takeaway point is the ease with which online activists were able to aesthetically appropriate, reproduce, and contribute to an evolution of the Zapatista movement.

So, to move things back to the premise of this chapter, the memeplex that grew to represent the Zapatistas in cyberspace was set in motion, cultivated, and propelled by a mainly anonymous global collective of people who lent their agency to a message that somehow resonated with them. In so doing, the meme of the masked insurgents and what they stood for evolved as both a symbol of the fight for social justice, and an ethical stand against the cruelty of neoliberal capitalist ideology dominating governmental policies. Memetic communication was used as a new tool to fight for specifically targeted issues, and to champion an ethical stand for empowerment of the oppressed around the globe.

IndyMedia.org

In 1999, online activists formed the IndyMedia.org collective to support the anti-globalization protest that took place that year in Seattle, Washington. IndyMedia took advantage of the internet to provide almost real-time reports from the front lines of the protest, including images, audio, and video. Their information-sharing efforts allowed protesters to act responsively to what was happening at various places in the streets, resulting in an unprecedented protest strategy. This collective was not wholly separate from the Zapatista struggle. Rather, it often intersected with it in complementary ways. At the same time, it took on a broader and more structured form. While still incorporating many of the same tactics and techniques of the Cyber-Zapatistas, IndyMedia sought to establish an alternative global media network of citizen journalists, distributing both original stories and reposting important lesser-known stories relevant to their progressive agenda. As they describe:

> The Independent Media Center is a network of collectively run media outlets for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of the truth. We work out of a love and inspiration for people who continue to work for a better world, despite corporate media's distortions and unwillingness to cover the efforts to free humanity. (Independent Media Center 2017)

The IndyMedia network has endured almost two decades, listing more than seventy connected sites around the world in various languages.

With countering "corporate media" highlighted in their mission, the IndyMedia collective exemplifies an approach to media activism rooted in the political economy of media.[7] This view of media considers the ownership

and profit motive of the global media apparatus to have an overwhelming effect on the content, such that only stories and viewpoints supportive of the dominant order even make it into production. In other words, whoever owns the production and broadcast outlets controls the ideological influence media has. The collective's dedication to an alternate media system extended to print news and video documentaries as well as their numerous projects online. A distinguishing characteristic of the IndyMedia collective has been its commitment to informational distribution rather than the more disruptive techniques of cyber-activism adopted by some Cyber-Zapatistas and, later, the Anonymous collective.

Anonymous Hacking and Cracking

On October 1, 2003, the now infamous 4chan.org web community first appeared online. Internet legend has it that sometime in that same year, the Anonymous online "hacktivist" group began to take shape in 4chan's /b/-random forum. The origins of the group are somewhat fuzzy, and its approach to activism has been equally amorphous. The name itself evolved from the fact that the 4chan/b/ forum forces all posts to be anonymous, and hence all users in the forum are identified as "anonymous" in the username field. So, the people posting called themselves collectively "Anonymous," and individually "Anons."

The first noted collective action of the group happened in 2006 when the anonymous 4chan/b/ users posted a decision to target the swimming pool of the Habbo.com virtual hotel with a collective DOS attack by blocking its entrance with a crowd of their avatars. This first action highlights the anarchistic background of the group, which many claim to participate in "just for the lulz" (just for laughs). Anons did many less-meaningful things for lulz in between the campaigns highlighted here. Nonetheless, the Habbo campaign had set the stage for their second notable action: Project Chanology.

Project Chanology was launched as a vendetta against the Church of Scientology in 2008. Anonymous charged the cult of practicing internet censorship after it had a YouTube video removed of Scientology member Tom Cruise in a bizarre rant. A call to action on behalf of freedom of speech targeting Scientology was posted, resulting in a global demonstration involving over seven thousand people in more than ninety cities. In addition to proving the international strength of the Anonymous collective, many of the participants chose to wear the Guy Fawkes masks, which became iconic of the group. Similar to the Zapatistas, the mask quickly became a global meme. The use of the mask as a signifier of protest originated in the movie *V for Vendetta*, in which a mass protest of Guy Fawkes masked activists confronts their government. In the hands of Anonymous, the mask

has become loaded with a significance of hacking, renegade justice, and resistance to authority.

Project Chanology brought public attention to Anonymous, and its membership swelled. The group moved away from 4chan as its primary medium and started using internet relay chat channels to communicate more securely. However, it still was not until after a few more "just for lulz" actions (some of which were highly offensive and in bad taste, to say the least) that Anonymous began to get purposefully political. Their 2008 hack of vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin's email stands as a starting point for the many political operations that followed.

It is difficult to call the Anonymous group an organization, as it is an entirely anarchistic formation. Anonymous users may drop in and out, to become part of the group for just one action if they choose, or to be more involved and take part in numerous activities. Their choice of targets can be seemingly random or arbitrary, based on a person or organization getting under a group member's skin, or when a critical mass of group members forms behind an issue. The Anonymous group showed its potential to move beyond demonstrations of power just for the sake of showing off when they shut down white supremacist radio host Hal Turner's website in December 2006 and January 2007. From that point into the present, Anonymous has attacked numerous targets in the name of social justice and online moral conscience. Although on many occasions members have continued to choose targets and causes for "lulz," it is their activism against unpopular figures and organizations, combined with their support for objectively "just" causes that has tended to define the group's popular image.

From information sharing to denial of service attacks to more benign acts of engagement, Anonymous has used many techniques similar to the Zapatistas. Perhaps one of the most obvious borrowings is the aforementioned use of a mask as the group's identity. One notable difference, however, is an absence of well-articulated ethics.

Rather than promoting the cultivation of a just and peaceful society, Anonymous promotes itself as a vengeful group of vigilantes on standby to mete out punishment. Their self-description speaks for itself in this regard:

> WE ARE ANONYMOUS.
> WE ARE A LEGION.
> WE DO NOT FORGIVE.
> WE DO NOT FORGET.
> EXPECT US.

The Anonymous warning cry is now a global brand, but the group does not seem to have a definite end-goal for itself. Its agenda is driven on a case

by case basis. As for its methods, Paganini (2012) explains, "there are two principal factions, the anarchists and the hacktivists." He goes on to explain that hacktivists differ from other hackers in following three principals listed by an Anon who goes by the username CommanderX: "Don't attack media; Don't attack infrastructure; Work non-violently for internet freedom" (in Paganini 2012).

The hacktivist faction is identifiable by their principled approach. Meanwhile, the anarchists are like wild cards that might or might not jump to action at any time. Serracino-Inglott (2013) characterizes the Anonymous approach as vigilantism rooted in "reprobative punishment" (217) rather than physical violence. Their group acts "more like eco-warriors than terrorists," and in Serrancino-Inglott's assessment, they work to fulfill their collective "vision of common good" (2013, 217).

As of this writing, well over one hundred actions have taken place under the banner of Anonymous, in all corners of the world. In addition to the lulz, Anonymous' approach to activism has brought about some remarkable successes, and a few notorious failures. For example, Anonymous users have been credited with running a support site for Iranian protesters after the 2009 election, knocking out the Australian government's website in 2009 and again in 2010 in protest of online censorship, and perhaps most famously for digital support for Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya during the revolutionary "Arab Spring" of 2011. Since its beginning, Anonymous has worked similarly with civic movements and rebellions in India (2011), Hong Kong, the Occupy movement in the USA (2011), Occupy Nigeria (2012), New Zealand (2013), and several others. They have also hacked governments to protest human rights abuses, such as Uganda's anti-gay laws (2011), Nigeria's anti-gay stance (2013), North Korea (2013), and several actions against the Philippines. Corporate giants such as Sony, Visa, Mastercard, PayPal, Koch Industries, Bank of America, and many smaller companies have found themselves targeted for overstepping what Anonymous members consider reasonable limits regarding censorship, corporate governance, and political interference/corruption. The group has attacked and hacked law enforcement several times in protest of police violence, such as the San Francisco Police in 2011, Cleveland Police in 2012, California Statewide Law Enforcement Association in 2012, the Anaheim Police Department (2012), the Ferguson Police Department (2014), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (2015), and even such agencies as Interpol, the FBI, and the CIA. In 2015, Anonymous both outed over 1,000 Ku Klux Klan members in the USA, and shut down over 1,800 web pages and Twitter accounts belonging to or associated with the terrorist group ISIS.

Anonymous has engaged in a long-standing battle against child pornography online. It began with the arrest of Chris Forcand in 2007, which is

thought to have been engineered by members of Anonymous in its early days. There have been many more successful operations against child pornography since, such as Operation Darknet which shut down forty child porn sites in 2011. A decade later, in 2017, Anonymous took their campaign to the "dark web" by shutting down over ten thousand sites hosted on hidden servers (which makes them impossible for the average internet user to find) that were estimated to be at least 50 percent full with child porn.

Another of the more famous successes of Anonymous was their key involvement in releasing video and photographic evidence in the Steubenville gang rape case of 2013. This crime might have otherwise not been taken to trial due to an attempted cover-up by stakeholders associated with the football team that carried out the rape. That said, Anonymous has had its share of fails as well.

Although Anonymous has declared victory in many operations, several of these same operations caught innocent people in the broad swath of their activities. For example, they judged many of the Twitter accounts and web pages taken down during the 2015 OpISIS campaign as sympathetic with ISIS merely because they contained Arabic. As a result, innocent private citizens, journalists, and academics found themselves accused of affiliation with ISIS. A 2014 attack on Boston Children's Hospital in protest of a child custody battle dangerously slowed the hospital's network to the point that doctors were unable to view medical records of their patients, while other vital systems became dangerously unreliable. A 2011 hack of private intelligence company Stratfor resulted in the public release of ninety thousand credit card accounts.

Even worse are the mistaken targeting of several people whose lives have been irreparably altered because of what has been characterized as Anonymous' reckless approach to justice (the effects of which I discussed in the previous chapter). Their 2008 Project Chanology misidentified and doxed a fifty-nine-year-old man and his wife as "pro-Scientology" hackers, resulting in harassing phone calls and death threats. In 2009, the group doxed (revealed private information) a fourteen-year-old who ran a website (the No Cussing web site) they deemed to be anti-free speech, resulting in the teen being spammed with pornography, prank calls, hate mail, and even death threats. In 2013 the group ran a campaign that accused a man who had taken a picture in front of a Star Wars display of pedophilia because a child had walked into the background and effectively photobombed the picture. This again resulted in hate mail, death threats, and actual physical harassment in the street.

A final criticism of Anonymous comes from our professional purveyors of justice, law enforcement agencies. The short, amateurish, and clumsy sleuthing strategies Anonymous employs have made the online criminal element

aware of vulnerabilities that they technically fix, and then steer clear of. By pushing criminal activity farther underground, Anonymous has made it harder for legitimate legal forces to properly discover, investigate, track, bust, and charge operators and users of such networks in their broader formations.

While not exhaustive, the above examples of hacktivism gone wrong show a severe threat to countless innocent people considered collateral damage. Does the good outweigh the bad? One might approach the answer to this question from various positions. The takeaway point, though, is that in the era of memetic communication, hacktivism is here to stay. The stakes get raised even higher, though, when we consider how hacktivism and exposure of sensitive information might impact global security.

Wikileaks 2006

In 2006, a global platform was launched that makes leaked and stolen top secret government information public. Known as Wikileaks, the platform leaped to global attention with the 2010 release of an estimated 750,000 documents given to them by a former army analyst, American Private Chelsea Manning (then known as Bradley). Manning was convicted for treason, and the founder of Wikileaks, Australian Julian Assange, became a global fugitive in 2011 after arrest orders were issued for his part in the sharing of classified documents. To the day of this writing, Assange lives in the Ecuadoran embassy in London, where he found refuge with his claims of political persecution.

Apart from the drama of the key actors in the Wikileaks phenomenon, the platform has been vital to contemporary hacktivism. In addition to many instances of documents acquired by organizational insiders willing to face the potential consequences of sharing classified information like Manning, hackers such as the Anonymous group have frequently used the platform to publicize the fruits of their online labor. The site operates with the credo that freedom of information is vital to a functional, just, democratic world. Toward this end, they state, "WikiLeaks specializes in the analysis and publication of large datasets of censored or otherwise restricted official materials involving war, spying and corruption" (Wikileaks 2015).

For the general public, the crescendo of Wikileaks up to this point seems to have been its role in the 2016 American presidential election, or perhaps a trove of CIA cyberespionage documents posted in the spring of 2017. Although Wikileaks is indispensable for hacktivists today, the organization itself only releases documents given to it by other sources. With such a limited role, there is not much more for us to learn about their form of activism for my purpose of this chapter. The information they distribute, however, does sometimes play a role in the social media activism I will now turn my attention to.

SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

The great hope for what the global democratization of information through the internet could bring seemed to have finally arrived with the "Arab Spring" of 2012. A storm of protest had erupted in Tunisia in 2011 after an individual's act of self-immolation in protest of state-sanctioned police impunity went viral on social media. Using social media and other means to coordinate, one reporter described protesters with "a rock in one hand, a cell phone in the other" (Ryan 2011). The massive uprising resulted in the overthrow of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who fled to Saudi Arabia in exile. In addition to its assistance in generating responses and coordinating protest activities inside Tunisia, social media put the rebellion on global broadcast. With a media phenomenon in some ways reminiscent of the Zapatista's global alliance building, the Tunisian protesters quickly found support from around the world.

It was not long before a dozen other primarily Arab nations followed their lead, including the nations of Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Libya, and Syria. Although most began in 2011, most of these revolts found resolution in the spring of 2012, hence the labeling of the "Arab Spring." Many of these civil uprisings resulted in substantive changes for the better within the governments under protest. Some, such as Egypt and Libya, were as successful as Tunisia in bringing complete regime change. However, not all were quick and decisively settled. For example, what began as a popular uprising in Syria evolved into a prolonged and complicated civil war, involving atrocities such as chemical weapons and torture, attracting involvement from global powers such as Russia and the USA. Post-"victory" Libya experienced a steady deterioration of conditions and political instability.

Although popularly described as "social media" revolutions, the Arab Spring uprisings were very "on the ground" and physical for those directly on the scene. Social media communication had facilitated coordination and dissemination of crucial information, but it was the physical mobilization of the populations that forced political change. On the other hand, from an outside perspective, the Arab Spring was almost a memetic spectator sport. Indeed, for the vast majority of Western civilization, the only place it happened was in media.

Audiences consumed the Arab Spring through social media newsfeeds just like any other form of content. And when social media networks (i.e., the internet and cell phone networks) were shut down during these tumultuous happenings, hacktivists (most famously, the Anonymous collective) busied themselves with various strategies and techniques to bring networks back online, or circumvent the traditional networks altogether. These contributions

from the other side of the world were quickly abandoned when it appeared to audiences that a resolution had been achieved.

The long-term results of the Arab Spring are somewhat different from the euphoric celebrations in 2012. In popular Western media, the Arab Spring meme is synonymous with a social media victory. As happens with memetic communication, the moment seems frozen in time, an eternal testament to the revolutionary triumph of digital communication technology. Meanwhile, unrest continues in many of these nations all these years later as they struggle to sort out the socio-political and cultural ramifications of their conflicts. For example, Libya in 2017 was gripped by yet another civil war, with reports of buying and selling of people as slaves. The civil war in Syria has dragged on for years, while new and lingering atrocities continue to accumulate unchecked. These current situations on the ground, however, seem in social media as disconnected from the Arab Spring meme as a soap opera is from the Superbowl. For the average audience member, the current conflicts in the Arab world pass through social media feeds as isolated incidences. They act as symbolic cues for talking points in various online communities that begin and end as quickly as the latest Twitter trend.

As we peruse our various media, we are constantly confronted with a new cause de jour, or perhaps more accurately, cause of the moment. Something that happened two days ago may feel like ancient history in the present moment. The solipsism of online communities (see chapter 8) encourages the reduction of life and death issues into simple slactivism—that is, exhibiting an appearance of concern, but not doing anything more than curating one's social media impression. The Kony 2012: Invisible Children campaign was one such deception.

With over 100 million views to date on YouTube, Invisible Children's Kony 2012 video first went globally viral within a matter of weeks upon its release in 2012. It dominated social media for several days before some people discovered that the film conveyed false and outdated information. It was exposed that the organization was keeping most of the money raised in the name of liberating child soldiers for itself. Adding insult to injury, the head of the Invisible Children organization was arrested shortly after their meteoric rise, for masturbating in public. Even so, the video remains on YouTube half a decade after their debacle, and the Invisible Children website continues to collect donations at the expense of Uganda and the child soldiers on the ground in other African nations. And equally so, the memetic approach to slactivism continues to enjoy a prominent place in our culture's political discourse.

Following the precedent of the Zapatista masks, aesthetically based efforts continue to be a favored approach to feigning involvement in world affairs. Facebook flag overlays have become a favorite expression of this, in which

a flag signifying the social media user's cause of the moment is melded with their actual profile picture. The aesthetic is used to show alliance and solidarity with the people suffering whatever disaster has befallen their nation. The 2015 "Je suis Paris" flag overlay campaign that followed a brutal terrorist attack is one of the better known of many such slacktivist demonstrations. Others have ranged from flag overlay celebrations of Gay Pride, to solidarity with women's rights, to other defiances of terrorism in Brussels and Sweden. A glance at the list of causes that have thus far gone viral with flag overlays shows that social media slacktivists do not seem terribly disturbed by atrocities beyond the Euro-American civilizational boundaries. Many other equally or even more shocking events in other parts of the world—such as anywhere on the Continent of Africa, the nation of Turkey, and anywhere in the Middle East—have gone with almost no popular social media acknowledgment at all. Some have criticized this as hypocritical, pointing out that it reveals underlying racism and ethnic chauvinism. Other unique (but ultimately hollow) memetic slacktions have erupted out of various other problematic situations. Among the more interesting examples is the Standing Rock Facebook check-in meme.

In October 2016, the Sioux Indian Reservation of Standing Rock, North Dakota, suddenly became one of the most popular places in the world. With the pretense of confusing law enforcement—said to be using Facebook to track and monitor protesters of an in-progress oil pipeline across the land—about 1.5 million people worldwide "checked in" to the location. Without having to do anything more than falsely map their location, Facebook users could feel like they were contradicting the FBI, helping the beleaguered Native American nation, and look like edgy, no-holds-barred protesters, all at the same time.

Meanwhile, the FBI and local law enforcement both publicly explained that they did not find Facebook a useful tool for espionage. Nonetheless, this multitude of online slacktivists celebrated victory when it was announced in December 2016 that construction would be halted for an environmental assessment. The Standing Rock campaign was thus considered finished in social media, and after that all but ignored. However, in February 2017, protesters on the ground were forcibly removed from the area, with the intention of resuming construction that spring. By that time, slacktivist attention was fixated on something that loomed much larger for them: protesting the election of Donald Trump and the rise of the Alt-Right.

The Rise of the Alt-Right

Preoccupied as we are, each in our own insular social media communities, an alarming moment in online politics came with the sudden popular aware-

Figure 11.1. Slacktivism. The top row revives the Uncle Sam meme, and uses World War II references to cast the Alt-right as neo-Nazis (the right-side image comes from an Alt-right source depicting Trump in a Nazi uniform gassing Bernie Sanders, who is Jewish). The bottom row left and right joke with the memetic Flag Overlay approach to social media activism image macros, while the center meme mocks social media slactivism regarding Standing Rock. Source: "Uncle Sam Antifascist," original image taken from a WWII anti-Japanese propaganda poster, found at https://i.redd. it/ynhg7lcjrgfz.jpg. "Back in my day Grumpy Grandpa," creator unknown, found at https://pics.me.me/thumb_alt-right-back-in-my-day-we-calledthem-nazis-7340705. png. "Nazi Trump Gassing Bernie," creator unknown, found at https://www.nation-alobserver.com/sites/nationalobserver/files/img/2016/01/24/trump_twitter.png. "Sweden stood with us after Bowling Green," creator unknown, found at https://pbs. twimg.com/media/C5D-fkyUYAAhDqA.jpg. "I Support Whatever's Trending," creator unknown, found at https://pics.onsizzle.com/i-support-whatevers-trending-we-are-live-you-cunts-21128060.png. "Our officers can't repel slactivism of such magnitude," creator unknown, found at https://memegenerator.net/instance/72793148/standing-rock-my-god-1-million-facebook-check-ins-our-officerscant-repel-slacktivism-of-that-magnit.Html.

ness of how effectively activists for authoritarianism, extreme right-wing ideology and fascism had appropriated the tools of online resistance that had previously remained mostly at the behest of leftists and anarchists. The degree to which the socially networked "Alt-Right" community played a role in the election of Donald Trump is still debated. However, the premise that

the Alt-Right played some kind of important role is generally accepted. The surprise for many outside the extreme political right has mainly come from the realization of how discretely divided into our own microcosms and how inward-looking our social world has become. It may be difficult for progressively minded people to accept, but the appropriation of political activism online may be less a conspiratorial theft of methods, and more a reflection of actual political conditions on the ground. As Papacharissi described:

> the use of the Internet, the operative medium here, as it converges and sustains multiple technologies, becomes an asset or a detriment, depending on how it is put to use. The internet, from this point of view serves as a tool, and does not contain the agency to effect social change. Individuals, on the other hand, possess differing levels of agency, based on which they can employ the Internet to varying ends, effects, and gratification. (Papacharissi 2009, 230)

Habermas (1987) warned that colonization of the public sphere needed to be constantly resisted, an idea taken up at length by Salter (2005). Citing Arendt, Papacharissi explains:

> transition from the prominent public realm to private spaces could equal alienation, in which "the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have been formed between the individual and his fellow men" is lost (Arendt, p. 4). It is precisely this "in-between," that, as individuals act civically from the locus of the private sphere, is filled in by online digital media. Unlike offline digital media, online technologies possess "reflexive" architecture, responsive to the needs of multiple private spheres, which would be isolated were it not for the connectivity capabilities of online media. (2009, 244)

In this regard, portions of 4chan and Reddit have been privatized through a process of extreme-right dominance that will not tolerate challenges to their narrative of supremacy. 4chan and the sub-Reddit /r/the_donald members use a relentless barrage of trolling posts (known as "shit posting" by the community) to dominate and subjugate other users in the space. An online subculture has emerged in these and other Alt-Right forums that has its own unique language in support of their communally constructed worldview. As I will show in chapter 12, these aesthetic constructs come to define the sense of purpose for these communities and their users.

The evolution of the Alt-Right online activist community was not very different from the evolution of any other online community. What distinguishes them is their purpose rather than their strategy. Through coordination on Reddit, 4chan, and other social media sites, the various groups employ basically the same tactics and strategies that any online activist group would use. Even the redistribution of "fake news" is consistent with the solipsism

of online communities I described in chapter 8. The result has been the rise of right-wing agitation and a digital culture built in opposition to what its members perceive as liberals, feminists, social justice warriors, immigrants, Jewish people, Muslims, Mexicans, African Americans, progressives, environmentalists, and pretty much any other identity not considered part of the fascistic Alt-Right. All of these have been given pejorative nicknames that serve as codes within the Alt-Right discourse, and a constant stream of image macros and discussion board churn have ensured they jump platforms to become memes.

A few Alt-Right communities are especially illustrative of memetic political activism. The sub-Reddit the_donald seems to be a phenomenon unto itself; a hive of around seven hundred thousand eager "centipedes" (as they call themselves) reinforcing one another's devotion to President Donald Trump. Related but not the same, the obscure Cult of Kek and its appropriated reimaginings of Pepe the Frog as a Nazi savior occasionally rhizomatically protrude from the shadows of the Alt-Right, to pepper various extreme right discourses with their particular aesthetic interventions. And the Breitbart News propaganda machine has been chugging along all the while, creating and framing agenda-setting discussion points for hungry right-wing social media audience members.

Since I already described the techniques the Alt-Right has appropriated in the previous sections of this chapter, I will not repeat them at this point. Instead, I will allude to a further unraveling of the effects of this well-bounded apparatus on popular discourse that is the subject of the next chapter. Although the methods have been seen before, the Alt-Right as a force exhibit a unity of purpose that makes them a formidable presence in memetic political communication, even though there is no evidence that they are more than a loud minority in the American polis. By embracing a common purpose and excelling as a mass with the tools of previous activist generations, the Alt-Right seems able to exert an influence disproportionate to their actual number. Hence, as European colonists in days gone by, the Alt-Right seems capable of controlling large areas of the digital world with a minimal amount of administrative capacity.

Enclosure and Colonization

The great hope of the internet and globally networked communication as a democratizing force for the world has had its ups and downs. Once the virtual commons of a libertarian and rebellious disaffected netizenry, our digital world is quickly becoming enclosed by forces of corporate dominance, governmental control:

we are in the midst of a considerable qualitative transformation in the processes of commodification that is, in large part, owed to an overwhelming capitalist enclosure of the wider communicative field. (Prodnik 2014, 142)

Now added to these enclosing forces is a thrust of fascism. The decline of the Internet as a facet of the public sphere through colonization by power and money is explained:

> Habermas warns of the "colonization" of the public sphere by money and power, which results in cultural homogenization, a lack of public discourse, and a centralization of decision-making power. [. . .] These processes lead to societies where citizens cannot agree with one another and discussion is useless; or, a society where only one perspective is allowed and discussion ceases to exist. Hannah Arendt writes [. . .] such outcomes isolate individuals in the "subjectivity of their own singular experience," negating the power of the public sphere as a place where individuals are exposed to the vast variety of human experience other than their own. (Clio's Current 2013)

However, while acknowledging the challenges and problems of memetic communication, Ding remains hopeful:

> Although there is abundant evidence shown that memes are permeated with stereotypes, old patterns of discrimination, and invisible whiteness, there are still reasons to hold optimistic beliefs in the liberatory possibilities of Internet memes. Their various genres, participatory culture, dynamic circulation and transformation, and political engagements, all display the potential of Internet memes to be utilized to achieve social justice. (Ding 2015, 88)

It bears remembering the 2017 women's march (with its highly recognizable pink "pussy ears" meme) on the same day as the inauguration of Donald Trump was the largest mobilization of national protest in history. And in spite of shortcomings by audiences in the virtual sphere, the Arab Spring did happen, which resulted in positive changes and greater freedoms in several nations.

NOTES

1. A typical comparison is summed up in a quote by Ryan (2006) describing Marcos as "a kind of postmodern Che Guevara."
2. A review of Chiapas-l (one of the busiest English language Zapatista listservers) archives shows a huge portion of translations were done by an individual or collective with the username Irlandesa.

3. The Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* was known as editorially friendly to publishing Zapatista communications.

4. Note the irony that it was their easily consumable image that helped them succeed.

5. As did the group I was working with in Toronto, The Food for Chiapas Campaign, and then later with the Canadian International Electrical Brigade.

6. See http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/EDTECD.

7. See McChesney, 2004; Mosco, 2009; Winseck and Jin, 2011.

Chapter Twelve

Twenty-First Century Witch Hunting

Targeted, willful destruction and terror in people's everyday lives is the eleventh consequence of memetic communication. Just as in days of old, witch hunting in the twenty-first century means literally targeting women and other made-up "heretics," for political gain and socio-cultural control. The Alt-Right uses an arsenal of tactics to harness memetic communication as an extreme form of cyberbullying, trying to silence oppositional voices in America's political discourse. People assaulted with enormous waves of denigrating spam, trumped-up public outrage, and personal threats often find the only recourse is to retreat from their virtual life altogether and hunker down offline. A climate of fear and "thinking twice" before posting controversial facts and stories thus permeates the infosphere, attacking democratic principles of civic engagement through public discourse.

In previous chapters of this book, I have discussed how informational errors have led to the destruction of people's lives and even death threats due to the nature of memetic communication. As I described in chapter 11, memetic activism has evolved to the point that it has become pivotal to political movements, such as the Arab Spring and the #BlackLivesMatter campaign. However, in the 2016 presidential election cycle, we witnessed the very same memetic tactics harnessed with the intention of triggering a barrage of abuse and intimidations for political purposes.

Some important differences distinguish these more recent controlled efforts from what we had previously seen: They target specific people chosen for ideological reasons, then induce a mob mentality online by strategically setting the memeplex into motion. There is often no discoverable or visible leadership, and they work with the goal of termination of their targeted end-user's presence online rather than correction of a perceived problem. Anonymity and the absence of organizational and individual liability protects the

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perpetrators, as it is difficult if not impossible to hold anyone responsible for the destruction of other people's lives. And as I explained previously, there is no way to undo what has been done once false information gets released in virtual space. Patchin states, "there is a level of permanence that is not evident in traditional bullying" (in Sturgis 2014).

The ubiquity of social media creates many more potential targets and points of contact for harassment online than off, and it is harder to get away from. The potential audience for a bully or harasser is exponentially larger than would be in the physical world. And while there are tactical similarities with memetic activism and digital moral panics, cyberbullies appropriate activist approaches as tools for their own purposes. Where hacktivism is targeted politically motivated action (i.e., chapter 11), and digital moral panics are emotionally driven contagion (i.e., chapter 6), organized, technologically adept fascists have remediated the age-old practice of witch hunting into a memetic format. Berlet (2012) compares online harassment with a dark and superstitious time in American history: "The witch hunts in Salem . . . have made a comeback today in lurid stories in right-wing media about FemiNazis and feminist sluts who extol contraception and abortion" (14).

In this chapter, I will treat witch hunting as synonymous with both vigilantism and cyber-harassment (which includes bullying). Technopedia (2017) defines internet vigilantism (aka digilantism) as "online actions that are oriented toward monitoring the actions of others." "Monitoring" is undoubtedly too soft of a description in many of the incidences more familiar to people. Policing the actions of others through incitement of targeted mob-like assaults is more accurately what victims of online vigilantism experience. Stantonian (2015) has called it the "weaponization of moral panic," which is historically connected to individual transgressions of ethical and spiritual natures. In the present, it takes on the characteristic of an overwhelming virtual attack on a targeted individual. In both cases, rationality and even the rule of law have little effect on the mob once it has been set in pursuit of the target.

The tactics of virtual witch hunting most align with the phenomena of cyber-harassment and cyberbullying. Cyberbullying falls into the broader legal category of harassment, "a course of conduct which annoys, threatens, intimidates, alarms, or puts a person in fear of their safety" (US Legal 2017). Further:

> Harassment is unwanted, unwelcomed and uninvited behavior that demeans, threatens or offends the victim and results in a hostile environment for the victim. Harassing behavior may include, but is not limited to, epithets, derogatory comments or slurs and lewd propositions, assault, impeding or blocking movement, offensive touching or any physical interference with normal work or movement, and visual insults, such as derogatory posters or cartoons. (US Legal 2017)

Most simply put, cyber-harassment is harassment of individuals through virtual/digital media. Citron explains:

> Cyber harassment involves a persistent and repeated course of conduct targeted at a specific person . . . designed to . . . cause the person severe emotional distress, and often the fear of physical harm. [It] is often accomplished by a perfect storm of abuse. Harassers terrorize victims by threatening violence. They post defamatory falsehoods about victims. They impersonate victims in online ads and suggest—falsely—that their victims are interested in sex. Sometimes, harassers manipulate search engines to ensure the prominence of the lies in searches of victims' names. Harassers invade victims' privacy by posting their sensitive information, such as nude images or Social Security numbers. Lastly, harassers use technology to knock people offline. (Citron 2015, 1)

For the sake of simplicity, unless explicitly differentiated, I will use the terms cyberbullying and cyber-harassment interchangeably.

Though there is not a huge gap in numbers, slightly more males than females cyberbully, and the online phenomenon seems to reflect typical offline bullying demographics (Sun, Fan, and Du 2016). Most attacks are against gay people, women, people of color, people who are considered "different" in some way (ethnicity, religion, or appearance), or high-profile people (Sturgis 2014). Journalists were added to this list of common targets in the Trump era.

It seems most studies of cyberbullying and cyber-harassment focus on children/youth, and abuse by formerly intimate peoples. The majority of studies I found were concerned with the victims' experiences and the legal technicalities of online harassment. The techniques are similar in many respects. I found twenty-two cyberbullying tactics in my research:

1. Anonymity: Keeping their identity hidden, so the victim does not know who is after them.
2. Catfishing: Stealing an online identity to create a fake persona, re-creating social networking profiles for deceptive purposes.
3. Cyber-Harassment: Continuous abusive, threatening communication directed through social media at and/or about a targeted person.
4. Cyber-Stalking: Following the victim throughout various social media forums and making threats to his or her wellbeing and/or safety. May also extend to others in the victim's social network.
5. Dissing: Sending or posting cruel information, photos, screenshots, and/or videos to damage reputations and/or friendships.
6. Dogpiling: A mob bombarding a comment thread with insults to make the victim take back their opinion or scare them.

7. Doxing: Publicly revealing personal information such as phone number, email address, home address, place of work, etc. to make the victim vulnerable and subject to virtual and physical world attacks by others.
8. Exclusion: Deliberately not including someone in social activities with other social media friends.
9. Fake Profiles: Created to hide the bully's identity.
10. Flaming: Posting scolding, demeaning, and otherwise disrespectful messages.
11. Fraping: Logging into a social networking account and impersonating the victim, posting inappropriate content in his or her name.
12. Hate Speech: Targeting individuals belonging to a specific group (often racial minorities, women, LGBTQ people, and specific religions) to incite rage or violence against or from the collective group, or an individual member.
13. Hijacking: Using someone else's account to antagonize and make threats.
14. Masquerading/Impersonation: Pretending to be someone notable or special to gain the victim's interest and trust.
15. Misogyny: Sexual advances and commentary (including slut shaming, talking down, mansplaining, belittling) specifically against women for being women.
16. Outing: Embarrassment or public humiliation of the victim on social media.
17. Revenge Porn: Posting X-rated or other sexualized photos of the victim that were meant to be kept private.
18. Shaming: Morally and ethically denouncing the behavior of the victim.
19. Spear Phishing: Sending a malicious file or link in an outwardly harmless message through a trustworthy-looking social media account.
20. Swatting: Calling a SWAT team (or other police or emergency service) to the location of the victim.
21. Trickery: Gaining trust so that the victim reveals secrets or embarrassing information that is then shared publicly online.
22. Trolling: Using personal attacks, insults, and bad language in online forums to provoke an irrational/angry response from the victim.

Every one of these tactics is damaging in incidences of cyber-harassment. In days gone by, an individual cyberbully or troll might systematically deploy one at a time against another individual or a group. Occasionally a cyberbully might have roused a small group of excitable individuals to their task of harassing an individual or another small group of people. However, it is now common for small armies of cyberbullies armed with virtual robots to target individuals with many or all of these tactics at the same time. A giant

Figure 12.1. Misogyny, Witch Hunts, and Anti-Semitism. In the top left the "Female College Liberal" image macro is used to argue a false equivalency, beside a sign with the "Nasty Woman" meme born by women wearing hats to participate in the "Pussy Ears" meme on the right (photo by Jonathan Eyler-Werve). The bottom row makes fun of the witch hunting mob mentality on the left. The bottom right corner makes a dual attack of misogyny and anti-Semitism by combining the Pussy Ears meme with The anti-Semitic meme of the Jew in the shadow. Source: "College Liberal," creator unknown, found at https://i.pinimg.com/236x/4f/0c/3a/4f0c3a256f5f0c097d84915 68101542c.jpg. "Women's March, January 21 2017, Chicago," created by Jonathan Eyler-Werve, Creative Commons 2.0 Copyright, found at https://en.wikipedia.org/ wiki/Nasty_woman#/media/File:Women%27s_March,_January_21_2017,_Chicago_ (31601577104).jpg. "Burn Him Alive," creator unknown, public domain, found at https://memegenerator.net/img/instances/67447159/he-wrote-something-on-the-inter- net-burn-him-alive.jpg. "Modified Antisemitic Pussy Hat," creator unknown, found at https://memestatic1.fjcdn.com/comments/Gtthe+pussy+hat+on+the+pussy+_9a0ed7c 0f9da113afb15d6d74d71922e.jpg.

wave of harassment can hit an individual suddenly and overwhelmingly. In these instances, it is almost impossible for an individual to do anything at all online. Control over an individual's virtual life is quickly and devastatingly snatched away from them.

MEMETIC MISOGYNY

On June 29, 2017, the following message was sent from Donald Trump's personal Twitter account:

> I heard poorly rated @Morning_Joe speaks badly of me (don't watch anymore). Then how come low I.Q. Crazy Mika, along with Psycho Joe, came to Mar-a-Lago 3 nights in a row around New Year's Eve, and insisted on joining me. She was bleeding badly from a face-lift. I said no! (Trump 2017)

His misogyny did not surprise anyone, as it was consistent with his record of publicly offending women.[1] What caused this tweet to resonate so strongly with the public was that he sent it in his new political role, which amplified its reach and impact. The President of the United States had used a few moments of his precious time to insult this woman, who had in fact been a supporter during his campaign.

As in witch hunts of old, women are by far the main targets of virtual witch hunts. While insulting to women on a national scale, Donald Trump's one tweet only scratches the surface of this deeply embedded online social ill. One of the earliest women targeted online back in 1995, Monica Lewinski described "mobs of virtual stone throwers" whose goal was her "global humiliation" (in Mitchell 2015, 5). Mitchell describes Lewinski's experience:

> Her public sexual shaming was one of the first virtual mass stonings on the Internet. Sure, some of the stone throwers wanted to punish her for Clinton's downfall, but the aggression appears to have been driven by those who enjoy the misogynistic sport of taking a woman down. (2015, 5)

Citron explains that women are subjected to "rape threats, doctored photographs portraying women being strangled, postings of women's home addresses alongside suggestions that they are interested in anonymous sex, and technological attacks that shut down blogs and websites" (2015b, 373). She goes on to explain that cyber-harassment "impedes women's full participation in online life, often driving them offline, and undermines their autonomy, identity, dignity, and well-being" (2015b, 373). Yet such misogyny typically

gets dismissed as harmless teasing, and the victims' experiences are trivialized as just a normal part of a woman's everyday life.

It may surprise some to learn that slightly more women than men use the internet. In the USA, 66 percent of the female population are netizens, compared with 65 percent of the male population (Statista 2017). This fact itself reveals a deep-seated patriarchal hegemony since "male" is the default assumed identity when a neutral or no identity is stipulated online (Bailey and LaFrance 2016). Within the online population of women, younger women (eighteen to twenty-four) are likely to experience twice as much harassment online than women just five years older than themselves (twenty-five to twenty-nine) (Wihbey and Kille 2015). These same women are also 75 percent more likely to have experienced online stalking (Wihbey and Kille 2015). As if that were not enough targeted harassment, their chances of being physically threatened, and harassed for a sustained period are twice as much as the older comparison group (Wihbey and Kille 2015). Wihbey and Kille's report concludes with the almost comical understatement that online harassment is "extremely upsetting" for women.

In addition to the previously explained twenty-two harassment tactics, Weiss (2016) identifies another six that are specific to women:

1. Sexualizing women's professional accomplishments.
2. Insults using sexist stereotypes and slurs.
3. Asking thinly disguised personal questions that disrespect personal boundaries.
4. Attacking other aspects of women's identities (i.e., sexual orientation, race, ethnicity).
5. Requesting free labor.
6. Combatively mansplaining a concept that is already understood.

In many professional settings, such attacks put women in a classic "double bind" position: If they protest the harassment, they face accusations of being overly sensitive, thin-skinned, and unable to function at a demanding and tough professional level; If they say nothing, they seem to reinforce these same stereotypes of weakness and are forced to internalize the fear and humiliation encouraged by the harassment.

Mitchell (2015) identifies the FHRITP[2] meme as a turning point for women, with misogyny having reached a critical mass that was more than women would tolerate. After a year or more of having men grab her microphone to reproduce the meme for themselves, CityNews reporter Shauna Hunt in Toronto touched off a counter-campaign when she confronted a group of men who had interrupted her report with her camera rolling. At the time of this

writing, her video is approaching 6 million views and has inspired women reporters around the world to similarly call out sexists who try to interrupt their work. That said, the battle for women's rights continues, as misogyny has found a comfortable territory within which to reproduce itself online. Our normative virtual culture is unquestionably patriarchal. And when this sexism intersects with racism, it adds yet another dimension to the damage.

MEMETIC ANTI-SEMITISM

With much of our attention to memetic discrimination focused on African American and Muslim people, it may be surprising to learn that while comprising only 2.2 percent of the US population, Jewish people continue to be targeted the most with hate crimes based on religion/ethnic identity in America and many other nations around the globe (Lichtblau 2016).[3] More than half of officially reported hate crimes in the USA are against Jews, which adds up to twice the number of the next group on the FBI's list (PBS 2017). Always a favorite target for harassment and persecution throughout the world in the past millennia, Jewish people and institutions continue to be relentlessly attacked in virtual space as well as physical in the present. Evidenced by the deployment of the Godwin's Law counter-meme (described in chapter 1), anti-Semitism online is a concern as old as the internet itself.

In the early 1990s, white supremacists set up the "Stormfront" online forum to facilitate discussion of their beliefs. Along with many others, it later became a full-blown portal of hate with twenty-three years of encouraging white supremacy (Beirich 2015). A 2014 report showed that close to one hundred people had been murdered in the USA by people with Stormfront accounts (Beirich 2014). The web community continues to operate with well over three hundred thousand user accounts.

The largest white supremacist web presence in 2017 was The Daily Stormer, named after a Nazi German newspaper whose founder was executed for war crimes after World War II. Its neo-Nazi founder, Andrew Anglin, is largely responsible for organizing and leading Alt-Right online harassment campaigns. In addition to select Jewish individuals, organizations, and those perceived to be "liberal" sympathizers, the so-called "Stormer Troll Army" has even carried out attacks against Breitbart News for failing to be as harshly critical of the State of Israel and American Jews as they would like to see. The Troll Army has promoted targeted murders, genocide, and armed preparation for a planned "race war," reveling in the excitement they see themselves provoking. As Anglin put it, "Triggering [outrage] is the national sport" (in Hankes 2017). The Troll Army has, in fact, built a physical-world presence

of thirty-one chapters as of this writing, preparing to carry out The Daily Stormer's directives to reshape the world according to a racial hierarchy. Toward this goal, Anglin called for an attack using "fake black person accounts . . . to create a state of chaos on twitter, among the black twitter population, by sowing distrust and suspicion. . . . Chaos is the name of the game" (in Southern Poverty Law Center 2017).

Until 2016–2017, such groups seemed to keep to themselves online, concerned mainly with their own supporters and not wanting to draw scrutiny that could result in them being shut down, or even possibly result in charges of incitement and hate crimes. People who might have had affinity with such groups seemed to be cautious about being publicly affiliated with them, fearing popular blowback that could damage their livelihoods and reputations. With the election of Donald Trump, their attitude seems to have changed.

According to Potok, "Trump's run for office electrified the radical right, which saw in him a champion of the idea that America is fundamentally a white man's country" (2017, 1). Trump's platform of choice, Twitter, is identified as the most rampant social media used to promote hate (Southern Poverty Law Center 2017) (although YouTube is reportedly also emerging as important virtual real estate for white supremacist and fascist groups).[4] The Anti-Defamation League reported a notable increase in anti-Semitism in social media correlating with Trump's 2016 election campaign. Their report explains that "a considerable number of the anti-Semitic tweets targeting journalists originate with people identifying themselves as Trump supporters, 'conservatives' or extreme right-wing elements" (Anti-Defamation League 2016). Twitter is the most popular social media outlet for promoting violence against Jews (Oboler 2016). However, all social media, in general, has seen a stunning increase of presence from hate groups and content, increasing 900 percent in just two years (from 2014 to 2016), fueled mainly by a sudden uptick in hate campaigns against Muslims and the LGTBQ communities (SafeHome 2016). And just in case the connection might seem too tenuous to be credibly sound, Anglin himself made clear the validation Trump's victory bestowed upon white supremacy in America: "Our Glorious Leader has ascended to God Emperor. . . . Make no mistake about it: we did this. If it were not for us, it wouldn't have been possible" (in Potok 2017).

As explained in chapter 3, memetic communication re-animates old tropes in new aesthetics and platforms. One of the most persistent anti-Semitic memes is called "The Merchant" by white supremacists, which belies its naked bigotry (figure 12.2). A report by Oboler (2014) more descriptively calls it "The Anti-Semitic Meme of the Jew." The deployment of this meme illustrates how a memetic campaign of hate is conducted. The first step is the creation of the graphic itself. Oboler (2014) explains:

> The Anti-Semitic Meme of the Jew is a cartoon picture depicting a negative stereotype of a Jewish man with a black beard, long hooked nose, a hunched back, crooked teeth, and hands being wrung in glee. The image was created by a white supremacist cartoonist and has been online in neo-Nazi circles since at least 2004.

The meme has been re-constituted many times over in many different depictions, such as an octopus (in reference to a German Nazi metaphor describing Jews as an octopus encircling the world in its tentacles), a rat (another reference to historical anti-Semitism), and innumerable representations of the character manipulating world events.

The second step in the campaign attempted to normalize the image in popular usage. In 2013 an entry on KnowYourMeme.com with the name "The Merchant" was created that explained the image as a joke used just for fun. In tandem, a Facebook group called "The Merchant" was made in 2014 that provided a false history of the meme, claiming it was created as a fun image and thus no one should be offended by it. Meanwhile, that very same group was used to distribute anti-Semitic messages and images. In a cybernetic analysis, the creation of these virtual sites works to insinuate the image across the system, facilitating the deployment of memes by both building a community of potential prosumers, and providing a stabilizing (though false) historical referent for the signifier.

The third step in the campaign of the Anti-Semitic Meme of the Jew was its leap across platforms. Stormfront was quick to recirculate the image and its variations, as were Reddit groups, Twitter users, and individual Facebook users. The image leaped into the physical world on signs and placards brandished at white supremacist rallies.

Facebook, Reddit, Twitter, and KnowYourMeme have taken steps to address anti-Semitism on their services, but the sheer volume and exponential reproduction of viral growth makes its demise seem impossible. And this is only the most visible discrimination. Erasure of anti-Semitism is even more difficult when steps are taken to hide it in plain sight.

One method of covertly sharing racist messages that gained popularity with anti-Semites is known as a "dog whistle." A dog whistle is "coded language" that, in this case, allows white supremacists to hold discussions among themselves in public without the general public catching on. A recent example is the "Jewish Echo" (aka "The Jewish Cowbell"). In text, the meme consists of three sets of parentheses encasing the surname of a person identified as Jewish like this: (((Name))). Originating as an anti-Semitic joke on a white supremacist podcast in which all Jewish names were sound-effected with an echo (to mockingly represent the echo of anti-Semitism through the ages), the meme jumped into text on Twitter to target a specific Jewish journalist

for attack by the Troll Army. Once it became known, this particular meme was countered with a campaign in which anyone who wished to participate simply added it to their own name, thus making it an unreliable signifier of Jewishness for its intended audience.

There are many other dog whistles, and there have been voluminous cases of extremist memetics. The examples given here were chosen for the ease of explanation. And it is important to reaffirm that even though this section has focused on anti-Semitism as a case study topic, these same issues have plagued people of color and sexual/gender minorities with equally terrifying effect. Naureckas explains that there are numerous "parallels between antisemitism and Islamophobia in contemporary rhetoric" (in Berlet 2012, 14). The net effect of the memetic communication examined here is that anti-Semitism is now mainstream (just as Islamophobia and attacks on people of color in general are). Oboler (2017) explains how this erupts in social media:

> PewDiePie, the most popular person on YouTube (53 million subscribers) posted a video which included a clip he commissioned in which two men held up a sign reading "Death to All Jews." A few days later he played a Nazi anthem while bowing to a Swastika, and later still he argued, "there's a difference between a joke and actual, like, death to all Jews," then cuts to a satirical video in which he says, "Hey guys, PewDiePie here. Death to all Jews, I want you to say after me: Death to all Jews. And, you know, Hitler was right. I really opened my eyes to white power. And I think it is time we did something about this."

At the time of this writing, Donald Trump as president has failed to condemn the Nazis, KKK, "White Nationalists," and other racists who have wrought violence in America's streets, even after a counter-demonstrator was killed by an act of Alt-Right terrorism in Charlottesville, Virginia. The web server host of The Daily Stormer terminated their account with them, and other US companies have refused to work with them, prompting them to move to an offshore internet service provider to avoid accountability within the USA.

Mainstream media seems to have awakened to the fact that these groups have made the jump from virtual space and are operating in the physical world. Even so, these groups are difficult to challenge and impossible to purge online. Facebook, Google, Twitter, Airbnb, and other social media sites have stepped up their efforts to remove anti-Semitic content from their services. However, as we have seen in chapter 10, once something has gone viral it is all but impossible to remove it from our virtual world. Even further complicating the situation are attacks on journalists, which often bring sexism and racism into play.

Figure 12.2. Anti-Semitic Image Macros. Top: (L) The Antisemitic Meme of the Jew; (R) Hillary Clinton skewed to mimic The Antisemitic Meme of the Jew. Bottom: (L) "Nazi Pepe" gassing the Antisemitic Meme of the Jew; (R) Hillary Clinton associated with the Star of David used as a symbol of supposed corruption by Jewish influences. *Sources*: **"The Antisemitic Meme of the Jew," creator unknown, found at https:// memearchive.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/cjfjoifuuaeca8i2.jpg?w=501. "Evil Jewish Clinton," creator unknown, found at https://i.imgur.com/NVKawCh.jpg. "Nazi Pepe," creator unknown, found at https://infostormer.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/jew-gas-pepe.png. "Clinton History Made," creator unknown, found at http://nymag.com/ daily/intelligencer/2016/07/trump-uses-star-of-david-to-call-clinton-corrupt.html.**

TARGETING JOURNALISTS

A recent target of virtual witch hunting is the broad category of "journalists," denigrated as part of the "fake news" meme. Encouraged by Donald Trump himself,[5] 2016 saw the rise of unprecedented harassment against journalists

in the USA. I have described the previous two types of virtual witch hunts as if they are separate categories of incidence, but they frequently intersect, and they are often used to bolster an attack against a journalist. For example, Lewis explains, "If you put a female picture or a female byline on an article then you will end up getting more hostile comments and more comments referring to the author's gender" (in Bouchart 2015, 2). A Jewish woman journalist is very likely to face harassment against all three aspects of her identity. For example, Julia Ioffe wrote a story that was taken as negative towards Melania Trump, for which she was targeted by speeches from Adolf Hitler that were played when she would answer calls from blocked numbers (O'Brien 2016).

No individual journalist or news organization is safe from virtual harassment in this era. Attacks seem to default to sexism and anti-Semitism (and/ or racism/ethnic chauvinism). The Anti-Defamation League reported "at least 800 journalists received anti-Semitic tweets. The top 10 most targeted journalists (all of whom are Jewish) received 83 percent of these anti-Semitic tweets" (Anti-Defamation League 2016). These attacks came as responses to critical coverage of Donald Trump and his campaign. At one point, a list doxing fifty journalists criticized as unsupportive of Trump was posted to 8chan (4chan's even more offensive cousin), which led to a barrage of attacks on individual journalists. Lizza (2016) describes the typical attacks:

> Many of the anti-Semitic tweets include images of the journalists they are directed at, Photoshopped to show them inside gas chambers or among the corpses of Holocaust victims. Tweets about putting Jewish journalists and their family members in ovens or having them made into lampshades are not uncommon.

The Fake News meme leaped out of the journalistic community into mainstream media when Trump himself hurled it as an insult at his first presidential press conference: "'You are fake news!' he pointed at CNN's Jim Acosta while refusing to listen to his question" (Carson 2017). Journalists had been using the term to describe propaganda in the guise of legitimate journalism being circulated on social media. Trump somewhat successfully turned the table regarding what the meme now signifies for most consumers of popular media. And CNN was one of his favorite targets. So much so that he took time from his presidential schedule to tweet his approval of a spoof video that portrayed him beating up "CNN" (represented by a logo placed over the face of an actor at a wrestling event). The author of the spoof had previously posted a graphic of CNN executives, hosts, and employees with a Star of David positioned next to each of them. Responding to Trump's approval, he wrote, "Wow!! I never expected my meme to be retweeted by the God Emperor himself!!!" (HanAssholeSolo in Haaretz 2017).

The ironic truth of using the fake news meme to attack journalists is that Trump himself has been peddling in "Fake News" for quite some time. The display of fake *Time* magazine covers featuring his image at his properties is a subtle but revealing example (Fahrenthold 2017). He is known to have bizarrely acted the part of his own press agent in the early days of his rise to fame, communicating false information and rumors about himself and thereby planting them in the news media (Fisher and Hobson 2016).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, has publicly denounced Trump's attacks on journalists:

> It's really quite amazing when you think that freedom of the press, not only sort of a cornerstone of the U.S. Constitution but very much something that the United States defended over the years is now itself under attack from the President. [. . .] To call these news organisations "fake" does tremendous damage and to refer to individual journalists in this way, I have to ask the question is this not an incitement for others to attack journalists? (In Nebehay 2017)

Added to the harassment for women is the issue of unpaid work that all journalists in this era find themselves putting in on social media. Lindy West (2017) explains:

> Twitter, for the past five years, has been a machine where I put in unpaid work and tension headaches come out. I write jokes there for free. I post political commentary for free. I answer questions for free. I teach feminism 101 for free. Off Twitter, these are all things by which I make my living—in fact, they comprise the totality of my income.

She goes on to explain that in exchange for her free labor, she had been under constant attack: "Neo-Nazis mine my personal life for vulnerabilities to exploit; and men enjoy unfettered, direct access to my brain so they can inform me, for the thousandth time, that they would gladly rape me if I weren't so fat" (West 2017). She explains the impossibility of personally combating the harassment on a personal level, explaining the double-bind that if she responds at all, she is accused of "feeding the trolls," while if she chooses to do nothing, it only escalates. She has been accused of censorship for reporting bullies, and accused of unfairly not allowing alternative viewpoints when she blocks users herself. It is truly a no-win situation for a Jewish woman journalist who finds herself targeted in an online witch hunt. As Bouchart (2015) puts it, "Everyone, regardless of their gender, should be able to work without the fear of getting insulted, threatened or bullied. And yet, for many women journalists today, receiving abusive comments online has become commonplace."

SOLUTIONS

As in witch hunts of old, the overwhelming power and ubiquity of mob participants (and now, online drone robots as well) can make it feel like escape is impossible. There are, however, several efforts to push back and reign in the abuses. Wihbey and Kille (2015) explain that online harassment is "a profound civil rights issue for women and other groups such as racial minorities." They go on to explain, "Persistent threats can not only diminish well-being and cause psychological trauma but can undercut career prospects and the ability to function effectively in the marketplace and participate in democracy." They have suggested part of the problem is the openness guaranteed by the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which was meant to facilitate innovation, debate, and creativity. In their assessment, the very same freedom from consequences creates a space for rampant derogatory speech from anonymous sources, with almost no legal recourse available.

Since it can be difficult if not impossible to legally pursue hundreds of thousands of individual anonymous users, legal approaches have tended to favor targeting internet service providers and community administrators. Unfortunately, the FBI has as much as stated it has no interest in addressing this problem, and legislative approaches in America have largely been ignored or outright rejected by lawmakers in Congress (Levintova 2016). In other words, apart from the occasional exception to the status quo where an individual or two have been prosecuted, nothing in this avenue has proven successful to date.

Several non-legal solutions have also been developed. Paladin, Crash Override, TrollBusters, and several other apps and web services seek to provide recourse for those who find themselves targeted. However, such approaches are reactionary, and can only be invoked after an individual target has been victimized. Nipping the mobilization of "troll armies" in the bud, before their campaigns have a window of opportunity to go viral, would be a preferable solution. Until this can be accomplished (if ever), the call among journalists to stick together seems to be the most actionable approach:

> Harassment should be seen as an attack on a free press and a call to action for other journalists. Journalists have a duty to watch each other's backs in the field and in the newsroom. (Seaman 2017, 33)

Whether or not this suggestion might result in a more favorable outcome, this only addresses the problem for a small group of people. It may indeed be possible for a clearly defined group of "journalists" to stick together, but it becomes much more difficult when a broad and ambiguously defined

gender and/or ethnic/racialized group comes under attack (for example, "Jews," "blacks," "feminists," etc.). Rather than having one another's backs, responses to online witch hunts have overwhelmingly taken the guise of studies and reports. This being as it is, it is little wonder West (2017) writes, "I have to conclude, after half a decade of troubleshooting, that it may simply be impossible to make this platform usable for anyone but trolls, robots and dictators."

 Despite all the obstacles in the way, it may indeed be possible to address the problem of online witch hunts and right the wrongs of troll armies. Like cures for physical-world viruses, the solution may be found by studying the way memetic harassment works from an objective, mechanical perspective.

NOTES

 1. For example, the "Grabbed her by the pussy" remark, "Blood coming out everywhere" etc. The Telegraph Online has published a comprehensive running list for those interested in Mr. Trump's notorious achievements in this regard http://www. telegraph.co.uk/women/politics/donald-trump- sexism-tracker-every-offensive-comment-in-one-place/.

 2. FHRITP is a staged video that went viral of a woman giving a 'live' on-air report who is suddenly interrupted by a disguised man who grabs her microphone and yells into it "Fuck her right in the pussy" (which I see no need to reproduce in the main text here). The video has almost 6 million views on YouTube as of this writing.

 3. Although African American people suffer from the highest rate of hate crimes based on race, attention in this section will focus on antisemitism due to the well-organized, sophisticated nature of social-media hate campaigns against Jewish people. While African-Americans by far suffer the most violent physical world hate crimes, the most prevalent meme-based hate crimes are easily illustrated with a case-study of virtual anti-Semitism. While this case study focuses on anti-Semitism, many if not all of the tactics described here are also deployed against other racial, ethnic, gendered and sexual minorities.

 4. See https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/03/magazine/for-the-new-far-right-youtube-has-become-the-new-talk-radio.html?smid=fb-share

 5. At his public events, Trump would corral media in a fenced central area, which he then used as a prop by pointing at and insulting the journalists from the stage, encouraging his audience to participate as well.

 6.   I argue that there most certainly is (see Kien 2002, 2007, 2013). But the nature of that encoding leaves our digital tools open to be used in morally contrary ways.

Chapter Thirteen

Looks Good Man

Aesthetic Dominance

The twelfth consequence of memetic communication is memetic struggles for aesthetic dominance as the manifestation of political power. Since the simulacral virtual world emphasizes the appearance of things rather than the truth about them, politics and social justice have become struggles over appearances. Shepherded in by the 1950s civil rights movement, the trope "seeing is believing" has evolved into the meme "pics or it didn't happen," even though it is well known in the post-Photoshop era that all digital images should be considered suspect. In answer to the age-old philosophical puzzle that asks, "If a tree falls in the forest and there is no one around to hear it, did it really fall?" contemporary media users would seem likely to reply, "Who cares? If it isn't a media event, it doesn't matter." Thus political struggle in our postmodern, post-truth world seeks to create what Virilio (2002) termed "the optically correct," through a battle of memes.

In the past few chapters, I have reviewed the history of how techniques of memetic activism were developed up to the present moment. From early "lone wolf" hackers to Cyber-Zapatistas, to Anonymous, to the Alt-Right, the intended outcomes have changed, but the tools used to populate the global network with memes are objectively void of such moral issues. The fact that viral marketing campaigns are now commonplace and continue to be constantly refined, incorporating every new "guerilla" technique that comes along, stands as a testament to the benignly amoral aspects of digital tools. This is not to say there may not be the encoding of moral values in the tools themselves.[1] Instead, the moral ends that people now use these tools to achieve arise from circumstances far beyond their origins. The tools we have inherited were made to create the digital world we now find ourselves navigating, which is still in its infancy. Many of the tools by which we will continue to conquer this terrain have yet to be invented.

I described in chapter 5 that our digital world is an aesthetically experienced construct that overwhelms our senses, triggering an analog embodied experience. Considerable effort is expended to invoke excitation and physical feelings that seem to originate in the virtual world rather than in our bodies. Like magic, that sleight of hand is entirely focused on directing the audience's gaze, to control the way things look to the audience. In a previous era, this struggle over appearances might have been handily dismissed as shallow and trite. However, in a world where simulacra comprise our everyday arenas of interaction, aesthetic sensibility is the pinnacle of our survivalist wits. An economic analysis of how such a semiosphere works can help us understand the tactics and strategies at work from more of a macro perspective.

Bordieu (1986, 1998) described "cultural capital" as an economy of symbols. The drive to acquire cultural capital is motivated by the desire to own the symbols of status and success in one's society. In what seems much like a cybernetic explanation, he wrote that the economy of cultural capital functions according to a logic of its own. In this view, the individual attributes we think of as charisma are ideological constructs. So even though it is a social construct, cultural taste is regarded as if it is natural or instinctual. Our cultural needs (in contrast with our physical needs) are determined by upbringing and education, so cultural practices are entwined with education. This is fairly easy to see illustrated in the status accorded private over public institutions. So according to Bordieau, our culture's hierarchy of arts (i.e., an aesthetic hierarchy) diagrams the way society has been educated. I argue such an aesthetic hierarchy is present in the virtual memeplex, and it plays out in the discursive formations that ebb and flow on social media. This happens not only in a generalized macro vision of our virtual world but also within specific online communities, as I described in chapter 8.

Similar to how I explained cybernetics and discourse in chapter 7, Bordieu stated that cultural capital creates and uses its own codes. Using these codes to communicate creates and maintains social order, which is itself an expression of our collective cultural knowledge (how we as a collective think society should look). As I elaborated through the discussion of discourse in chapter 8, a person's inability to use these codes (whether it be from ignorance of them or lack of people in a group who understand them) results in the exclusion of the individual from a given conversation. This results in discursive policing, separating what ideas are considered legitimate in a culture or subculture, from what is considered illegitimate. So, in Bourdieu's description, the acquisition of cultural capital is the acquisition of the coded language useful within a given group. This plays out in a dynamic of unsophisticated labeling of "others" through the deployment of objectifying stereotypes. It is a process of separating "us" and "them" in language, "our" ideas from

"theirs," in which no group can stand outside of its own system of classification since it is how they describe themselves for themselves. In this regard, there can only be objectification (the stereotyped judgment and treatment of people as simple, one-dimensional objects), in which there is no objectivity (the unbiased, non-judgmental observation of what people actually do).

According to Phillips and McQuarrie (2004), at least two important factors influence the way audience members receive aesthetic information. One is a person's competency to read the semiotic codes (which I previously mentioned as a cultural competency). The second is how motivated a person is to struggle with interpreting the text. Together these factors align with Hall's discursive theory of communication, as elements of what he described as "structures of meaning" (1999). In a linear path, upon receiving an aesthetic message a person may or may not be competent enough in the semiosphere it originates to understand it. At that point, they may be motivated (or not) to agree, disagree, or negotiate the meaning of what they see. In the ever-changing virtual world, however, this process becomes easily subverted, and purposely manipulated to juxtapose signs with alternate meanings.

Featherstone (1991) described our consumer culture as having an "over-supply of symbolic goods," meaning we have far more symbols in circulation than we need to maintain our social order. In chapter 2 I described how our virtual world is purely symbolic in nature (i.e., the simulacrum). Featherstone explained that our abundance of signs is symbiotic with "cultural disorder and de-classification," and "reordering" our aesthetics becomes our paramount goal for our everyday activities, rather than making substantive material changes. In practice, we focus our energies on changing what the media representation looks like, rather than changing the injustices and problems of our physical world. This kind of "reordering" is exactly the type of activity that makes media memes what they are, as they are altered, reproduced, and pushed onward by myriad social media users.

Harris and Taylor (2005) explained that a quantitative increase in the production of things brings about changes in the qualitative experiences we have with them. They invoked the concept of "technical loyalty" to describe the now-taken-for-granted assumption that truth is only accessible to us through technological means. For example, the instant replay in sports television shows us frame by frame what "really" happened in a given moment of the game. Alternatively, we must rely on imaging technologies such as ultrasound and CAT scans to know the truth of what is going on in our bodies. Harris and Taylor describe the conceptual result as a commonly held cultural logic, that there is an independent "external reality" outside ourselves as individuals. So technological reproduction and its subsequent aestheticization of truth invoke a conceptual divide between real experiences and what we

consider "truth." This makes truth and reality malleable concepts, rather than the solid facts they were once thought to be.

Truth and experience were traditionally bound with ceremony and spirituality, shaping meaning for specific purposes. For example, the symbols of Christmas, such as the tree, the stockings, etc. were given meaning by the purpose of the holiday: to redistribute wealth, create generosity and goodwill among people. Our technological world, though, is not rooted in ceremonial rules and spiritual purposes. No "thing" is sacred. In the absence of these, digital aesthetics float as the empty signifiers (i.e., simulacra) we know them to be. There is no institutional authority to enforce specific uses and interpretations. Instead, interpretation is guided by our sensory perception, the characteristics of the medium, and the conditions (societal and other factors) in which the symbols are received and deployed. With aesthetics stripped of spirit and ceremony, meaning is removed from our everyday experiences, and truth becomes unattainable. Rather, all things are discrete moments, carrying no memory of what "was" the moment before.

Harris and Taylor explained that we are incessantly bombarded by a bewildering procession of images, creating a sense of seductive, dream-like hallucinations. In our present moment, the aesthetic realm we create for ourselves in social media becomes our entire world and sense of self, much like McLuhan's (1995) concept of narcissus narcosis. The truth we consume aesthetically is contingent, continually changing, supplies only superficial details, and emphasizes the most "average" audience effect (i.e., not the best, nor even the worst). Perhaps most conveniently, it is always and everywhere ready for us to consume it. Likewise, it is very difficult if not impossible to stabilize aesthetic meanings or control the direction a symbol will turn once it has entered a discursive community. Only the community's collective decision-making can determine that.

In a democratic society, persuading individuals' hearts and minds is the only legitimate path to success. This plays out politically as a battle of media images representing thoughts and feelings about the world since the truth about the world is considered to be located in the aesthetics we consume in media. To repeat Virilio (2002), the "optically correct" succeeds the "politically correct" (31), meaning democratic politics in practice is, quite literally, the circulation of aesthetic representations. A demonstration of this practice may help clarify some of these theoretical machinations.

Gilson (2015) claimed that neoliberalism brought about the completion of consumer culture's political project: "the collapse of politics into entertainment" (627). Not to ignore Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger, but his words seem to have uncannily predicted the rise of Donald Trump. Along this line of thought, he proposed that the study of political media memes can

reveal schemas of power relations. In this spirit, there is perhaps no better case study to exemplify the aesthetic nature of contemporary politics than the electoral battle of Pepe.

THE CORRUPTION OF PEPE

In 2005, the comic artist Matt Furie created a somewhat unremarkable black and white line drawing of an anthropomorphized frog named Pepe, stating "Feels good man." Pepe was one of four characters portrayed as young (late teen/early 20s?) drug-using, video-gaming male roommates in Furie's comic strip Boy's Club. The Boy's Club series began as postings to MySpace, where fans first started to modify the image with color and added a body to what was originally just a head drawn in the lower corner of a cartoon box.

Figure 13.1.   The Corruption of Pepe. Nazi Pepe at Auschwitz, and Politician Pepe on the 2016 presidential campaign trail. *Sources*: "Nazi Pepe," creator unknown, found at https://images.theconversation.com/files/146941/original/image-20161122-24550-1hgu2wx.png?ixlib=rb-1.1.0&q=45&auto=format&w=237&fit=clip.   "Trump and Pepe," creator unknown, found at https://www.dailydot.com/wp-content/uploads/1f0/0c/197a9419e41e23f4dfb4863c084430cf.jpg. "President Pepe," creator unknown, found at https://cdn.vox-cdn.com/thumbor/uVkqjzCyfjA0Zu_Tl9dQuZXTF-0=/0x0:800x533/1200x800/filters:focal(0x0:800x533)/cdn.vox-cdn.com/uploads/chorus_image/image/51074007/trumppepe.0.0.png.

Pepe thus became an image macro and internet meme used to dryly express good feelings. In Bourdieu's terms, the image became a form of cultural capital. Pepe's sense of simple, ironic contentment was very suited to the "boy's club" of 4chan, whose users grew to feel a sense of ownership over the meme. Pepe became a sort of mascot for 4chan's /pol/ community.

The Pepe meme grew and spread beyond its humble beginnings. People in all kinds of forums began using the Pepe meme for many different purposes. By 2015, 4chan users had become concerned about maintaining their special relationship with the image. They began creating so-called "limited-edition" variations of what they termed "Rare Pepe" images (unusual visual uses of the meme). In Bourdieu's terminology, they were seeking to reinvigorate their claim to the image by investing more in the economy of its circulation, and by literally "owning" the most valuable Pepe images, which would establish their connoisseurial relationship with the symbol. The production and sale of Rare Pepes on eBay and other e-commerce sites distinguished 4chan users' authentic claim to the meme over the general public, whom they called "normies." One strand of this effort did particularly well: his transformation from a somewhat innocent, happy-go-lucky stoner, into a symbol of white supremacy and political authoritarianism.

The early days of 4chan's campaign to reclaim Pepe included a knowing reordering of the image (in the way Featherstone explained the goal of re-ordering symbols), to make it unappealing for normies to use. Few symbols have had as much offensive power in American culture as the Nazi swastika. Its use in almost any context will assure its rejection and condemnation by the mainstream. 4chan's combination of the swastika with Pepe images took the meme down a predictable path. Not only did mainstream users slow their use of Pepe memes, but white supremacists also latched onto Pepe as a Nazi mascot. This moved it into a nefarious social realm, amplifying the distaste normies were already expressing.

A well-known troll made up a backstory about the conspiracy to remake Pepe as a Nazi that he shared with a *Daily Beast* reporter (see Nuzzi 2016). He later explained to a reporter for *The Daily Caller* that the Nazification of Pepe was all a ruse to wrest control of it from normies (Bennett 2016). He also explained that the *Daily Beast* interview was just another troll as well and that he used the opportunity to further associate Pepe with the distastefulness of white supremacy. He claimed that for him and his online community, the whole phenomenon was merely a successful gaslighting of the political Left—they were using Pepe as a symbol of identity, and to demonstrate their superior status online.

Regardless of 4chan users' sarcastic intentions, the meme had evolved into something beyond their control. In popular culture, Pepe had become a sym-

bol of contemporary white supremacy. The Nazi Pepe meme had provided an opening into social media terrain for white supremacists that had previously been difficult for them to traverse. As described in chapter 12, the innocent backstory of Pepe provided cover for the dog whistles and overt racism of that community. If accused of racism, users could hide behind the defense of sarcastic humor. Of course, as I illustrated in chapter 9, sarcastic racism is still racism. Tait (2017) explains:

> Many who claim to be "satirical" Nazis are simply hiding behind a thin veil of plausible deniability. The word "irony"—however incorrectly it's being used—allows them to spread Nazi messages and iconography whilst denying culpability. It also leaves many on the left unsure where they stand.

Whether by design or by accident, Pepe had become part of the mainstreaming of white supremacy in America. However, this was only the beginning of Pepe's political career.

THE CHAOS MAGICK CULT OF KEK

In his seminal book *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins (2008) described the bizarre phenomenon of Sesame Street's Bert character appearing on a poster beside an image of Osama Bin Laden, which was then captured in footage of a Middle Eastern political demonstration that was broadcast on CNN. It turned out a website called Evil Bert had been placing images of the Muppet into unlikely photo situations throughout history. Their image of Bert with Bin Laden just happened to be high resolution enough that it made for a great poster-size printout. The path Evil Bert followed turned out to be a blueprint for the way Pepe would become part of the 2016 election campaign.

In September 2016, Hillary Clinton declared in a campaign speech:

> To just be grossly generalistic, you can put half of Trump supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. . . . Racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamaphobic, you name it [. . .] he has lifted them up. He has given voice to their websites that used to only have 11,000 people, now have 11 million. He tweets and retweets offensive, hateful, mean-spirited rhetoric. (In Merica and Tatum 2016)

Clinton was critiquing the Trump campaign's frequent forwards and reposts from suspect sources, such as Breitbart.com, the sub-Reddit the_donald, and numerous conspiracy theory websites. While she was not wrong in her critique, what stuck was the idea of a "basket of deplorables." This became a meme in itself, which was embraced by Trump supporters.

Pepe had already been frequently portrayed as a Trump supporter on social media sites. The "Basket" meme provided an opportunity to take the association with Trump up a notch. A widely circulated movie poster–like image of Trump at the head of a combat squad included the notable faces of Anne Coulter, Alt-Right figure Milo Yanopolis, Ben Carson, Rudy Guliani, and, yes, Pepe. White supremacists' support of Trump's campaign was made visibly clear through the meme.

The use of Pepe as a Nazi/white supremacist became commonplace enough that near the end of September 2016, the Southern Poverty Law Center added Pepe to its online catalog of hate symbols. This was seen as a triumph by the trolls and shitposters, serving as a measure of the extent their work had come to have mainstream influence. Soon after, Hillary Clinton's denunciation of Pepe as a hate symbol circulated by the Trump campaign only added to legitimizing the abhorrent corruption of the symbol. Cybernetically speaking, just being included in the conversation marked a triumph for those who had previously been denied a voice in American political discourse. All this may already seem quite remarkable for a meme with such humble beginnings. However, even more—and possibly more perplexing—phenomena were happening to Pepe beyond the surface, which helps explain the online deification of Donald Trump.

Anyone taking a quick browse through the rabid Trump sub-Reddit the_donald will notice many of its members exalting the politician with the title "God Emperor." On the surface, it might seem like a few over-zealous supporters are seeking to ingratiate themselves with the community, or seek to elevate the president through glorifying platitudes to the level of the Pope. Interestingly though, there is much more behind the use of this title than meets the eye, and it involves the unwitting Pepe meme. Welles (2016) wrote: "Donald Trump is said to be the Egyptian god Kek's choice for president, and Pepe the Frog is interpreted as an incarnation of Kek." So who is Kek, what does Kek have to do with the US presidential election, and how is Pepe implicated in all of this?

Internet lore has it that Kek is a god from ancient Egypt, belonging to the Ogdoad (eight primordial deities, most often depicted as human bodies with animal heads). The male gods of this order are depicted as anthropomorphized reptiles: Females have serpent heads while males have frog heads, both atop human bodies. Welles (2016) explains, "the Ogdoad were said to preside over a Golden Age in which . . . there was no evil, scarcity or suffering." Upon seeing the Pepe meme gaining power, someone somewhere[2] described Pepe—with his frog head and human body—as a representation of Kek. The meme was already becoming associated with Trump by then. Thus, the claim was made that Kek was speaking through Pepe and that Trump was Kek's choice for president. This all sounds rather far-fetched of course, and the degree to which anyone truly believes this online legend-making/shitpost-

ing is difficult to know. However, the fact of what happened with Pepe as a memetic representation of Kek and symbolic Trump supporter stands on its own as a curious phenomenon that gained surprising momentum. In addition to the word "Kek" peppering the_donald and other Trump web presences, dedicated Kek websites and forums sprung up. Altogether, this scattered but dedicated collection of communities became known as the Cult of Kek.[3]

The cult explains its success to itself with what they call "Meme Magic." Whether it was elaborated as a troll or not, the idea behind Meme Magic is that the spread of Pepe memes put the supposed spiritual magic of Kek into the world. Trump's win stands as a testament to the veracity of Meme Magic for Kek followers. In other words, they say it works because the results prove it:

> The King of Trolls has won. That's it. Trolling clearly went from horse-shit to an art form in a matter of years. And now: it's a powerful political tool to become the commander in chief. For some people, it has become religion: trolling is a way of life and Memes . . . are prayers. (Theødor 2016)

Welles (2016) turns to a description of what is known as "Chaos Magick" (the k on the end distinguishes it from regular magic) to explain how the cult's Meme Magic works. He explains that the mystical aspect of the cult is focused on their use of Pepe as a magic sigil. Simply put, a sigil is a symbol considered to have magical powers. Sigils are crucial in the performance of Chaos Magick since this particular kind of magic is said to be magic without ceremonial features (i.e., none of the performative fanfare that we are used to seeing with popular magic shows). He applies Phil Hine's four-step description of sigil creation to analyze the Cult of Kek's use of the Pepe meme, which I have charted for clarity (see table 13.1).

The Kekist prayer may also help steps 1 and 3:

> Our Kek
> who art in memetics
> Hallowed by thy memes
> Thy Trumpdom come
> Thy will be done
> In real life as it is on /pol/
> Give us this day our daily dubs
> And forgive us of our baiting
> As we forgive those who bait against us
> And lead us not into cuckoldry
> But deliver us from shills
> For thine is the memetic kingdom, and the shitposting,
>   and the winning, forever and ever.
> Praise KEK[4]

Table 13.1: The Creation of the Sigil Pepe.

	Sigil Creation (Hine)	Pepe/Kek Sigil (Welles)
Step 1	Make a statement of intent about the magical operation (verbally or in writing) • The sigil's purpose must be completely clear • Any irregular thoughts won't change its intent once purpose is defined	Pepe political meme intent: • Help Donald Trump • Hurt Hillary Clinton's campaign
Step 2	Create the sigil	Find or create a Pepe meme
Step 3	Launch the sigil into the "multiverse" through one of the following: • Meditation on the sigil • Visually fixate on the sigil while having an orgasm • "Charge" the sigil in a magical ritual	Post it online in a state of gnosis • Welles suggests simply being online in a virtual environment creates altered state (i.e., a narcotic effect)
Step 4	Ignore and forget the sigil's original intention for two reasons: a. The point of using a sigil is to tap into the unconscious, so consciously thinking about your desire stifles the process b. The sigil is a display of confidence in its effectiveness. Act with complete confidence in an outcome like it is an inevitable fact, and others will too	Most posters are unaware of the Chaos Magick they are participating in, and thus by default act out step four

Whether Welles' analysis is correct is not the point of my inclusion of it here. It is likely impossible even for the Kekists to settle the question, as explained by Theødor (2016)

> "Trump was memed into the white house"
> [. . .]
> Do they really believe in it?
> Yes and no, it's always part-true and part-troll.

The point here is to demonstrate the lengths to which the community members have gone to evolve the meme into a sigil. A sigil, per the description above, is a very powerful bit of cultural capital. Observing the Pepe controversy as a general phenomenon, Welles wrote, "all the energy focused on the

Figure 13.2.   The Cult of Kek. The top left corner image shows a questionable interpretation of Egyptian hieroglyphs. The top right emblem demonstrates the stylized font-type logo used in the Kekistan flag below it. In the lower left, the magic frog record label from the Italian band P.E.P.E.'s 1986 single "Shadilay" was claimed by Kekists to be proof of the existence of meme magic and the veracity of the Prophecy of Kek. *Sources*: "Egyptian Hieroglyphs of Kek," creator unknown, found at https://i.imgur.com/5HO4ydw.png. "Kek Memetic Magic Font-Type," creator unknown, found at https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/001/123/797/74e.png. "Shadilay," creator PEPE, unlocatable, found at https://i.kym-cdn.com/entries/icons/original/000/021/633/1473736180387.jpg. "Kekistan Flag," creator unknown, found at https://www.google.com/search?q=kekistan+flag&num=20&newwindow=1&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwia5vGevILdAhVrrFQKHQv3AlkQ_AUICigB&biw=1216&bih=681#imgrc=CgoZQ8nniAVTqM.

memes is creating an egregore" (2016), a collective mind of a specific group of people. Welles' work itself only adds to the egregore, contributing to the self-fulfilling prophecy of his own analytical framework. In a cybernetic paradigm, the more Pepe/Kek memes are created and passed around, and the more people ruminate about Kek as the "bringer-in of light," the more

powerful the sigil becomes. It does not matter whether the avatar is based on anything historically accurate since it is how we use it and respond to it in the present that gives it its relevance, and hence, power.

Among the many photos of the April 15, 2017, Berkeley Alt-Right "free speech" (i.e., white supremacist) rally, unsurprisingly, there are numerous images with Pepe's glib face. A bit more obscurely, the event also served as a staging area for the Cult of Kek. Several participants had prepared a performance piece around the meme, claiming to be representatives of the country Kekistan. They claimed the "Kekistani" culture was under attack by social justice warriors and feminists. They waved what they called the Kekistan flag: a Nazi war flag with the color green swapped for red, a geometric display of capital Ks replacing the swastika, and the 4chan logo in the bottom corner. Not only had the community seen their sigil come to fruition, the community itself—no matter how ironically or cynically—had leaped out of the virtual world and into physical existence. The symbolic reordering of the virtual world became reflected in the material world.

Throughout all this memetic activity, further associations with Trump were created in memes where Pepe would be portrayed giving the "OK" sign, a frequently used hand gesture of the future president when making speeches. With all the momentum behind the Pepe/Kek meme, even this seemingly benign signal became associated with white supremacists. Circulation of pictures of well-known Alt-Right figure Milo Yannopolis flashing the OK sign pushed it unambiguously into use as a symbol of hate.

Even with all of this circulation of imagery as cultural capital within the Alt-Right/white supremacist community, Inman (2016) argues that Pepe should not be considered a hate symbol for two reasons:

1. "The appropriation of Pepe the Frog by online trolls is intrinsically ironic and satirical"
2. "White nationalist symbols have been appropriated by the meme as a rhetorical device, as a comment on the state of speech itself in today's political climate"

The first argument returns to the original intention of the early Nazi Pepe memes, in which the goal was not to spread hate, but rather "to 'reclaim' the meme from mainstream culture by marginalizing the meme itself" (Inman 2016). He lists the goals of shock, hate, marginalization of the meme to diminish its mainstream appeal, and making a statement about free speech as all contributing to its popularity. And then he makes a fascinating statement:

the meme has appropriated white nationalism for the purpose of satire rather
than the white nationalists appropriating the meme for the purpose of a racist
agenda. (Inman 2016)

Here Inman is blaming the meme itself as appropriating white nationalism
(i.e., white supremacy). The agency is attributed to the meme, saying that it
has appropriated a social phenomenon and not the other way around. Perhaps
the language is unintentional, but it is interesting to consider that this is how
a virus would actually proliferate: upon discovery of fertile ground (in this
case the white supremacist community), to populate it with its own progeny.

The problem with these arguments is, of course, that it absolves people of
the consequences of their actions based on their intentions, rather than judg-
ing their actions based on outcomes. The facts about the meme tell a much
simpler and harsher story. According to a 2016 Anti-Defamation League re-
port, anti-Semites most commonly used a Nazi Pepe meme to harass Jewish
journalists online, while the most commonly used word shared among their
collective posts was Trump.

Like a parent watching their errant offspring lurch from one tragedy to the
next, Pepe's creator witnessed the meme he put into the world go from a bad
turn to worse. In the age of memetic communication, ownership of an image
does not equate with power over it, as the flurry of viral distribution makes it
impossible to keep up with its uncountable incarnations and evolutions. This
did not stop Furie from trying to rescue it:

> Before he got wrapped up in politics, Pepe was an inside-joke and a symbol
> for feeling sad or feeling good and many things in between. I understand that
> it's out of my control, but in the end, Pepe is whatever you say he is, and I, the
> creator, say that Pepe is love. (Furie 2016)

Although well intentioned, Furie's assertion was almost wholly ignored. Un-
able to re-assert control over the image in a focused campaign, Furie finally
opted to symbolically kill Pepe in one final cartoon. His goal, again, was to
take the meme back from those who had hurtled it so far from its intention.
Though Pepe's symbolic death may have satisfied some people's unease with
what the meme became, the gesture at least provided some absolution for Fu-
rie. However, for those who deified Pepe by turning him into Kek, the god's
immortality is as assured as any meme's. A 2017 study showed there was no
weakening of the meme's veracity: "The use of racist and bigoted versions
of Pepe memes seems to be increasing, not decreasing" (Anti-Defamation
League 2017).

The aesthetic war that comprises contemporary politics has real-world consequences for the hundreds of millions affected by outcomes experienced by millions of others as purely mediated phenomena. The 4chan users that created Nazi Pepe memes to retake control of their mascot's image were only concerned with the aesthetic value of the symbol. On the other hand, the people having to live out everyday life in a culture which normalizes fascism, white supremacy, and anti-Semitism are subject to attempts to reorganize the material world so it aligns with the symbolic order created online. The nature of the battle and the stakes thus illustrated, the next chapter explores what makes memetic communication somewhat unpredictable.

NOTES

1. See http://www.cultofkek.com.
2. I was unable to track down the first example of this.
3. See http://www.cultofkek.com.
4. https://www.reddit.com/r/kekistan/comments/6akkds/fellow_kekistanis_let _us_say_our_daily_prayer/.

Chapter Fourteen

We're All Situationists Now

The 1950s revolutionary tactic of aesthetic "détournement" has become assimilated into mainstream, everyday practice in social media, which turns the method on its head and results in Consequence 13. I contend that we social media netizens have all become situationists. This has deflated the revolutionary power of the tactic. Quick and sudden aesthetic change is normal in memetic communication, revealing the limits of détournement as a liberatory practice in the first place: It is satire—postmodern tactical playfulness, without strategic permanence. It is relative and reactionary. As an everyday condition, it promotes exactly what Heidegger explained to be the danger of technology. Memetic communication orders[1] us to think and act a certain way, directing our attention away from the pursuit of truth and thereby entering freely of our own accord into our relationship with technology.

Donald Trump's success in securing the Republican nomination and his subsequent road to US presidential victory surprised many people around the globe. However, there was an even more surprising candidate in the 2016 vote: a dead gorilla. The image of silverback gorilla Harambe began its journey to memetic immortality upon his death in the Cincinnati Zoo in May of 2016. Zoo officials shot and killed the animal as a precautionary measure to save a four-year-old boy who had crawled into Harambe's cage, and whom the gorilla had subsequently started dragging around like a plaything. The episode was captured on video, uploaded to YouTube, and numerous photos quickly went into circulation in other social media. Within two days, an online petition framing the incident as murder and demanding "Justice for Harambe" had acquired almost 340,000 signatures. His image was made into a macro, and was Photoshopped into numerous satirical scenarios. For example, Harambe's image was included alongside Prince, David Bowie,

Muhammad Ali and a couple of other celebrities who had recently died, with the caption "2016 . . . I'm taking everyone."

The Harambe meme was a bit unusual in its longevity. A campaign playing with the "Justice" meme called "Dicks out for Harambe" in July of 2016 helped sustain its virility.[2] Other notable incidences included hacking of the Cincinnati Zoo director's Twitter account, plus mobilizing winning votes to name a street and a newborn monkey after Harambe. The most political activity of Harambe's memetic spirit was as a write-in candidate for the presidential vote. The estimated number of people who voted for the dead gorilla varies from a few hundred to fifteen thousand. Regardless of the actual count, the meme leapt into political reporting as a result of the voting. And here we have an illustration of exactly how détournement, a tactic meant to upset the status quo and spur revolution, has become assimilated and part of the very apparatus it was invented to disrupt.

SPECTACLE AND DÉTOURNEMENT

In his famous 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin (1969) found cause for hope in the detachment of art from history. He described the massification of culture as a break from the hierarchy that aesthetics had traditionally been dependent upon. For example, artists in the past had depended on patronage and the exploitative apprenticeship system of teaching art skills in exchange for labor. Benjamin saw the old ways of producing art and aesthetics also reproduced the ideology of hierarchical class relations. In his analysis, the emergence of popular culture created a new opportunity for the proletariat to take control of the infrastructure of ideological production. Those pursuing the goal of emancipating the masses from ideological domination have tended to consider media the rightful place to seek interventions ever since Benjamin and the Frankfurt School of critical theory set their project in motion. In the 1950s and 60s, Guy Debord spearheaded a movement of aesthetic critique and production in this same tradition.

Debord became best known as a spokesman for a revolutionary anti-arts movement called the situationist international. The situationist mission was to create experiences (i.e., situations) in which the deceptive veil of ideology (i.e., "spectacle") would be revealed for what it is, allowing the truth about the world to be seen by those victimized by it. People would then be able to see that consumer culture promoted a false consciousness that keeps us trapped in a repetitious, tedious, subordinate relationship with the bourgeoisie.

In his highly influential film (and later book) *The Society of the Spectacle,* Debord explained that in our highly mediated consumer culture, life

Figure 14.1. Harambe. The Harambe meme sustained through numerous evolutions, from traditional image macros, to the "Dicks Out for Harambe" campaign, through to presidential candidacy and write-in votes. *Sources***: "He Died for Our Dank Memes," creator unknown, found at https://www.google.com/search?q=rip+harambe,+he+died+fo r+our+memes&num=20&newwindow=1&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKE wif7_L5vILdAhVBiFQKHY7NCfoQ_AUICigB&biw=1216&bih=681#imgrc=XDSpaRaR6 ZcLWM. "He Died for Our Memes," creator unknown, found at https://pics.me.me/he- died-for-our-memes-dicksoutfor-harambe-17887639.png. "Dicks Out for Harambe," creator unknown, found at https://pbs.twimg.com/media/Cos9fU6XYAEk_jL.jpg. "I'm with Harambe," creator unknown, found at https://carpefreedomsite.files.wordpress .com/2016/09/ripharambe_10241.png?w=640'. "Harambe for President," creator unknown, found at http://www.stickpng.com/img/memes/harambe/harambe-for-pres ident. "Harambe Write In," creator unknown, found at http://cdn.junglecreations.com/ wp/viralthread/2016/11/prezharambe.jpg. Three small edited screen shots of Harambe Poll Results, sources unidentifiable, all posted on Facebook. "President Harambe," creator unknown, found at https://i.imgur.com/PKl8Seb.png.**

is reduced to aesthetic representations. The excess of goods available to us as consumers has emphasized the importance of appearances over use value when selecting products. An example of this is water, which we can get virtually anywhere in the USA or Canada for free from a tap. However, instead of drinking from the tap, many people now prefer to purchase branded bottled water, even though the water in the bottle is not subjected to the same rigor-

ous testing schedule that tap water is. Even those who do reject bottled water generally fill expensive, fancy bottles at special stations, as if the aesthetic somehow makes the water better. Of course, it does not. The water was never really the issue, because there is simply so much of it, and it is so cheap that there is little money to be made from the material good. Instead, we emphasize the packaging, and struggle over how it signifies our position in our social hierarchy. The commodification of drinking water is an entirely aesthetic competition, given the overabundance of the liquid in our everyday lives.

Aestheticization of our culture can be extrapolated to almost any aspect of our lives. We are most familiar with this in the form of brand identities, such as Coke vs. Pepsi, or Apple vs. PC (examples mentioned in chapter 8). This means it seems as if life can only be "consumed" (not lived) through the viewing of fragments of events (which Debord called "Spectacle"), as if "life" were in another world or dimension. Spectacle directs our look away from the material conditions of our lives and makes this split between "life over there" and "consumption over here" seem natural. However, Debord explained that this split is, in fact, social in its nature: conceptualized, made material, and maintained in everyday activity.

Debord explained that Spectacle is its own justification, informing our ideas about reality. Through this process of seeing and enacting, Spectacle becomes reality. It becomes the goal of all our striving. We struggle and work to make spectacles, focusing on the appearances of things and what we believe they express about ourselves rather than their function and necessity. For the situationist, this negates our actual life, since the signification of living is given prominence and importance, rather than life.

It can be hard to break through the ideological shell Spectacle creates, as it is not dialogue; it does not converse with us. Rather, Spectacle is authoritative and monolithic. It seems solid and impenetrable, despite it being an illusionary aesthetic. For example, it is very difficult to imagine how an average person might get into the spectacle of the Superbowl. This makes access to the Spectacle the height of prestige; and the bigger the spectacle, the greater the prestige.

Modern society and our current postmodern culture are focused on producing spectacles. Appearance is even more important than actual possession. In other words, it is better to be seen in borrowed expensive designer clothes than in your own apparel bought from a discount store. It is more important to create an image of a fancy dinner and post it on social media than to eat an ugly but satisfying meal (i.e., people generally do not post pictures of ugly meals to social media). Spectacle thus separates human power from the world in which we actually live. We are subject to the requirements of Spectacle, and even administrators who have the power to control spectacle must

still succumb to its domination. Since all our productive power, including thought, is turned toward creating and maintaining spectacle, life is continuously deferred.

The virtual environment in which memetic communication evolves depends on human power exercised in precisely the way I have described above, along with all the same taken-for-granted assumptions. The driving question is, of course, how can it be different? In Debord's time and place, he observed that people were already locked into daily patterns and routines that Spectacle made seem impossible to break out of. For situationists, however, the tactic of "détournement" offered a method.

Debord described détournement as a way of "turning expressions of the capitalist system and its media culture against itself" (2002). A different publication (Debord and Wolman 1956) describes the workings of the method (which I have abridged and edited into a succinct "How To" guide for ease of understanding; see appendix B). The founding principle of détournement is the juxtaposition of contradicting elements. A trope of capitalism is, in effect, attacked by a harsh reality that exposes the lie. For example, the iconic image "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima" has been détourned by replacing the flag at the top of the pole with a McDonald's logo.[3] In a more recent example, the "pepper spray cop" meme is grafted into The Beatles' *Abby Road* album cover to spray Paul McCartney in the face.[4] In both these cases, something symbolically sacred is being perverted to reveal how superficial and open to reinterpretation the original images truly are.

There are several good examples of successful détournement in recent history—the way the Zapatistas inserted themselves into the global media system described in chapter 11 stands as an incredible achievement in turning the global capitalist system against itself. Beyonce's 2016 Superbowl halftime show that hijacked the global media system to pay tribute to the Black Panthers and the BlackLivesMatter movement was a powerful moment of twenty-first-century détournement. More recently, NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick's refusal to stand during the playing of the national anthem before games permeated popular media, becoming a meme with such power that countless supporters staged their own versions. Kaepernick's act of détournement even prompted the President of the United States to associate himself with the controversy.

The examples mentioned here are important interruptions to the status quo. Unfortunately, these successes are the rare exception at this stage of late capitalism. In the fully virtual environment of social media, détournement has almost no oppositional effect. Instead, it has become an everyday practice of media prosumerism. To say détournement has been assimilated by the capitalist apparatus may be an understatement in the virtual context.

Détournement seems to have been built into the digital world as one of its primordial functions, as it is one of the fundamental media practices that facilitates memetic communication.

As I explained in chapter 7, memetic communication reflects an attitude of postmodern irony and cynicism. Détournement in this environment is used as an expression of the individualist libertarian spirit of inventing oneself. It celebrates manipulation of simulacra as if it were an important achievement. It enables the armchair activism discussed in chapter 11, attaining an individual identity-building expression of moral/ethical value, without having to act beyond appropriating images. In our digital prosumerism, détournement is easy, normal, and anything but a challenge to hegemony. Fürsich and Roushanzamir explain:

> The text is constituted as a site of determination, a site where productive and interpretive communities meet and where the heterogeneous social factions can interpret freely but only within the confines of the text itself. This text increasingly homogenizes the diversity of possible interpretations . . . (Fürsich and Roushanzamir 2001, 376–77)

The "Monopoly Man" photobomb meme illustrates the problem.[5]

A photobomb is the unexpected appearance of another person in the frame of a photo. In everyday experiences, people may do this as a troll just for kicks. It can also be used as détournement. This was Amanda Werner's intention when she dressed as the Monopoly Man and photobombed the former Equifax CEO Richard Smith's US Senate Banking Committee testimony in 2017. As Smith gave his testimony, the character "Rich Uncle Pennybags" sat in the audience waving oversize fake money and subtly drawing attention. The goal was to raise awareness of the "get-out-of-jail-free card" buried in standard online user agreements that requires people to forfeit the right to sue companies. Without thoroughly reading or understanding the terms of service, millions of people agree to a shady arbitration process should problems arise. The effect is often complete absolution of liability for the company. The Equifax data breach which exposed the private data of hundreds of millions of people is one such incident.

Werner's photobombing went viral and achieved her goal of raising some awareness of the issue. Many more people, though, simply saw it as a cynical joke. Numerous other similarly motivated photo and media bombings have had similar outcomes. The activist group The Yes Men[6] is premised almost entirely around this concept.

The main failing in these attempted affronts to capitalism is a misunderstanding of the way prosumers use digital information. As described at length in chapters 3 and 5, users encounter digital information as a possible selection
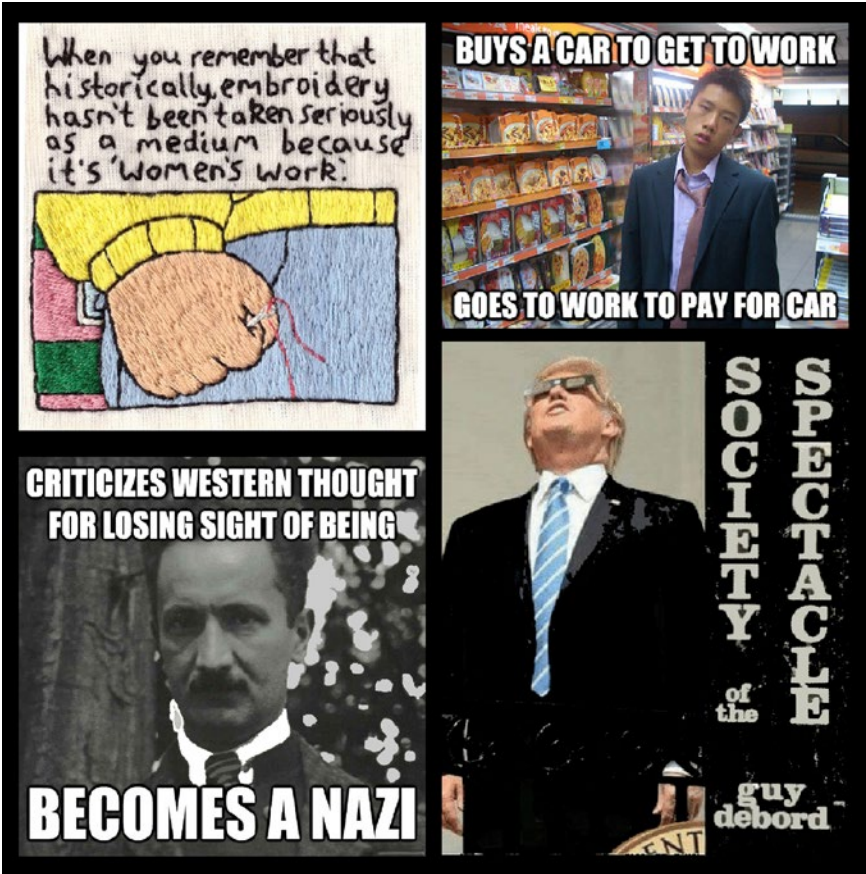
Figure 14.2. Détournement. The top left image demonstrates a feminist needlepoint détournement of a popular image macro. Next to it an image macro expresses a common trope about everyday life in the twenty-first century. The bottom left image macro detournes Heidegger's philosophical authority by highlighting his questionable moral character. The bottom right détournes Debord himself by swapping an image of Donald Trump wearing paper solar eclipse viewing glasses with the original book cover image of an audience wearing 3D paper glasses. *Sources*: "Arthur's Fist Embroidered," posted to Twitter by @hanecdote, fair use copyright, found at https://78.media.tumblr.com/061141970dfd28df1b56e7e55907cc87/tumblr_oee5srQfYr1rvud5do1_500.jpg. "Disenchanted Young Worker," origin unknown, found at https://i.redditmedia.com/evj1DTCUdurnY-tUwsbpGRArG1lVP9uvK4dwvdTSehk.jpg?w=502&s=3d72ffdafef4243b3485c2b23dc884cf. "Hypocrite Heidegger," creator unknown, found at https://i.warosu.org/data/lit/img/0085/94/1475867753587.jpg. "Spectacle Trump," US Gov. stock photo, creator unknown, found at https://78.media.tumblr.com/12ee00f02c87df58d06b3c3ecb312846/tumblr_ov22w3ZIq31sqxodyo1_500.jpg.

that may or may not contribute to their personal spectacle. Hence the memetic success of détournement depends on its aesthetic usefulness for individuals, while the success of understanding the political message comes after that, if at all. Moreover, this all happens within social media's privately owned corporate spaces, entailing what Cherry (2013) describes as "cyber commodification" (389).

THE FAILING OF A SITUATIONIST WORLD

Debord himself seemed to foresee the reason détournement may not be an effective strategy for change in an environment comprised entirely of spectacle, such as the internet: "Anticipating the problem of relying on the spectacle in order to bring about its destruction, Debord had always feared that the Situationists would become not the revolution of the spectacle, but the 'latest revolutionary spectacle'" (Puchner 2004, 13). In other words, détournement attacks spectacles. It does not replace them. It does not abolish them. It does not change material circumstances. It merely uses them to demonstrate that another way of thinking and interpreting reality is possible.

Add to this my argument above that détournement has become assimilated into everyday life as a technique of the spectacle-making machinery. Frederico (2010) explains this transition, saying "the critical theory of spectacle gave place to the confirmation of the simulacrum" (185). The postmodern crisis of identification followed from the disconnection of referent from the sign and its reassignment of meaning, upon which détournement depended for a dialectical struggle of opposition. Detournement needs modernist structuralism to be revolutionary. Without a conceived structure to attack, it is merely another media practice.

Consumer culture has also changed with time, assimilating and co-opting many of the counter-cultural, revolutionary tactics that had been invented to resist it along the way. The nature of economics has changed along with it, especially in this era of the prosumer:

> In prosumer capitalism, control and exploitation take on a different character than in the other forms of capitalism: there is a trend toward unpaid rather than paid labor and toward offering products at no cost, and the system is marked by a new abundance where scarcity once predominated. (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010, 13)

In addition to the assimilation of tactics, resistance groups have been recast as niche markets, targeted with advertising and strategic communication campaigns: "Marketers have converted resistance efforts from some of consump-

tion's most ardent critics into market segments by targeting certain goods and services toward them" (Rumbo 2002, 127).

Détournement depends on biparadigmatic irony (discussed in chapter 9) and is subject to all of the same pitfalls. Authentic counter-culture—the kind that is 100 percent resistant to the hegemonic status quo—is dialectically linked to the mainstream culture it struggles against, and must constantly recall it to prominence in order to fight against it. Desmond, McDonagh, and O'Donohoe explain, "the term counter-culture is rooted in ideas of identity and its formation in relation to another" (2000, 245). Counter-culture in this definition of authenticity is self-aware, founded on a set of shared values that are defined through a critique of the mainstream. This seems to support Jameson's (1998) assertion that the construction of good parody requires "some secret sympathy for the original" (4). He explains, though, that parody (which mocks authority) gives way to neutral pastiche due to the aestheticization of reality, and "fragmentation of time into a series of perceptual presents" (28).

The aestheticization of counter-culture makes it a consumable product, which displaces the focus of agency onto spectacle, as Debord described. It converts resistance into a consumable good, making it possible to divert counter-cultural symbols toward one's individual identity-building project, as mentioned previously. This is an especially attractive aspect in the prosumption of memes:

> memes frequently transform the original tone of iconic photos from seriousness to "explicit playfulness," which mostly takes two different forms depending on whether the appropriations are "politically oriented" or "pop-culture-oriented." (Boudana, Frosh, and Cohen 2017, 16).

Political icons get humorously subverted by playing with the intended message, while pop cultural icons are détourned by attacking (i.e., modifying or defacing) the image itself.

Empowerment through détournement is meant to come from the performance of disobedience, rather than the result (Schacter 2008). This type of disobedience is not the same as Heidegger's statement about freedom: that we do not feel compelled to obey technological demands put upon us (more about this later). Instead, it is more specifically about fighting over the ways ideas are expressed through spectacles, a struggle over understanding. However, in so doing, détournement can be elitist and uncritically reproduce social inequalities. For example, Malitz (2017) explains:

> It is worth noting that the "pepper spray cop" meme emerged out of an incident in which the victims of police brutality were mostly white college students. By contrast, the brutal murder of Oscar Grant, a young black man, by BART police

officer Johannes Mehserle, which was also filmed, generated nowhere near the same level of outrage. Détournement, as a communicative strategy that closely mimics dominant culture, often replicates—or even relies on—oppressive cultural assumptions and biases.

Détournement as a tactic also tolerates the "part-time" revolutionary. People may drift in and out of the counter-culture as they see fit (Desmond et al. 2000, 263–64). This accommodates individual inconsistencies in moral and ethical behavior. It facilitates subjective interpretations of what acts of resistance mean. Moreover, it presents a fractured movement that cannot be counted on to stick together through thick and thin.

Détournement does not require an ethical alignment with the principles from whence it came. For example, Horsti (2016) describes how white supremacists have détourned images to support a trope of "Muslim rape" around which a community of Islamophobes have constructed an identity of whiteness and white victimhood. Spectacle exists despite the authentic world it seems to insert itself in front of. Authenticity preexisted spectacle, and since spectacle operates as an ongoing sequence of fragmented viewing, the space between fragments remain part of our everyday experience and knowledge—a point taken up by Møller and Genz (2014) in the context of sports, but which is applicable in our everyday use of détournement in social media.

Although ethical alignment is not required to use détournement, all sides of the aesthetic struggle are required by the nature of the medium to succumb to the same process of sorting out "us" from "them." The typical formula for any context of ideological struggle is elaborated by Berlet (2012, 14):

1. Dualistic division: The world is divided into a good "Us" and a bad "Them."
2. Demonizing rhetoric: Our opponents are evil and subversive . . . maybe subhuman.
3. Targeting scapegoats: "They" are causing all our troubles—we are blameless
4. Apocalyptic aggression: Time is running out, and we must act immediately to stave off a cataclysmic event

There is no possibility of reconciliation between parties when both are putting such focus on creating and sustaining images of the other. As I described in chapter 8, they may barely be cognizant of each other's existence at all.

We have transformed our everyday circumstances into a simulacral expanse, revealing itself to us at a blinding pace one transcendental horizon after another. We embraced the useless "playful" frustrations of postmodern geography as "normal," and became loyal to the cybernetic machine we seem

to have pledged our agency to. Even the sincerest postmodern netizen must play the game, while his or her earnestness is assailed with disbelief from all sides. So how do we live in a postmodern world in which meaning is fleeting, and therefore everything is meaningless? Are we really just cultural dupes, victims of manipulative media strategies, as détournement assumes? This is an ontological question.

Much of the current existential crisis can be understood as an error in the enframing of everyday life assumed by the situationists. For their tactics to work, the everyday realm needs to be real. For postmodernists though, it is understood that everyday life is the navigation from one hyper-real moment to another. The nature of everyday life in the streets the way the situationists were concerned about is one type of debate, but the nature of everyday life the way we experience it online seems to reflect the postmodern description, and align with Heidegger's description of everyday life as a realm of deception and inauthenticity. Cherry (2013) explains that the memeplex itself defies definitions of nature:

> cyber-space is in a state of incomplete commodification. The current landscape of cyberspace contains multiple regimes of commodified, noncommodified, and mixed-use settings. This mixture—which in many instances defies logic or common sense—tells us that there is no one natural "state of nature" for the Internet. (Cherry 2013, 451)

In Heidegger's assessment, we can only be technologically free when we freely choose to enter into our relationship with it. We cannot do that, however, if we do not know the truth about technology. Heidegger described the essence of technology as the enframing of our everyday world, like a paradigm that helps us to make sense of whatever is contained within it. Many people, however, do not realize that what they are most concerned with is merely the enframing of the world, rather than the world as it actually is. It is not their fault, as this is the nature of technology, making it seem as if the order of our world is natural. If we are not aware that the world is thusly enframed by technology, we do not know the truth: Technology is dangerous because it orders our world and our own being. Thus, Heidegger describes freedom as dwelling in the world as it is, without feeling required to obey the status quo. This is not a haphazard rejection of all norms and mores, but rather less dramatic decisions one might make about choosing if and how to navigate the world, knowing the parameters within which one chooses to operate.

In its dogmatic revolutionary aspect, détournement falls short of the eloquence required of poeisis, which Heidegger described as the use of enframing to reveal the truth. For Heidegger, art is one way to bring awareness of the truth by using poeisis, by creating moments in which the truth erupts

for individuals witnessing the art. Détournement might at times accomplish this, but it is neither required to, nor is it intended to have such a profound ontological effect. Rather, it is meant to show us that through play, we can all subvert and resist. Through Heidegger, we can see that this is yet another enframing. Simply being a controvert does not make one's position truthful.

In our postmodern simulacral social media world, we are all situationists, most of us enframing ourselves in obedience to the technological requirements. It was not always like this. In the time before electronic mass media, representation was only one aspect of spectacle. Hughes (2012) argues that pre–mass media spectacle was driven by both representation and message. Perhaps in this there is a clue as to how we might break the spell of narcissus narcosis: by reviving the message as a component of the lives we live, despite the machine.

NOTES

1. "Order" here is understood as a verb, rather than a crass command, as a required position or program of action.

2. The campaign included video of actor Danny Trujo stating the phrase along with a small group of young men. The saying is reputed to have been chosen because being a gorilla, Harambe didn't wear pants.

3. See http://uncyclopedia.wikia.com/wiki/File:Mcdonalds.JPEG.

4. See http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2011/11/23/article-2065419-0EEB7F9F000 00578-77_634x585.jpg.

5. See https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/monopoly-mascot-equifax-senate-banking-committee_us_59d5056de4b06226e3f55e53.

6. See www.TheYesMen.org.

Chapter Fifteen

Ethical (R)evolution

With this fourteenth and final consequence of memetic communication, I call for a revolution in digital media ethics. Journalism especially seems to be reeling from the ethical implications of memetic communication, putting the field at the forefront of the discussion. Having already gone through a crisis of credibility during the years of "yellow journalism," leading ethicists hold out hope for a radical, global effort to restore informational integrity.

A McLuhanist analysis would sum up all the consequences in this book as indications that the medium—our social media and global digital network—is responsible for memetic communication and the changes in society, culture, and civilization that we are presently struggling through. In some regards, that seems to be a correct assessment. And a McLuhanist would maintain that the content of this new media is the old media it replaces. Hence, the problems and characteristics of the old media become mashed up with the new in converged technology. This too seems, to some extent, correct. New social and cultural combinations, potentialities, eventualities, and possibilities arise with the advancement of technology. Again, some of these changes would be media driven. The McLuhanist would maintain that media creates the circumstances of its production and consumption, and it is most fixated on producing more of itself. Finally, McLuhanites would have no choice but to explain memetic communication as somewhat less important to all of this than I have treated it. As McLuhan put it, "the 'content' of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind" (McLuhan 1964, 8). This last assumption must be rejected. As Heidegger pointed out (and I discussed in the previous chapter), fascination with our shiny machines distracts us from the truth about our circumstances. Further, blaming the technology absolves humanity of responsibility for the mistreatments we inflict on one another to through our media.

If memetic communication is bait, then it is more metaphorically similar to methamphetamine than meat. The narcotic effect McLuhan (1995) himself described (i.e., narcissus narcosis, a fascination with dreamily watching oneself in media) is one characteristic of this new form of communication. Baudrillard (2003) agreed that the medium is the message, but asserted it also affects the message, both in its technological parameters and in how it alters the way we think about conveying information. As shown in the previous fourteen chapters, memetic communication is highly consequential content in numerous ways, and we ignore it at our own peril. If we take it as a mere byproduct of the media system it circulates in, we misdiagnose our sociocultural problems.

Media memes are like ideological viruses that ride the datastream of the global system, resembling pathogen-infected blood in the circulatory systems of living organisms. We communicate these viruses to each other. Not all of them are going to cause illness, and not all of them are completely undesirable. Some may even help inoculate our information system against future outbreaks that threaten the cybernetic organism. On the other hand, it may also be possible for one meme to incite unimaginably devastating consequences—an informational pandemic of sorts.[1]

Culture determines the various ways we as a civilization approach and deal with these circumstances. To build on the biological metaphor, we humans are part of the global cybernetic media organism (described in chapter 2). We occupy specific places and carry out specific tasks and functions. Being cybernetic, we act according to the information we receive. We cannot know all the myriad components of the organism, and we do not need to in order to carry out our own functions in the spaces we occupy. All we need to do is respond to the changes that are communicated to us. We, in turn, communicate our own needs from our positions in the system. Memetic communication is one of the ways we send and receive those messages.

As assimilants into the global media system, our ontology has evolved into a differently framed existential absurdity than it used to be.[2] Given our cybernetic enormity, our new way of being may not be individually human in scale, nor recognizable to us as only human. If this is so, we require a new understanding of selfhood, including oneself as part of a larger entity, with emotion, motivation, and locative scale. This is no small undertaking, but it is necessary if we are to take control of our current circumstance and attenuate the cybernetic organism of which we are part. If we are to overcome the danger of our overloaded data works (see chapter 2) and be free, an all-encompassing "We" need to truly be the governors and servomechanisms of the system. To be anything other than that is to succumb as hapless victims of the spectacles we have created.

As I explained in the previous chapter, freedom *from* technology is not possible. However, we can find freedom *in* the machine. To do so, we must overcome the urge to focus on the apparatus and the spectacles, to disregard that we seem to be impossibly drowning in the simulacral digital environment. Understanding the natures of these components helps us recognize the conceptual tools of enframing (i.e., the equipment) that they all are. We will only be able to make them work toward revealing truth when we can say that their limits truly do not matter. We can then use these limitations by actively and knowingly working within them, to make them what we want to see them become, rather than merely feel obligated to react cleverly to everything that passes through one's own digital space.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

Since the early days of the internet, there has been an effort to establish ethical principles, rules, and guidelines for behavior in the virtual world. Words like netiquette[3] (Shea 1994), cyberethics[4] (Spinello 2010), and netizenship[5] (Kouzmin and Jarvan 1999) were conceived to facilitate the discourse. Even so, much of the popular discourse of digital ethics has followed the direction of Godwin's Law. A formidable list of similar laws and rules has aggregated across the web, but they only further Godwin's meme by continuing to jokingly reflect on phenomena rather than reshape it.[6]

To keep things clear, I will break my analysis of ethical concerns and responses into two main categories: (1) issues of the medium, and (2) issues of behavior enabled by the medium. The first category will include the issues of production in a more traditional medium/content production schema, whereas in the second is focused on prosumer behaviors that are enabled or arise from the characteristics of medium and content.

Ethical Concerns with the Medium

Ethical concerns with the medium arise from digitalization and new digital methods of data collection. Eberwein and Porlezza (2016) explain, "digitization of the media creates new ethical problems that stimulate calls for a redefinition of the norms and values of public communication" (328). They go on to describe that new instruments and methods of gathering data require new forms of media accountability and regulation. Beyond this, there are ethical dilemmas implied by computer use for all people in society, from users to programmers to nonusers (Forester and Morrison 2003, 249). This situation creates a difficult moral terrain. Although they face numerous ethical dilem-

mas, there is no common code of ethics for computer experts such as there are for doctors and lawyers (Forester and Morrison 2003, 254–55). McPeak (2015) suggests, "even though the existing ethics rules can suffice for the most part, non-binding, supplemental guidelines, or 'best practices,' should be created to help practitioners and judges navigate the ethical issues created by new technology like social media" (845). This may provide a reasonable and doable first step to address ethical concerns arising from the medium and the basic functions it enables.

Concern also arises from misinformed popular judgment and discourse about social media and the phenomena associated with it. Koretzky (2015) argues that mainstream media does not yet understand how to investigate and report on social media phenomena. The methods and techniques needed are yet to be developed and applied effectively. It is crucial that journalists learn though, and that we users also step up our media literacy. A majority of young people turn to social media to learn about breaking news (Tandoc and Johnson 2016). Sixty-two percent of Americans in general depend on social media for their news (Gottfried and Shearer 2016). Given the infancy of the medium, it is not surprising there has been some lag. Catching up is ethically imperative though, if we are to come to terms with the way we use media.

Ethicist Stephen Ward sums up the general issue in the context of journalism and media as fragmentation of ethical standards:

> ethical revolutions are prompted by fundamental changes in the technology, economy, and social climate of media. A media revolution prompts ethical changes because it alters the relationship of journalists and their publics. The new practices question existing media values, such as objectivity. In time, so many practices question so many norms that a consensus on media ethics is undermined. (Ward 2015)

However, despite challenges and adverse effects, we learn and move forward. Eberwein and Porlezza optimistically state, "the digitization of communication must not only be regarded as a danger for ethically justified behavior in journalism and the media; at the same time, it can also be a generator for promising innovations in this field" (2016, 336). The efforts by companies such as Facebook and Twitter to combat "fake news" and the spread of misinformation are exemplary of this approach. However, the philosophical position is almost celebratorily technocratic, focused on artificial intelligence, and seems to all but ignore the way people actually use technology despite the supposed limits on it. For example, at his 2018 Senate hearing, Mark Zuckerberg admitted some responsibility, but then with almost childish naivety invokes a highly simplistic vision of the Facebook netizenry that one imagines would make McLuhan blush:

It's not enough to just build tools. We need to make sure that they're used for good. And that means that we need to now take a more active view in policing the ecosystem and in watching and kind of looking out and making sure that all of the members in our community are using these tools in a way that's going to be good and healthy. (Zuckerberg in Bloomberg Government 2018)

Almost in counterpoint to Zuckerberg's comments, Zuckerberg's former employee, Chamath Palihapitiya, expressed "tremendous guilt" for contributing to Facebook's toxic mechanisms:

The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops we've created are destroying how society works. No civil discourse, no cooperation; misinformation, mistruth. And it's not an American problem—this is not about Russian ads. This is a global problem. (In Vincent 2017)

Altogether, the two statements constitute some degree of culpability. Whether technocratic fixes can lead to the changes we need to see in order to satisfy a principled and ethical evolution of social media platforms remains to be seen.

Contending with the medium and the institutional challenges of production is one important side of the ethical issues of memetic communication. On the other hand, audience behavior is un-institutionalized, and thus far less manageable and legally administrable. Questions about the nature of prosumerist ethics compound the audience/prosumer side of the issue.

Moral Choices and Ethical Behavior

What is ethical in a machine that demands perpetual motion and unceasing rearrangement? What is being when an obsession with the denial of gravity's inevitability dominates everyday life? What is human in these circumstances, and what are the consequences for our humanity when subsumed by this game of virtual/viral hot potato (see chapter 4) our survival depends upon?

To return to my main argument in this book, there is an obvious danger in the way current practices of prosumerism work with information that is not as simple to counter as Godwin's "counter-meme" tactic suggests. With an emphasis on playful irony, new aesthetics are welcomed for their use value in self-expression, but symbols are not considered for their original meaning or effect beyond immediate, very limited circumstances. This leads to a solipsistic, self-referential, closed, exclusive, and ultimately dysfunctional approach to community that accepts offending others as a normal part of everyday experience. Counter-memes can be helpful sometimes, but they are always reactive and do not go far enough in correcting viral media mistakes. Godwin himself summed up the limitation of the Godwin's Law meme:

> The purpose of it was to label and to implicitly ridicule, in a reductive way, people who fell into these lazy, glib comparisons. So, its purpose is fundamentally rhetorical, rather than scientific or observational. So rather than being like Newton's Laws of Motion, it's more like the maxim, "Keep it simple, stupid." It's a way of tagging and thinking about stuff and recognizing a phenomenon that signifies, in most cases, some lazy thinking. (Godwin in Amira 2013)

This approach both points out and contributes to a problem with the audience's moral disengagement.

Sanders and Tsay-Vogel (2016) define moral disengagement as "a cognitive process that allows a person to disengage self-sanctioning when evaluating the moral appropriateness of behaviors in various contexts identification and moral judgment" (232). They go on to explain that moral disengagement reduces the amount of guilt a person might anticipate feeling in advance of doing or witnessing bad behavior, thus removing an inhibition that might otherwise keep their behavior and judgment in check. This "may create or change the nature of moral judgments, or operate as a result of previously formed judgments (i.e., "This person is a good person; therefore, I should be more tolerant of questionable behaviors")" (Sanders and Tsay-Vogel 2016, 232).

Godwin's Law and others like it point out moral disengagement on the part of people who make casual comparisons with Hitler and other deplorable figures. On the other hand, the popularity of using these counter-memes indicate a level of moral disengagement on the part of those deploying them. Rather than engaging with sincere intentions to correct wrong information and call out unethical behavior, a quick counter-meme reaction facilitates enough moral disengagement for a person to resolve his or her cognitive dissonance and move on to the next bit of content.

The solution to these issues is not simple. It ultimately rests with individual moral decision-making, patience, dedication to the goal of resolution, and a personal will to be open to concepts of truth beyond ones' immediate experiences. This must also be applied consistently between and among the simultaneous communities an individual audience member participates in. It is imperative for individual users to know that being ironic is an option for the privileged that often plays with other people's misfortune, and which is experienced as a form of oppression for those very people whom the prosumer might believe he or she is helping by spreading information.

For viral publicity to be helpful in ending oppression, it is a prosumer's duty to recognize and respect the intended meanings of the signs that evolve into memes. He or she must ensure the original meaning is maintained, and explained if necessary in the reposts and forwards. The prosumer's goal should be to challenge ideas in communities beyond one's existing networks, not just entertain oneself and friends within their current community. Further,

ideally, a person would seek ideological challenges for his or her self and his or her community, instead of bracing oneself in a solipsistic, insular posture. In sum, in our world of memetic communication, we all assume the role of journalist and broadcaster. In this regard, we would do well to learn and apply ethical standards just as broadcasters and journalists do. As such, journalism is our media ethics vanguard.

Our current media circumstances have been compared with the yellow journalism era of print newspapers (Samuel 2016). Given the freshness of memetic communication as a pop cultural phenomenon, it would seem that we may be going through a necessary "yellow" phase in social media, in which the demand for eyeballs is outstripping the demand for facts. Schiavo (2016) explains why an institutional approach alone is not enough to contend with the challenges of yellow social media:

> never as in our times do so many reasons point to the need for revisiting media ethics in a way that would support the kind of reporting that is reflective of our global media environment as well as multiple views and cultures; and most important, also appeals to a responsible global ethic "to practice a journalism that helps different groups understand each other better." A local, insular, or media outlet-driven view of media ethics is no longer supported by the global environment in which we live. Such view may create biased, inaccurate or partial coverage and result in public misunderstanding on the implications of local issues on global or national prosperity; incite groups within a country or a region to attack each other; promote parochial views and prejudices against specific groups or populations; advance causes or issues that may no longer be in the best interest of our global interconnected community; and/or incite social discrimination, wars, genocide, racism, terrorism, or other disruptive and unjust events. (Schiavo 2016, 143)

It is a dire warning indeed, but it is in keeping with the point made previously that almost any piece of information in the global system can have far-reaching, devastating consequences somewhere else in the world. Still, the goals of individuals in even the most diametrically opposed groups tend to be remarkably alike, which gives cause for hope.

Szécsi and Koller's (2017) research suggests even if communities see themselves tribalistically in opposition to one another, the goals of individual members are very similar: "In ethical communities, people care about each other and about their relationships" (22). They elaborate four broadly shared goals of individuals online, which I have abridged and edited for convenience:

1. Conformity: Online social networkers feel a need to orientate themselves to assertions of opinion and behaviors of others

2. Hedonism: A general value involving openness and individuality, a hedonist aims to feel good and satisfied
3. Recognition: Individual users wish to be treated as important, to be honored by others for their achievements, to have opportunities to show their particular skills to others
4. Universalism: Feeling responsibility for others and the maintainable environment, caring and support of each other

<div align="right">(Szécsi and Koller 2017, 21)</div>

Understanding these individual goals can help us when dealing with difficult personalities or conflicts that arise within and among communities. People may feel these goals threatened by glib dismissal and moral disengagement, or may themselves use moral disengagement as a tactic to protect their feelings of satisfaction. An approach that affirms these goals even while challenging specific information and ideas may prove more effective than brute force attacks.

The importance of these goals is reflected in a study that found the greatest influences in the practice of journalistic ethics are independence and personal values (Suárez Villegas 2015, 91). This same study found that public opinions and interaction are secondary factors. In other words, the security of the individual within their community (be it institutional or otherwise) are the strongest elements encouraging ethical behavior.

Having explored ethical concerns with the medium/production and matters of behavior, there remains the task of clarifying what ethics are appropriate and applicable for memetic communication moving forward.

Ethics for Memetic Communication

With journalist ethicists leading the way, a swell of work on ethics applicable to social media (and thus memetic communication) is already happening. Much of this work reflects the grounding ideas of Plaisance (2016) who calls for "media ethics theory-building that is informed by practice, that is testable rather than restricted to an abstract level, and that reflects shifts in media cultures" (455). Ess (2013) broadens these principles by adding some specific criteria for our current technological moment:

> these devices and their affiliated ethical challenges confront every person who takes them up, such an ethics must serve as an applied ethics "for the rest of us." Candidates for a global media ethics must be accessible and useful for the vast majority of those who use these devices, not just philosophical ethicists. A second immediate challenge is. . . . Such an ethics must be *global*. (253)

Figure 15.1. Relativism. Across the top is a set of three diagrams that evolved from a conversation on the relativity of truth, none of which are correct when a Heideggerian understanding of enframing and revealing is applied. In the lower left, an image macro of Foucault plays with the "All your base are belong to us" meme to emphasize that "truth" is defined in the discursive language games we play. Anthropology Fox in the lower right corner clarifies a common misunderstanding about cultural relativism. *Sources*: "Perspectives and Truth," creator unknown, posted on imgur.com by xmoses 8080, fair use copyright, found at https://imgur.com/gallery/UKvZY. "Foucult's Discursive Regimes," creator unknown, found at https://threews.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/foucault-1.jpg. "Anthropology Fox," created by Liz, creative commons license, found at http://anthropologymajorfox.tumblr.com/.

Such a scope for an ethical project is a grand undertaking but is directly proportional to the potential consequences. Ward (2015) points out that it is also a dynamic process: "media ethics must evolve with, and track, changes in the media system and in society" (xiii). Some vital tasks of this media ethics project are to address conflicts in values, choosing which principles

can be preserved, inventing new ones where necessary, and creating new benchmarks and standards that can guide media practices and behavior (i.e., media prosumption).

Instead of trying to find shared universal values, Ward suggests we use the constructionist method of global ethics to see whether all or most interested parties can "construct" and agree upon a set of principles through a fair process of deliberation. He suggests people concerned with global ethics must show how its ideas imply changes to norms and practices. With an approach that seems to echo co-cultural theory, Ward and Wasserman (2015) propose an ethical approach based on listening: "Listening is conceptualized as part of open and dialogic ethics—an ethics that is open to all citizens, that uses dialogue to do ethics, and that attempts to cross borders" (2015, 834). They affirm this approach accommodates global conflict, diversity, and inequality.

One barrier to globally shared values is cultural relativism, the idea that every culture's ethics and behavior is justifiable from within their own worldview. If we radically adhere to this principle, it becomes impossible to transcend differences, to move past conflict and deflate hierarchies of oppression. Ward and Wasserman explain,

> Listening as a democratic practice is founded upon the notion of voice as a basic value. This is the notion that all persons have human dignity, and that dignity is respected when people have the opportunity to express their life experiences through narrative. (Ward and Wasserman 2015, 837)

In essence, it is a postmodern micronarrative approach. It does not seek consensus, but instead emphasizes a process of discussion, even if it is difficult and conflictual. Cultural relativism can be avoided by focusing on producing the best ethics that accommodates all voices, rather than imposing ethics in a way that maintains hierarchy. This produces an inclusive discourse that shapes the types of relationships desirable to all. Ward names this approach "unity in difference" (2015, 106).

Ward explains that a unity in difference approach expresses ethics as values and goals that are adaptable, so we may apply them in different ways by various methods in diverse media cultures. This overcomes discernable differences by using overlapping values as a means of unification. Difference is accommodated this way, not denied. Differences serve as the basis of values. Ward provides an example:

> the ideas of truth-seeking, accuracy, social responsibility, impartiality, and serving the public receive different interpretations in different forms of journalism and media cultures. Yet these notions can be given a basic formulation that unites journalists of many kinds. (Ward 2015, 106–7)

Ward goes on to add the more universal principles of human rights, prosperity (expressed as "flourishing"), and global justice as components of "the human good." He explains that individuals may contribute to these common goals from within the traditions they find themselves. Echoing the words of Ess though, he warns that individual moralizing and broader social media ethics will not succeed without institutional encouragement for global values and a broad, all-encompassing, inclusive schema:

> Global media ethics must construct its principles with everyone in view. Principles and norms should apply not only to professional journalists but also to citizens creating media. Moreover, media ethics needs to deal with issues beyond journalism, such as cyberbullying, digital media and privacy, online pornography, and the use of mobile devices to spread rumors. (Ward 2015, 228)

Leach (2016) gives us all a litmus test for our own social media practices: "With hindsight, we can ask whether the information collected from social media was important or merely intriguing" (137). We should further challenge ourselves to consider whether our media work has added to understanding, and how it advanced the discussion.

HOW WE BEGIN

Objectively, it is a tall order stacked and waiting for us in our virtual worlds. Many might find it overwhelming at first glance. Thankfully, there is a way we can all move forward. We may adopt the truism that one must begin from where they are at. This means that our varied starting positions in this global ethical project do not matter, so long as we are all committed to moving in the same direction. We can focus on effects rather than causes, to address the way things are now and move forward rather than lament what has already become untouchable. Moreover, we may begin today, right now, at this very moment.

To improve our informational environment and contend with the effects of memetic communication, we may begin by evolving a culture of rigorous methods. We may commence by demanding credible proof, to be aware of and test for logical fallacies, and to know that we ourselves may fall victim to these errors.

It will help us go forward to understand and admit that we actually like a lot of what we have made our virtual world into. But at the same time, we can reinvigorate utopianism and imagine a world in which we overcome problems, rather than haplessly regurgitate them. By focusing on the performative moments of our everyday lives, we have the ability to revise the script of our everyday world.

At the same time, we may need to accept some truths as universal until rigorously proven otherwise, and some questions as satisfactorily answered. We may find unity in difference, and some information as just not worth our time and attention even when the technology makes it seem like the most important thing at that moment. We can approach analysis cybernetically, asking, "What parts of the machine don't I see?" Likewise, we should be aware that we have scotomas (blind spots) that may also prevent us from seeing what is right in front of us. So, we should pay attention to feedback, not just seek to nullify it.

Altogether, I have tried to demonstrate the fourteen consequences of memetic communication in this book as symptoms of our circumstances like any other viral phenomena, not the causes. It is my hope we as a civilization can understand and celebrate that vaccinations and inoculations are the only defense we have we have as of yet against invasive and parasitic viruses. Finally, we need to acknowledge that memetic communication is still just communication, not our destiny. In so doing, we may enter freely into our relationship with it.

NOTES

1. To stave off accusations of hyperbole, in the time it has taken me to write this book there have been several severe data breaches, such as Equifax of 143 million accounts in 2017, River City Media of 711 million records in 2017, Yahoo's updated total of their 2013 breach to over three billion accounts, and Uber disclosed 57 million users' data was compromised in 2017. These are just the largest and most popular incidences. Dozens of smaller incidences happen that don't attract attention because of their relatively small size, typically less than 1 million. See https://www.identity-force.com/blog/2017-data-breaches.

2. I mean here that in a Heideggerian analysis, the ways we enframe and reveal the truth has evolved with our technology. The truth remains what it is.

3. See http://netiquette.xyz.

4. See http://www.cyberethics.info.

5. See http://www.netizenship.net.

6. For examples, see http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Internet_law and http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/JustForFun/TheGrandListOfForumAndCommunityLaws.

Appendix A

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA MEMEPLEX: A CRITICALLY SELECTIVE OVERVIEW

Unlike many other modes, digital communication provides its own clear record of its development, intricately tied to developments in digital media. It is thus possible to create an accurate timeline of events that have contributed to the creation of our social media memeplex. This history begins after the distribution of standardized digital computers throughout America and the world, which happened roughly from the 1940s on through to the 1960s. This allowed for the concept of connecting computers in different locations together through existing electronic infrastructure (i.e., telephone lines).

To fulfill the vision of interconnecting computers in various locations, the first internet message between UCLA and Stanford was sent in 1969. This was followed by the creation of the ARPAnet (Department of Defense's "Advanced Research Projects Agency network") in 1970 (which would grow to become the internet we know in the 1980s). The 1970s also saw the invention and success of personal computers as a consumer item and the popular adoption of digital culture throughout Western civilization (through such things as video games and sci-fi movies). Of course, this was also the same era as the rise and fall of the 8-track tape and fads such as pet rocks, macramé, and "string art," which I mention just to remind ourselves that digital development did not follow a simple straight arrow into the future as we might otherwise be led to believe. Still, the creation of silicon chips and the resulting miniaturization of technology was a crucial step toward making digital appliances that almost anyone could cheaply apprehend and carry with them seem normal, such as digital calculators and watches.

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In 1976 Richard Dawkins (2006) invented the term "meme" in his book *The Selfish Gene*, explaining:

> Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes (derived from the Greek root Mimeme, or imitation) propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain. . . . When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell. (Dawkins 2006)

Discussions of memes from then until the next decade tended to focus on the biological veracity of Dawkins' theory. Several books for and against its argument were published, focused mainly on the possibility of its biological existence.

Meanwhile, evolutions in musical technology and culture throughout the 1980s (such as the invention of hip-hop, and the success of musical projects such as "Stars on 45") popularized the concept of the mashup: putting two or more songs together to create a new one, which would later serve as a conceptual model for technological "mashups" of social media content in the 2000s. Also in the 1980s, an early example of an electronic meme, 1337speak (pronounced Leetspeak, a method of spelling words using numbers as letters) was invented and first used by the "leet" (meaning "elite") subculture of hackers and programmers, using American Standard Code for Information Exchange (ASCII). 1337speak leaped from its originating platform when people copied it for electronic pager communications, popularizing methods of short electronic messaging that, in turn, later evolved into abbreviations and emoticons in cellular text messaging (aka SMS: short messaging system).

In 1989 Tim Berners-Lee introduced the next incarnation of the internet to the world, the World Wide Web (WWW or Web), which was the networked "web" of public, retrievable information we still use today. In 1991, the first traceable electronic meme to go viral was born in the form of a mistranslated Japanese Sega Genesis video in-game message ("All your base are belong to us"). The phrase later jumped platforms when it got appropriated (in or around the year 2000) by gamers and hackers to express victory and dominance over another's electronic space. With its ability to display both text and images at the same time, plus its clickable hyperlinks, the invention of the Netscape browser at the University of Illinois in 1992 helped touch off the explosion of internet use that was to follow. With the Netscape browser free to download and easy to use, the World Wide Web became a virtual commons that almost anyone with a PC and a dial-up modem could use.

With the World Wide Web growing exponentially in popularity, internet companies started springing up to capitalize on the digital frontier. Inventing

and innovating, they introduced many new approaches to business and technology to the world. In 1994 Douglas Rushkoff published the book *Media Virus*, explaining how free email services like Hotmail and Yahoo! were adding advertising to their users' outgoing messages to take advantage of a "viral" marketing opportunity successfully. The book touched off a revolution in advertising, and viral marketing quickly became a necessary component of any complete advertising campaign. The change forced by digital technology was so thorough in marketing and business planning that Rust and Oliver declared "The Death of Advertising" in 1994, encouraging companies to embrace what we now know as an integrated communication strategy that approaches all possible points of contact with audiences as opportunities to strategically communicate.

Also in 1994, University of Toronto engineering professor Steve Mann began 24/7 live streaming his Wearable Wireless Webcam, birthing the "Lifecasting" movement. JenniCam (1996–2004), CollegeBoysLive (1998–present), and many other Lifecasting programs inspired and converged with the reality TV genre that would rise to popularity in the 2000s.

The revolution in advertising seems to have signaled the inevitability of digital culture's domination of the mainstream. One of the early transitions of internet memes to popular culture happened in 1996. The "Dancing Baby" (aka "Baby Cha-Cha") animation first gained widespread attention through bulletin board posts and email forwards to achieve a new height of popularity for an internet meme. Its leap to television as a series of recurring hallucinations on the TV series Ally McBeal brought the offline world into direct contact with internet culture. This blending of media worlds was just the beginning of the smudging and eventual elimination of such borders. The first cross-platform reality show Big Brother began broadcasting in the Netherlands, showing 24/7 internet streaming and edited TV episodes is another example of how media borders were blending.

By the 2000s, internet memes had become a popular form of mediated communication between friends on social media networks. "Internet famous" sensations such as "Star Wars Ninja Kid," "Leeroy Jenkins," Tay Zonday's "Chocolate Rain," and the "I Can Has Cheezburger" cat (among many others) became iconic. These early examples of internet fame were only the first of many later examples of ordinary people getting thrust into celebrity by the global meme machine. Meanwhile, "Rickrolling" (the unexpected and unlikely appearance of Rick Astley's hit pop song "Never Gonna Give You Up") and other online pranks opened the way for a more mischievous line of memes.

While internet memes historically precede social media, the critical mass of memes that has led to our current memetic communication would simply

not have been possible without the ease of sharing, repurposing, and repost-
ing heralded by our social media interfaces. A key element of our global
meme-making apparatus came in 2003. Emulating the success of social
networking site Friendster, MySpace launched its own social networking
platform and quickly became the most popular social media site in the world.
Its large user base of musicians and fans led to the embedding of music and
video players into MySpace pages, taking mainstream what became known
as internet mashups: web applications that combine functionality from more
than one online media source, similar to the concept of musical mashups as
described previously in the 1980s. In 2005 the Reddit.com community web
platform went live with its user "upvote" system, through which audiences
rank user-submitted content. Calling itself "the front page of the internet,"
it became one of the key sites propagating internet memes. The triumph of
social media truly came in 2006, when Facebook opened its network to the
general public. Facebook quickly surpassed and then obliterated MySpace as
the most popular social media platform. Building on the internet mashup con-
cept, Facebook has continuously incorporated most other successful social
media as they have become popular, such as Instagram, Twitter, YouTube,
and WordPress, facilitating an enormous rise in viral media sharing activity.
The arrival of smartphones and Facebook's attention to apps made it possible
for average people to participate in meme generation on multiple platforms
throughout their everyday lives.

   The mainstream appropriation of social media technology inflected virtual
spaces with the reproduction of numerous mainstream social problems, such
as sexism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, ageism, ableism, and almost ev-
ery other physical-world oppression we can identify. Often the offenses and
offenders are blatant, such as the presence of white power hate groups (see
chapter 11), or the open misogyny of "men's rights activist" groups. How-
ever, along with this new media have also come new forms of old problems
that can be harder to recognize. For example, blogger Carmen Sognonvi on
Racialicious.com found it necessary to invent the term "hipster racism" to
describe the sarcastic and ironic use of racism and cultural appropriation to
create jokes that are intended to be inoffensive, but in fact continue to per-
petuate stereotypes and oppressive ideas (see chapter 9). Other critiques of
technological spaces have demonstrated issues such as an economic "digital
divide," the erasure of difference and forced conformity toward the domi-
nance of white male supremacy in virtual spaces, and the reality of Anglo
white male dominance and misogyny in the physical world interactions of
Silicon Valley and other techno hubs.

   While there is quite a lot that critical analysis can reveal about power and
oppression online, most user experiences seem to lean toward expressions

of fun, belonging, and even banality. For example, in 2008 Sam Weckert of Adelaide, South Australia, started a Facebook page to post photos of what he and his friend called "planking," which quickly grew to a global-scale meme phenomenon. Other visual memes such as the Harlem Shake, Psy's "Gangnam Style" dance, and "Oneshot" videos highlighting institutional community furthered this strand of memetic activity.

By the 2010s, the internet memeplex was running with incredible efficiency. Memes were spreading farther and faster than could have been imagined just half a decade before. With such speed and rapid growth comes the potential for ever greater disaster. Small errors can quickly become large, and larger errors can become devastating. Demonstrating the potential speed and volatility of some internet memes, the Kony 2012 Invisible Children Video Campaign went viral, collecting over one hundred million views in just a few days from well-meaning people seeking to spread awareness and raise money to correct a terrible injustice. Within the same week though, the campaign became virally maligned, as information came to light that the campaign was working with inaccurate and badly outdated information and that only a small percentage of donated money would be spent for its intended purpose. The campaign stalled the following week with the arrest of one of the key campaign organizers.

Individual political expression through memes on social media also seemed to hit a new speed record in 2012. Mitt Romney's comment about "binders full of women" during a presidential campaign debate with Barack Obama went viral on social media before the debate had even ended. Numerous web presences on hosts such as Tumblr and Pinterest sprung up within hours, documenting and archiving the many mutations and interpretations of Romney's gaffe.

With similarly rapid ascension, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi created #BlackLivesMatter as a Twitter hashtag to express outrage against racial profiling and police brutality against African Americans after the acquittal of George Zimmerman (who was on trial for the shooting death of unarmed black fifteen-year-old Trayvon Martin) in 2013. The hashtag quickly went viral, jumped across numerous platforms, and became the iconic/semiotic center of civil rights demonstrations across America and in other cities throughout the world. Since going viral, #BlackLivesMatter has spawned a robust national movement and activist network, and has far outlived the typical lifespan of most memes by continuing to be a prominent hashtag in the present.

Altogether, the early 2010s were a time in which communication through internet memes matured and normalized into an everyday format of communication. While some notable memes achieved more distribution and recogni-

tion than others, meme generator sites (such as imgur.com, quickmeme.com, livememe.com, and imgflip.com) made it so easy to recombine images with new text and push them out to various social media that almost anyone online could participate in this new form of mediated communication. In some ways, it presented a perfect combination of iconic communication with short, SMS-type text messages: in essence, words on pictures. Added to the extreme portability, scalability, and cross-platform compatibility of the product, the millennial generation had been given a brand new means of expression, which was without hesitation adopted as their own. It became common to add a hashtag (#) to status updates on Facebook, tweets, and other messages with keywords, even further truncating written communication. Hashtag trends became the barometer of real-time audience interests and emotions. Instagram, Snapchat, and Vine became indispensable apps on smartphones, and social media strategy became a crucial component of integrated public communications.

While much sorting out of this early 2010s milieu was about smallish, friendly networks of individuals experimenting with fairly benign content provoking fairly limited consequences, several new forms of big and persistent old social problems also erupted. For example, in 2014 the #Gamergate meme went viral on Twitter. The meme was perpetuated by mostly "supportive" (supportive of the original poster, that is) anonymous users issuing death threats and misogynistic messages against game developers Zoë Quinn, Brianna Wu, and cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian, after Quinn's ex-boyfriend blogged remarks that threatened her with assault and murder. Another notable storm of misogynistic criticism similar to #Gamergate happened in 2015, wryly known as the Reddit Revolt. Bowing to viral attacks and sub-Reddit blackouts over the removal of content judged offensive, illegal, and against Reddit's policies, plus the firing of the moderator of the AMA (Ask Me Anything) sub-Reddit, Ellen Pao was forced under duress to step down from her position as CEO of Reddit.com amid an avalanche of insults and threats from the user base, and a petition with over 200,000 user signatures. She was replaced by a male co-founder of Reddit, Steve Huffman, who immediately enacted and enforced even stricter policies than Pao had been working on. The Reddit community then seemed to demonstrate its status quo of misogyny by accepting Huffman's enactment of these stricter policies without criticism, resistance, or blowback.

The perfection of the meme-generating media system had meant an almost total convergence of platforms. Television, social media, print media, apps, radio, movies, video games, and any other format we can think of in our present moment have been more or less made to sync with one another, to feed one another content, and keep audiences engaged throughout their

daily movements and activities. Radio announcers refer to their social media accounts, where you might encounter trending stories from a newspaper or a meme erupting about a political statement that then gets picked up and reported on television.

Reality programming was one of the pioneering genres of this type of cross-platform mobility. The internet had enabled 24/7 reality streaming of people's intimate home lives. TV studios copied this format and packaged for popular television episodes known as reality TV. As the genre developed and the media integrated with one another, one reality star emerged with an audacious brand that he successfully leveraged into becoming the President of the United States in 2016. Donald Trump's presidential campaign was built around his mastery of social media, and his ability to launch successful memes from the catch-phrases and slurs he would off-handedly deploy, much like his "You're fired" meme became the de facto signature of his show The Apprentice. Espousing openly racist and sexist stances in short sound bites and tweets, Trump demonstrated a profound attachment to Twitter that continued into his presidency. With Twitter as his platform on the campaign trail, Trump launched numerous notable memes such as "Lying Ted," "Little Marco," "Make America Great Again," "Ban All Muslims," and "Crooked Hillary." Social media also exploded with Trump counter-memes, such as "A Small Loan of a Million Dollars," "Drumph," "Orange Trump," and many more.

Trump's choice of Twitter as his preferred media outlet over traditional media and campaign strategies demonstrated social media as a superior means to electoral success than traditional broadcast media. It is clearly a benchmark in measuring the extent to which hashtag communication and other memetic media deployments have come to prominence in American culture.

Organized mainly through social media, the largest single-day civic demonstration in US history took place on the same day Donald Trump was inaugurated president in January 2017. However, the 2016 US election outcome set in motion many different media memes, with effects rippling across America and around the world. Trump's continued reliance on Twitter as his primary communication method resulted in him holding only one press conference in the first six months of his presidency, as he prefers to remove intermediaries such as traditional news media between himself and his support base. As president, he has used Twitter to communicate everything from executive orders on immigration, to setting foreign policy, to commenting on pop culture celebrities, to making nuclear war threats. Memetic communication had thus become a vital mode of interfacing in politics and international relations.

Appendix B

HOW TO DÉTOURNE

Abridged and edited from "A User's Guide to Détournement" (Debord and Wolman 1956).

1. Any elements can be used to make new combinations, no matter where they are taken from.
   - When two objects are brought together a relationship is always formed, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be
   - The mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the juxtaposition of two independent expressions, supersedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organization of greater efficacy

2. The goal is indifferent parody.
   - It is . . . necessary to envisage a parodic-serious stage where the accumulation of detourned elements . . . express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original, and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity
   - The advertising industry gives us the best examples

3. Two main categories of détourned elements:
   1. Minor détournement
      - Détournement of an element which has no importance in itself and which thus draws all its meaning from the new context in which it has been placed
   2. Deceptive détournement (also termed *premonitory-proposition* détournement)

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• Détournement of an intrinsically significant element, which derives a different scope from the new context

Extensive detourned works are usually composed of one or more series of deceptive and minor détournements

4. Laws on the use of détournement:
   1. The most distant détourned element . . . contributes most sharply to the overall impression
      • This is essential and applies universally

   Nos. 2, 3, and 4 are applicable to deceptive détourned elements

   2. Distortions introduced in the detourned elements must be as simplified as possible
      • The main impact is directly related to the conscious or semiconscious recollection of the original contexts of the elements
   3. Détournement is less effective the more it approaches a rational reply
   4. Détournement by simple reversal is always the most direct and the least effective

5. Two main applications of detourned prose:
   1. Metagraphic writings for detourning prose and other objects or images
   2. Clever perversion of the classical novel (i.e., narrative) form

6. Détournement attains its greatest effectiveness in cinema
   • Juxtaposed narrative/images
   • Inserted texts and/or on-screen activity

7. Ultra-détournement: Tendencies for détournement to operate in everyday social life
   • Gestures can be given other meanings
   • Any sign or word may be converted into something else, including its opposite
   • Clothing/fashion may be detourned
   • The ultimate goal is constructing situations
      ◦ To détourne entire situations by deliberately changing one or more determinant conditions of them

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About the Author

Grant Kien, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Communication at California State University, East Bay. Dr. Kien studies new digital media effects from a critical/cultural perspective, using qualitative and interpretive research methods. He has conducted research in seven countries, published more than twenty scholarly research papers, and authored several books (one translated into Russian in 2015). He has a been an invited plenary speaker at universities and conferences throughout North America and as far flung as Moscow. Dr. Kien's current research focuses on the characteristics and consequences of memetic communication, and analyzing fascistic discourse on social media.