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Pop Polyvocality: Internet Memes, Public Participation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement

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From the inception of Occupy Wall Street (OWS), participatory media played a key role in the movement. Members of the public engaged OWS on sites like Tumblr and reddit. Central to the discussion were Internet memes. Memes are multimodal artifacts remixed by countless participants, employing popular culture for public commentary. Analyzing the use of memes in political discourse can illuminate the nature of mediated commentary on public events. This article examines how memes were used to articulate perspectives on OWS. A corpus of memes commenting on OWS from multiple participatory media networks was analyzed using multimodal critical discourse analysis. Findings indicated memes facilitated conversation between diverse positions. OWS memes employed populist argument and popular texts, intertwining them into a vibrant polyvocal public discourse.

Participation and the Occupation

On September 17, 2011, approximately 1,000 protestors descended on New York's Zuccotti Park, located at the mouth of the famous financial center known as Wall Street. Occupy Wall Street—OWS as it is commonly abbreviated—was initiated by activists associated with the "culturejamming headquarters" Adbusters (adbusters.org). The plan was to stage a long-term protest of prevalent social and economic injustices such as income inequality, corporate influence on politics, and unregulated business practices. A contingent of protestors stayed in Zuccotti Park full time—sleeping, eating, meeting, marching, and organizing—to draw consistent attention to the financial practices protestors argued were detrimental to social welfare and individual prosperity.

The protest initially garnered little traditional media attention, even though it had an active core of grassroots participants disseminating its message via social media outlets like Twitter (twitter.com) and YouTube (youtube.com). In the days, weeks, and months that followed, however, media coverage of the protests grew. This was concurrent with the increase in protestors, demonstrations, participating cities (American and international), arrests, and charges of police brutality. While police disbanded the initial occupation of Zuccotti Park on November 15, 2011, OWS lives on in altered forms across the globe, as does its broader influence on political discourse. "Most significantly," DeLuca, Lawson, and Sun (2012) note, "in a mere few weeks, OWS changed the national conversation despite the initial neglect and

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dismissive framing by traditional mass media organizations" (p. 484). This may well be the legacy of OWS.

Despite the emphasis on physical occupation, participatory media were central to OWS from its inception. Pickerill and Krinsky (2012) note that OWS "was mediated through a mix of 'old' and 'new' methods of diffusion. It worked with electronic media, and also through interpersonal ties and existing alliances" (p. 285). Costanza-Chock (2012) calls this "transmedia mobilization," arguing that Occupiers combined "extensive offline, analog, poster and print-based, and 'low-tech' forms of media production" with "cutting edge technology development and use" (p. 378). Engagement ranged from physical participation to Facebook (facebook.com) conversations to sophisticated multimedia productions. Existing and emerging activism practices intertwined. DeLuca, Lawson, and Sun (2012) call this range "panmediation," arguing OWS media content worked as "a decentered knot" of engagement, a plurality of coexistence and interaction.

These decentered knots existed across many participatory media networks. Key pieces of OWS content—like the flagship poster of a ballerina dancing atop Wall Street's Charging Bull statue below (Figure 1)—were shared on sites like Twitter, Tumblr (tumblr.com), and reddit (reddit.com):

Figure 1. An OWS promotional poster, depicting a ballerina dancing atop Wall Street's Charging Bull statue.

By utilizing hashtags on Twitter, subreddits on reddit, tumblogs on Tumblr, and videos on YouTube, OWS spread its message, made its claims, and mobilized its support. However, so did those critical of the movement. Panmediation opened up the argument to new discussants and new means of discussing. When enough argumentative strands intertwined, media manifested vibrant public debate about the movement and its central aims.

This article explores one facet of mediated conversation over OWS in order to better understand the flow and form of participatory public engagement. It focuses on the prominent use of memes—the always-active amateur media artifacts—to facilitate political debate across participatory media networks. The next section argues that an empirical analysis of memes and OWS can illuminate questions on polyvocality in mediated public discourse. A multimodal critical discourse analysis then assesses the interrelationship between public voice, popular culture, and Internet memes in mediated discourse on OWS.

Populism and the Polyvocal Public

Populist Memes

Internet memes are prevalent artifacts in an era of ostensibly participatory media and were prominent in mediated discussion of OWS. The term *meme* was coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) to describe the flow and flux of culture. However, memes have evolved on participatory media networks. Shifman (2013), calls Internet memes "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience" (p. 367). They are multimodal symbolic artifacts created, circulated, and transformed by countless meditated cultural participants. Memes are increasingly vibrant and prominent in mediated public discourse and are fundamental strands in panmediated knots.

In the case of OWS, diverse artifacts were produced, shared, and reappropriated during mediated conversations on the movement. Common phrases were employed (such as "We are the 99%" and "This is what democracy looks like"); videos were edited, annotated, and remixed (e.g., footage of assemblies, marches, or police response to protests); "on-the-ground" media artifacts where captured and uploaded (e.g., cardboard protest signs or subversive street art). However, image memes—small still-picture and animated GIF files—were especially prolific in the public discussion of OWS on sites like reddit, Tumblr, and 4chan (4chan.org).

The predominant purpose of image memes on these sites is satirical humor for public commentary. Image memes can be quickly produced and shared, and therefore can agilely respond to diverse public events. OWS was no exception; it inspired extensive commentary via image memes. Below are three remixed images commenting on OWS (Figure 2). Two are "image macros" overlaying text on image; one is a "photoshop," annotating a protest capture with *Sesame Street*'s Cookie Monster:

Figure 2. Image memes shared in late 2011, inspired by OWS.

During the months when OWS was most active, participatory media networks buzzed with such artifacts. Participants discussed the social and political dimensions of the occupation through these versatile visuals. By intertwining multimodal popular commentary with text-based discourse, participants were able to creatively engage the debate.

In this way, image memes are a populist means to express public perspectives, even when those perspectives are diverse. "'Populism,'" van Zoonen (2005) says, "always involves a protest or policy on account of 'the people' who fall outside the reach of the political system" (p. 147). While van Zoonen points out this sentiment can be manipulated to antidemocratic ends (she highlights links between populism and fascism pre–World War II), she contends that, inherently, "a populist reaction is an inevitable counterforce to the structural contraction of the political field" (p. 147). The "vernacular creativity" (see Burgess, 2007) fundamental to participatory media like YouTube videos, Twitter trending topics, and image memes depends upon creation, circulation, and transformation outside of traditional media gatekeepers. Even if participating in that vernacular demands some adherence to technological and cultural limitations, the structure is decidedly more open—more the realm of "the people"—than narrow one-to-many modes of mediated communication. Image memes, in their very form, house potential for populist expression and conversation.

This reciprocity between public discourse and populism can inspire worries about a negative restylization of politics (Corner & Pels, 2003). Discourse can be cheapened when pop culture and pop humor become part of the political discussion. But to van Zoonen (2005), calling pop engagement "cheapened" is a way to shut out alternative forms of understanding. Instead, van Zoonen says, "popular genres and means" allow for richer participation in public discourse. For example, Atton (2004) says mashup musical sampling—with its unique ability to juxtapose others' words and sounds—"might be considered as media criticism, differing only from that published in articles and books in terms of the nature of the quotations they employ" (p. 96). If sharing clips from *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* "can be seen as a political act or a performance of citizenship—a means of engaging with and intervening in matters of personal and public concern" (Baym & Shah, 2011, p. 5), then memes may be seen as a populist way to engage with public discourse. After all, as Shifman (2007) argues, "humor can serve as a unique key for the understanding of social and cultural processes" (p. 187).

Populist media, in the best conceptions, expand participation in public discourse. Vibrant public discourse depends on more voices having access to channels of engagement. If more people can log onto reddit or Tumblr and engage in political discussion from more perspectives, democracy benefits. Zuckerman (2008) makes this argument as he traces the "cute cat theory" of civic engagement, tying net culture to political participation. Jenkins (2006) argues that as people "photoshop for democracy," they combine pop participation and political engagement. Memes are part of a media ecology that inspires hope for broader public discussion. Empirical assessment, however, is necessary to understand how these populist discourses are being employed and to what ends. The nexus of image memes and OWS is a worthy subject to examine.

Mediated Polyvocality

The ultimate hope for expanded public discussion—the kind that may be fostered by populist image memes—is a more engaged citizenship. Dahlgren (2009) defines citizenship actively. He says it is not only "a formal, legal set of rights and obligations" but also "a mode of social agency" enacted by "subjective identities" with "collective dimensions" (p. 57). Populist engagement, affective investment, and agonistic contestation are all essential to Dahlgren's notion of citizenship. The "interactional dimension" of citizenship is crucial, and civic life is nothing without "civic talk." If citizens aren't discussing public issues, the stagnancy undermines vibrant public life.

Assessing the relationship between image memes and OWS can test the proposition that participatory media broaden the public sphere (Habermas, 1962/1991) by affording more active civic talk. To Habermas, the public sphere was the liminal space where private citizens engaged in public deliberation about social and political issues. It was a communicative space housed physically in parlors and coffeehouses and metaphorically in the pages of the press. Habermas sees the public sphere as a historical artifact, the product of the public life of the Enlightenment-era European bourgeois that fell away and has never been replicated. However, many have critiqued Habermas' original notion of a singular, overarching, accessible public sphere as an idealistic fantasy (see Asen & Brouwer, 2001). Others, such as Schudson (1993), say whether the public sphere is in decline is less important than the ever-present need to make it better.

Often, this translates into a question of how to get more voices involved in public discussion. In these arguments, the health of the public sphere comes down to polyvocality. Bakhtin (1970/1986) calls discourse inherently "polyphonic"—comprising "many sounds" created by multivocal and always unfinished texts overlapping. A healthy public sphere weaves those many sounds—those many public voices—into a tapestry that covers a wealth of perspectives. Dahlgren (2009) says that "for democracy to happen, citizens must be able to encounter and talk to each other. They need access to each other to develop their collective political efforts, and contexts in which they can act together" (p. 114). Without vibrant public discourse, there is not much hope for a healthy public sphere.

Participatory media—seen as a personal answer to exclusionary mass media (see Castells, 2009)—can facilitate this active, polyvocal citizenship. The hope is that the previously marginalized will have a means to find information and engage in public conversation on more equal footing. To Dahlgren (2009) "ease and adaptability of use" means "the Internet represents a massive boost for the public sphere . . . emerging as a clear factor in promoting participation" (pp. 169–170). In their analysis of OWS Facebook pages, Gaby and Caren (2012) find that the content most shared was not the result of direct

framing by OWS. Instead, "those posts that resonated with different audiences became popular through online sharing, while thousands of posts with little appeal were simply passed over" (p. 372). While Gaby and Caren express concern this memetic spread may "reduce the power of movements to shape their own frames" (p. 372), Costanza-Chock (2012) sees "openness" as key to the OWS ethos.

However, while participatory media can inspire polyvocal engagement with public discourse, they also provide enough customizable information that users can find whatever they want whenever they want it. This self-selection might undermine any positive effects of mediated cultural participation. "Echo chambers" (Sunstein, 2007) are the negative corollary to polyvocality. In a boomerang effect, the wealth of public discourse on sites like Twitter, reddit, Tumblr, and YouTube might lead users to seek and engage only opinion-confirming content. Individuals can create their own metaphoric giant room where they shout an opinion and hear the same opinion bounce right back. When DeLuca, Lawson, and Sun (2012) analyzed how right- and left-leaning political blogs covered OWS, they did not find that panmediation resulted in polyvocal participation. Instead, "in the two alternative worlds of right and left political bloggers, these decentered knots of world-making, the OWS protest is a wholly different event" (p. 492). If tumblogs are islands of singular perspective, if reddit threads are a "hivemind" of echoing agreement, then commentary—on OWS or anything—is shallow, and the promise of mediated public participation goes unfulfilled.

Image memes, as strands of populist discourse, are mediated expressions of members of the public. Their relation to OWS—which extensively utilized and inspired participatory media—is a worthy case to use to assess the scope and depth of pop polyvocality in the mediated public sphere.

Analyzing Multimodal Discourse

For a broader project, I spent from mid-2011 to mid-2012 building a corpus of text and images from participatory media networks that create, circulate, and transform memes as public discourse. I gathered primarily from five "Internet culture" sites: reddit, Tumblr, 4chan, the Cheezburger Network (cheezburger.com), and Canvas (canv.as). I analyzed how memes were used to comment on social issues and political events. In fall 2011, OWS inspired extensive mediated discourse, and became a central thread in that broader corpus. During the height of OWS mediated activity, I also gathered images and text from selected secondary sites that featured OWS memes or discussion on OWS memes. Tweets, YouTube videos, and news stories related to OWS and memes were all purposively collected.

Methodologically, this study is a critical discourse analysis (CDA; see Wodak & Meyer, 2009). CDA focuses on the form and content of communicative artifacts—such as memes—and the social practices that inform them. CDA emphasizes the relationship between what is communicated and the social realities tied to that communication. It is an ideal method for analyzing how participants employed diverse mediated arguments as they discussed OWS and for evaluating the implications of these arguments for public discourse. The more than 1,000 images specifically analyzed for this study employed diverse means of captioning and annotating to make their arguments. They existed in blurred categories of support for OWS, antagonism toward OWS, or ambivalence toward OWS. Their relation to OWS aims and claims depended on not just message, but message context as well. Specific images included in the analysis below demonstrate the vibrancy of the corpus and were chosen for the exemplary way they represent communicative norms beyond them.

CDA is also fundamentally focused on intertextual and interdiscursive relationships in public commentary. Reisigl and Wodak (2009) see intertextuality and interdiscursivity as the bridge by which statements can be "recontextualized": transferred from one setting to another in order to create a juxtaposition, produce a metaphor, or posit a universal truth. Jäger and Maier (2009) elaborate on how "entanglements of discursive strands" during commentary produce "discursive knots" (p. 47). Given that OWS discourse was a "decentered knot" (DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012) of participatory perspectives, a method of textual analysis sensitive to connections is key. In the case of this corpus, OWS image memes employed intertextual references to mass media artifacts and personalities, to internet culture practices and aesthetics, and even to high culture art and literature. They interdiscursively connected to historical events, contemporary news stories, and age-old discussions. These intertextual and interdiscursive connections at times led to difficulty in parsing out a political argument *about* OWS from a pop culture reference *to* OWS, but such ambiguity is also essential to the versatile political power of populist discourses. Therefore, the ever-present intertwine between pop and political is foregrounded below.

Last, while CDA has historically focused primarily on words, the connections made through memes are predominantly multimodal. Memes braid text and image—and even audio and video—in their expression and commentary. There is an increasing call among discourse analysts to appreciate multimodal facets of discourse (see LeVine & Scollon, 2004). Van Leeuwen (2009) says multimodality is particularly important for CDA, since ideology in mediated commentary is often not stated outright, but projected in more subtle visual ways. Graphic artifacts should be viewed "as single, multimodal communicative acts, especially inasmuch as the cohesion between the verbal and the visual is usually enhanced by some form of stylistic unity between the image, the typography, and the layout" (Van Leeuwen, 2004, p. 7). A CDA of the multimodal commentary occurring through OWS memes can inform our understanding of popular commentary, mediated polyvocality, and multimodal discourse. These will be threaded together in the analysis below.

Memes and the Movement

Public Images and Polyvocal Assertions

At their height in fall 2011, OWS memes were employed by citizens with a wide range of opinions. "Polyvocality" was fundamental in this employment. Image memes were exemplars of what Dahlgren (2009) calls the "very talkative media culture" essential to polyvocal public participation. Active citizenship demands agile communicative tools, and image memes were employed with great agility to make diverse points on OWS. This added not just reach but nuance to public discussion.

Image memes were individually a series of assertions. They may not have, decontextually, resembled discussion; they may not have expressed a consistent message; they may not have appeared complex in their composition or argument. However, in the compounding of these images, in the colliding of inconsistent messages, in the complex interrelationships between text and discourse, OWS memes exemplified polyvocality. The panmediated flurry surrounding OWS was a polyvocal manifestation of populist citizenship.

Even individual assertions by OWS organizers were polyvocal, in that they were assertions threaded together with intertextual and interdiscursive reference. The following three images were posted to the official OWS tumblog in October 2011 (Figure 3):

Figure 3. OWS promotional images, directing members of the public to hashtags and Google searches.

These images employ multiple modes of communication—and multiple intertextual references—to make their argument. Text is overlaid on a close-up of Wall Street's Charging Bull statue. A censored face sits over a hashtag. A play on a Jay-Z lyric is paired with instructions to Google the OWS movement. The multimodality, intertextuality, and reappropriation inherent to memes are essential here. And as these images were circulated, pop culture references and visual aesthetics allowed engagement with OWS. Civic talk birthed civic talk.

Beyond what Adbusters produced, numerous image memes from numerous public participants supported OWS. Some of the most notable early examples critiqued New York police officer Anthony Bologna. On September 24, 2011, Bologna pepper-sprayed a young protestor already "kettled" in orange police mesh. The incident was caught on amateur video and spread via YouTube and Twitter to traditional media outlets (Costanza-Chock, 2012, cites this as a catalyst for mass media coverage of the protests). Image captures from these videos were reproduced and shared (Figure 4):

Figure 4. A screen capture from amateur video of an OWS protestor being "kettled" by police and pepper-sprayed; the screen capture itself was shared in late 2011.

Charges of police brutality were levied via image macro, as the incident became an early rallying cry for those supportive of the movement. "Tony Baloney" became a macro villain (Figure 5):

Figure 5. Images critiquing "Tony Baloney" for his use of force on protestors.

The vernacular creativity inherent to memes is employed politically in these images. Standard macro aesthetics (the visual emphasis, the use of a simple white font, the "set-up/punch-line" format) provides a recognizable template for the assertions. Their context is sparse and the emphasis is humor. However, in this minimalist humor is an expression of citizenship. As Dahlgren (2009) argues, humorous commentary works to "strip away artifice, highlight inconsistencies, and generally challenge the authority of official political discourse" (p. 139). In doing so, humor "offers pleasurable ports of entry to current political

topics, as it contributes to the evolution of mediated political culture" (p. 139). Participating via image meme gave citizens a means to offer commentary, adding new voices to the panmediated discussion.

The Anthony Bologna incident initiated an extensive focus on police response to OWS in image memes. The amateur cameras shooting so much of OWS ensured there were numerous images to circulate and remix. The following three macros combine images of (what are ostensibly) OWS arrests with overlaying text to critique police action against protestors (Figure 6):

Figure 6. Images satirizing the use of force on protestors.

The first takes a popular ironic quote and applies it to an image of a protester slammed to the ground with a strong knee in his back and combat boots resting on his head. The result is an Orwellian overtone of placid oppression. The second is a shot of a female protestor—mouth agape—being groped in the breast while being detained. No matter how intentional the grope was, or how long it lasted, the fixed image behind the text communicates a static violation. The text adds a pun, overlaying the slogan and font for Chase bank. The third image is another knee from another officer on another pinned protestor. The protestor's firm glare at the camera and the flag draped over his hands make the image powerful on its own. The caption adds a curious irony. In one reading, clearly the text and image are oppositional. What awesome possibilities exist in a country that slams knees into the throats of protestors? But in another, the expression on the protestor's face communicates a resolution that does come close to something awesome. As if the struggle of the protest, the stakes of its goals, and the resolution of its activists merits pride and hope.

In addition to brutality, American president Barack Obama was another recurring focus in image macros supporting OWS—and not as a sympathetic figure. He was frequently criticized for his silence and his financial ties with major banks (Figure 7):

Figure 7. Images unsympathetic to American President Barack Obama and his practices relevant to OWS.

Obama's expressiveness is used against him in these images, employed to imply sneering, cynical, duplicitous cronyism. His wide smile becomes a sign of bold hypocrisy in the first two. He is criticized for holding expensive fundraisers while protestors fight for a political system free from such practices. He is called out on his condemnation of police brutality when it happens in Middle Eastern nations, but not when it happens in America to individuals protesting corporate influence in politics. He is a determined hero, but one fighting to "save the banks." Even Obama's reputation as a progressive could not save him from accusations of crony capitalism and plutocracy by OWS supporters.

But the sentiment regarding OWS was certainly not monolithic on participatory media networks. Instead, it was vibrantly (at times ferociously) polyvocal. Memes were employed to express ambivalence, dismissal, and outright disagreement with the goals and methods of the protests. OWS memes were interdiscursive, intertwining multiple texts and commentaries into complex collages. Images themselves would at times speak to each other. These two images—both circulated in fall 2011—work as binary counters, one critiquing the political right, one critiquing the political left (Figure 8):

Figure 8. Images similar in form, one critiquing the Tea Party, and one critiquing OWS.

The left image features an annotated picture of an apparent Tea Party protest. Overlaying the protest signs opposed to taxation are arrows pointing to all the things in the photo that come from tax dollars: sidewalks, roads, traffic lights, phone lines, and so on. The implication, of course, is that the protestors are blind to their dependence on the fruit of taxation, and a "zero taxes" policy would be detrimental to the lives of the people making the proposition. The right image makes a mirrored claim about OWS and corporations. The annotations claim protestors want "evil corporations" destroyed, while enjoying Panasonic cameras, J Crew hats, Clairol hair dye, and Gap clothing. The implication is that the protestors are blind to their own dependence upon corporations, and that a "down with corporations" policy would be detrimental to the lives of the people making the proposition. The images work as discursive counters, pointing out alleged inadequacies in the arguments of prevalent movements of the day.

The hypocrisy accusation persisted prevalently in OWS memes. Occupiers were critiqued through macro for entitlement and blindness regarding wealth and privilege (Figure 9):

Figure 9. Images critiquing OWS protestors for entitlement and privilege.

Young, hip urbanites tell us to "just put the revolution on my parents' credit card." Their degrees in "womyn's studies" mean nothing to real-world problems. After protestors realize they've skipped their

allotted songs on the streaming radio service Pandora, they cry that they are the "99 Percent" (lampooning the phrase used by the OWS movement to differentiate between the bottom 99% of wage earners who are worth considerably less than the top 1%). These images imply protestors are anti-capitalist while taking advantage of its fruit, are revolutionary without any real consequence, and are complaining about the problems of an entitled leisure class.

Many macros argued that protestors did not have problems worth occupation, especially in comparison to other instances of inequality and human struggle (Figure 10):

Figure 10. Images critiquing the legitimacy of OWS.

Martin Luther King Jr.—an American Civil Rights icon and a symbol for justice in the face of adversity—thinks it is "adorable" that the Occupiers are rallying. The term is not generally applied to serious sympathies. In the Middle East, the second image argues, protestors are facing explosions, fire, blood, and bullets. In America, they're sitting in Guy Fawkes masks (a symbol reappropriated by the hacker group Anonymous from the film *V for Vendetta*) while cops stand disinterestedly behind them. In the third image, a photo of starving children is a counter to the marchers in the panel above. Their "99%" claim is qualified by the magnitude of suffering occurring throughout the world.

Another common critique of OWS was that protestors did not have specific goals, demands, or solutions, or that they were not able to clearly articulate with any precision what it was they were protesting (Figure 11):

Figure 11. Images critiquing OWS for its lack of clear objectives.

A common character in image macros, The Most Interesting Man in the World tells us that when he starts a protest, he "actually define[s] a clear set of objectives." All protestors want, according to the annotations in the second image, is an ambiguous end to what they hate and more of what they want. Protestors know step one: occupying. They know step three: replacing the "entire global economic system." It is step two they are confused about. Commenting on an ambiguous "step two" is a popular strategy in participatory media networks for pointing out a logical inconsistency. The tactic is taken from an episode of the TV series *South Park* in which gnomes "1. Steal underpants, 2. ??????, and 3. Profit."

All these critiques were in line with complaints posited across traditional media outlets, suggesting a deep interconnection between the arguments occurring on meme sites and the broader discourses occurring during the protests (see DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012). As sites like reddit and Tumblr were mobilized in support of OWS, these critiques cropped up in tandem. Their mere existence served as a polyvocal response on meme sites deeply tied to the protests. In fall 2011, visiting 4chan, reddit, Tumblr, the Cheezburger Network, and Canvas meant being inundated with multiple images from multiple perspectives about OWS. Participatory media networks facilitated polyvocal political assertion. These were the artifacts of active citizens, engaging politically with multiple perspectives.

Conversational Citizenship and the 99%

Another prominent OWS meme oscillated between support and derision, and did so conversationally. The term *99%* was central to OWS discourse and has become common in American vernacular since the height of the protest. The 99% message—that the bottom 99% of income earners were oppressed by the unfair practices of the top 1%—spread around OWS protests, moved through participatory media networks, and entered into traditional media. The slogan, Pickerill and Krinsky (2012) argue, was unique in that it "immediately created a sense of inclusion and majority" (p. 281). But despite its inclusive spirit, it was met with polyvocal pushback. 99% image memes inspired conversational citizenship in surprising ways, as multiple perspectives used a memetic core to directly engage each other.

The phrase owes much of its prominence to a tumblog that featured OWS sympathizers sharing write-ups on why they supported the movement. These write-ups, Gaby and Caren (2012) say, became some of the most prominent OWS images shared on Facebook. Memetic participation gave force to the argument as participants shared photos like these (Figure 12):

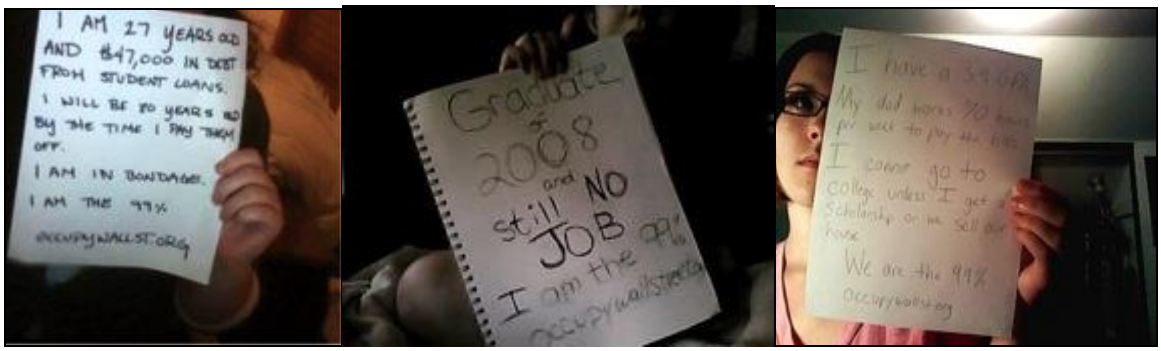

Figure 12. 99% images shared on Tumblr in late 2011.

All these images feature a handwritten story of hardship, held up to the camera. They all end with a nominal reference to the 99% and direct readers to occupywallst.org. Textually, they are independent, fixed images, absent of annotation or remix. However, extratextually, they are dependent upon a memetic process that intertwined imitation and transformation from a core convention, a performance of citizenship polyvocally linked to the perspectives of other citizens.

This similarity was not entirely organic. At least on the official tumblog, the rules for remix were not simply gleaned by savvy participants. They were explicitly enforced by the editors who were gatekeeping submissions. The meme's fixed core was outlined in bullet points on the submission screen for the tumblog (Figure 13):

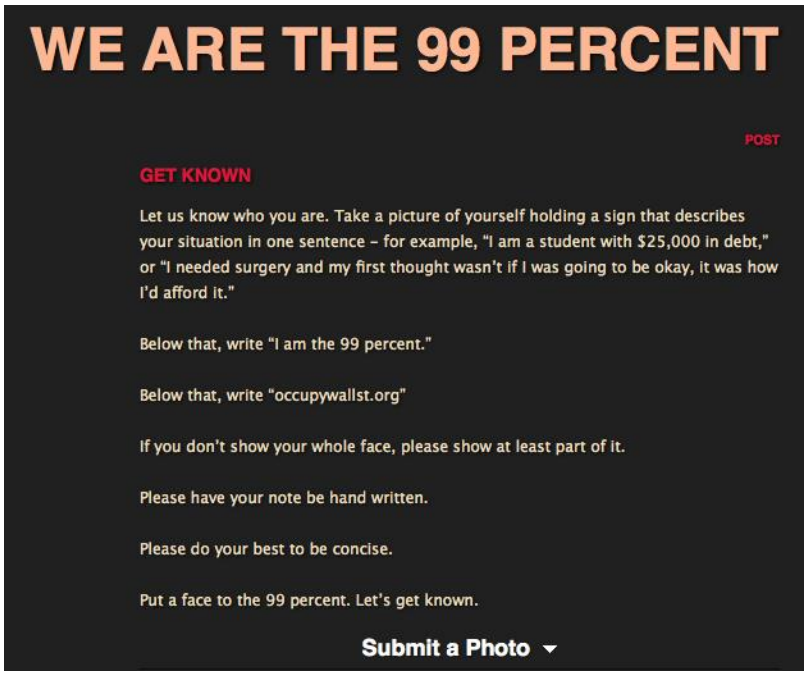

Figure 13. A screen capture of the 99% tumblog, conveying explicit instructions for replicating the desired aesthetic for images on the site.

Some of these guidelines were flexibly enforced. Many participants only showed part of their face (a very small part in the first two submissions above). A few posts were not handwritten. More than a few were noticeably *un*concise. Instead, some handwritten pages contained words scrawled so tiny they were impossible to read without an accompanying caption. Still, the instructions were followed with enough consistency to establish an archetypical 99% aesthetic that became an immediately recognizable part of the protests.

Through this formula, 99% images relied upon pathos to facilitate engagement. They were explicitly subjective and partial; they stirred affect intentionally. Van Zoonen (2005) defends the value of such affective participation, and Dahlgren (2009) reminds us that participation in politics cannot happen without first fostering engagement. Participants creating and circulating 99% images may or may not have also been scrawling on cardboard and marching down city streets. However, their engagement helped frame broader political discourse. Long after the physical occupation of Zuccotti Park ended, the 99% was part of the public conversation.

Of course, any aesthetic that exists can be reappropriated; engagement opens itself up for parody. 99% submissions were the subject of satire and critique (Figure 14):

Figure 14. Images satirizing the 99% aesthetic.

The first image plays on the entitled hipster stereotype. The second charges that protestors only have an impotent, vague critique of capitalism. Intermingled with nonsensical jabber is the phrase "capitalism punched me in the eye." The third reframes the "story of struggle" convention by associating it with Adolph Hitler, an undesirable ally. The connotation is that selective information can elicit sympathy for anyone's circumstances. These satires of 99% memes were conversational. A point-counterpoint emerged as 99% messages inspired their own satirical contestation.

Along with satire came outright contradiction. Another number was employed to counter the 99% meme. Based on the premise that only 53% of Americans pay income tax, "53%" images began to circulate in response to 99% images. Of course, even if the contested 53% fact is accurate, it is as fallacious to imply all those sympathetic to OWS do not pay income tax as it is to assume that 99% of the population are the Occupy in-group. Still, the notion resonated as a counterargument. The 53% set up its own tumblog, which reappropriated the 99% aesthetic in order to make arguments against OWS (Figure 15):

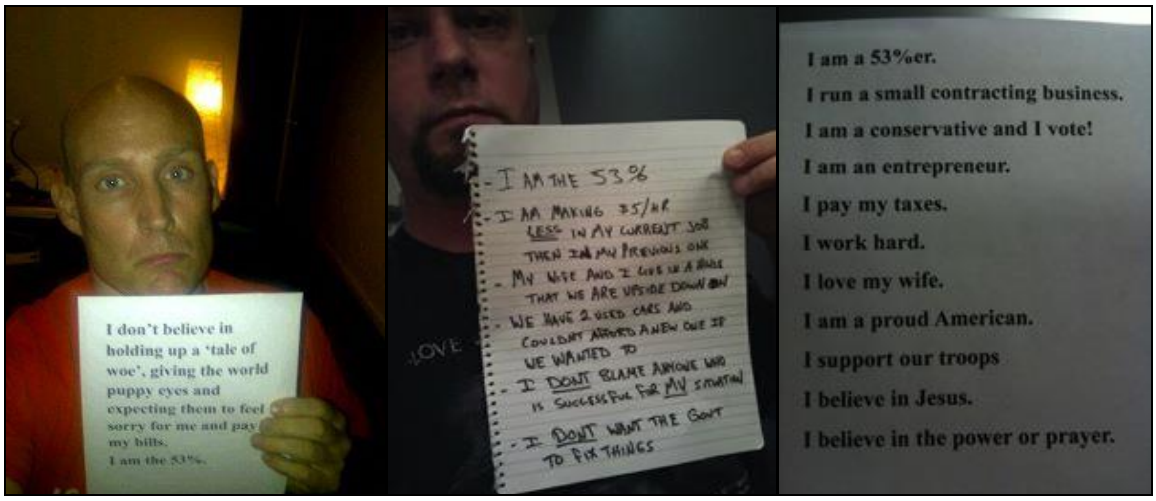

Figure 15. Images from the 53% tumblog, an anti-OWS counter to the 99% tumblog.

These three images each take a different tactic in their response to the 99% meme. The first image addresses the aesthetic norms of the images directly, positing a conventional tendency to give "the world puppy eyes" and then accusing those producing 99% signs of wanting people to pay their bills. The second image gives a story of hardship that might be found on a 99% sign, but tacks on the point that "I DON'T blame anyone who is successful for MY situation," and that "I DON'T want the government to fix things." The last image blends social and financial conservatism. The author claims to "work hard," "love my wife," "support our troops," and "believe in Jesus." The message comes from a "proud American." Placing this list of associations underneath the 53% banner implicates the out-group. If this is definitive of the 53%, those sensitive to OWS must be antithetical to these qualities.

The back and forth via handmade sign went even further. There was even a tumblog set up for members of the 1% of income earners who "stand with" the 99% (Figure 16):

Figure 16. Images from the 1% tumblog, expressing support for OWS.

These images used the 99% aesthetic to express solidarity with its message. Repeated in the images above are phrases like "TAX ME" and "redistribute."

These discourses went beyond single-turn assertion. When it came to Percenter images, political participation was distinctly multiturn. As polyvocal perspectives engaged through memes, arguments happened between texts and even within texts. This 99% note itself responded to 53% notes (Figure 17):

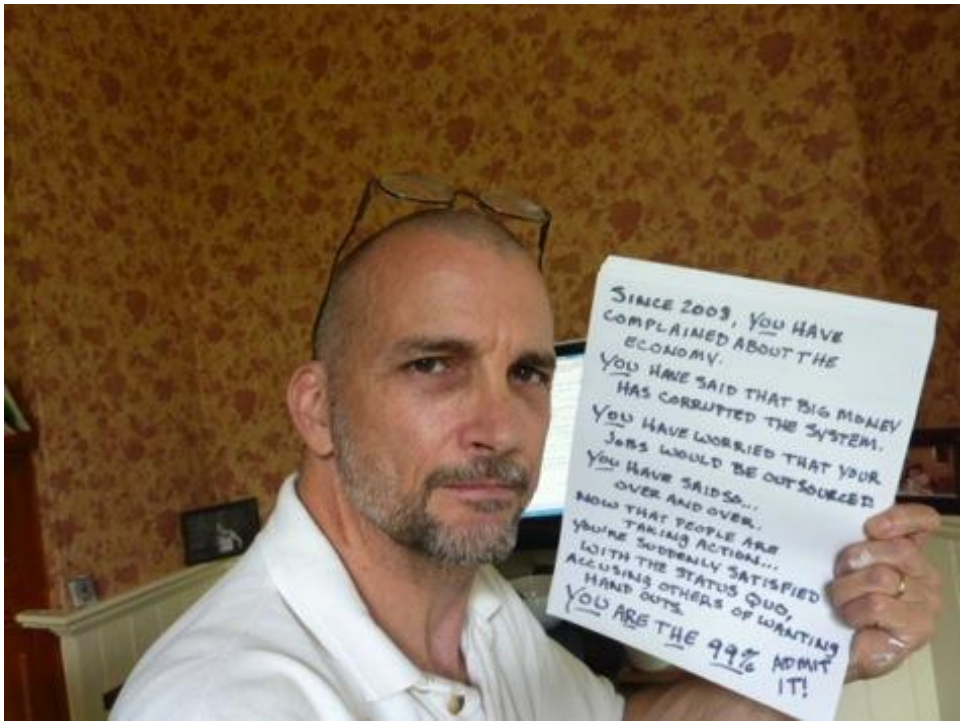

Figure 17. A 99% image explicitly addressing 53% images.

The message is a direct address; it is polyvocal beyond single-turn commentary. "YOU" is repeated five times with underlines (instead of the "I" that is standard in most 99% posts). The content, through this second-person address, calls out conservatives who have "complained about the economy" for years, but are "suddenly satisfied with the status quo" when another political group starts "taking action." The last line is another inverse: "YOU ARE THE 99%. Admit it!". The message argues for hypocrisy in 53% posts and does so via shared aesthetics. A citizen directly, conversationally, addresses an implied audience of interlocutors. Memetic remix affords polyvocal discourse.

Because of multimodality, multiturn argument could occur even within a single image. Participants often used text annotation to argue with a source image. For instance, the following 99% image inspired a thread of rapid responses on the site Canvas (Figure 18):

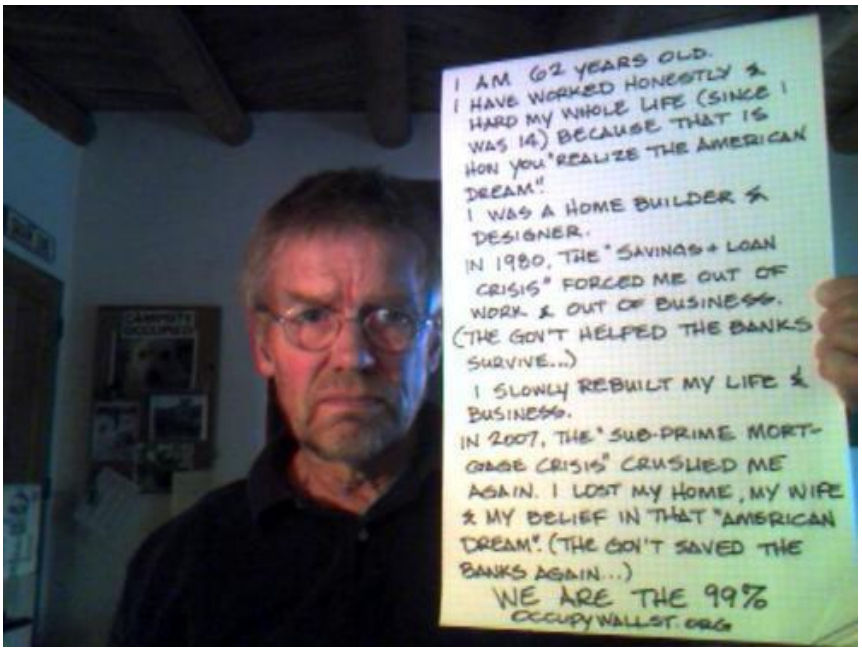

Figure 18. A 99% image shared on its tumblog.

Participants used annotated remix to refute the handwritten message (Figure 19):

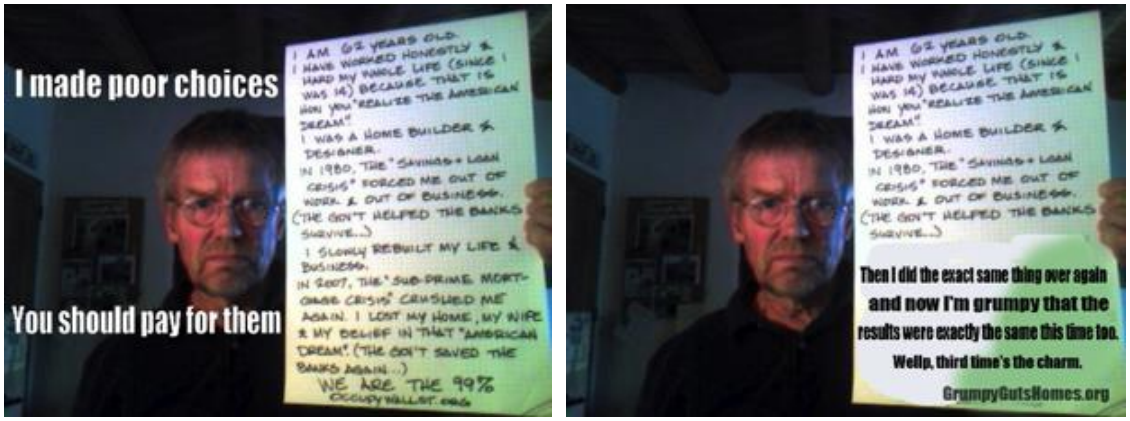

Figure 19. Remixes of Figure 18, annotated on Canvas.

The first response reduces the message (and its author) to two clauses: "I made poor choices; you should pay for them." The second remix whites out the bottom portion of the text to argue the situation was self-inflicted, redirecting blame from social, governmental, or economic forces to personal inadequacies.

This also occurred with 53% posts. The following post was another annotated via Canvas (Figure 20):

Figure 20. A 53% image shared on its tumblog.

The annotations create a multiturn response just as in the 99% post above (Figure 21):

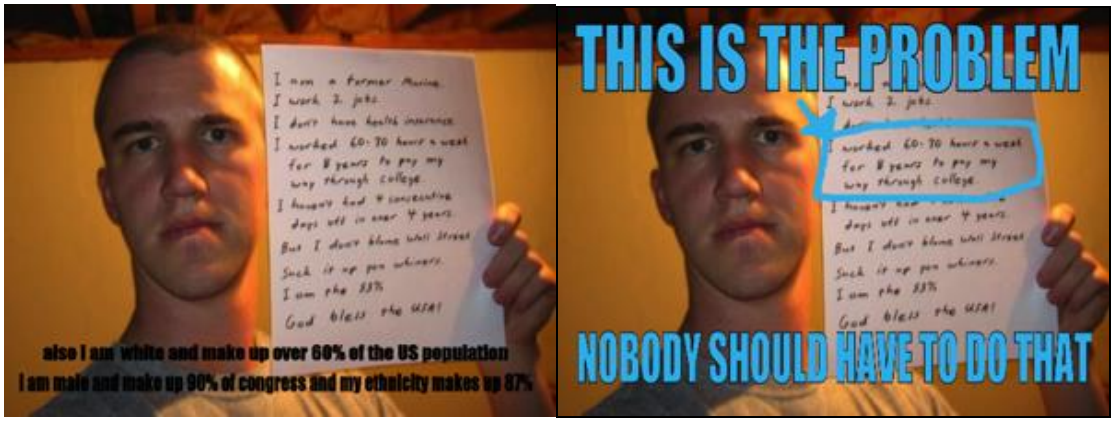

Figure 21. Remixes of Figure 20, annotated on Canvas.

The first comment points to a privilege inherent in the author's social identity—that he is a white male and therefore overrepresented among the powerful. It argues against the general successes of white males rather than addressing the specifics of the image. The second annotation, though, makes a more specific counter to the post. The annotator circles and points to the claim that the author "worked 60–70 hours a week for 8 years to pay my way through college." The refutation reads "THIS IS THE PROBLEM. NOBODY SHOULD HAVE TO DO THAT." It is an argument that does not contradict the evidence in the original point, but instead affirms it to a different conclusion. In the reframe, the fact that the original author had to live like that is not evidence of the success of the system; instead it indicates its failure. The comment is an expression of citizenship that conversationally addresses a specific interlocutor in order to make a broader public point.

One example went even beyond these simple annotations. Below is a single vertical image (broken up into two columns here) that makes a multipanel visual argument for the fabrication of a 53% post (Figures 22–23):

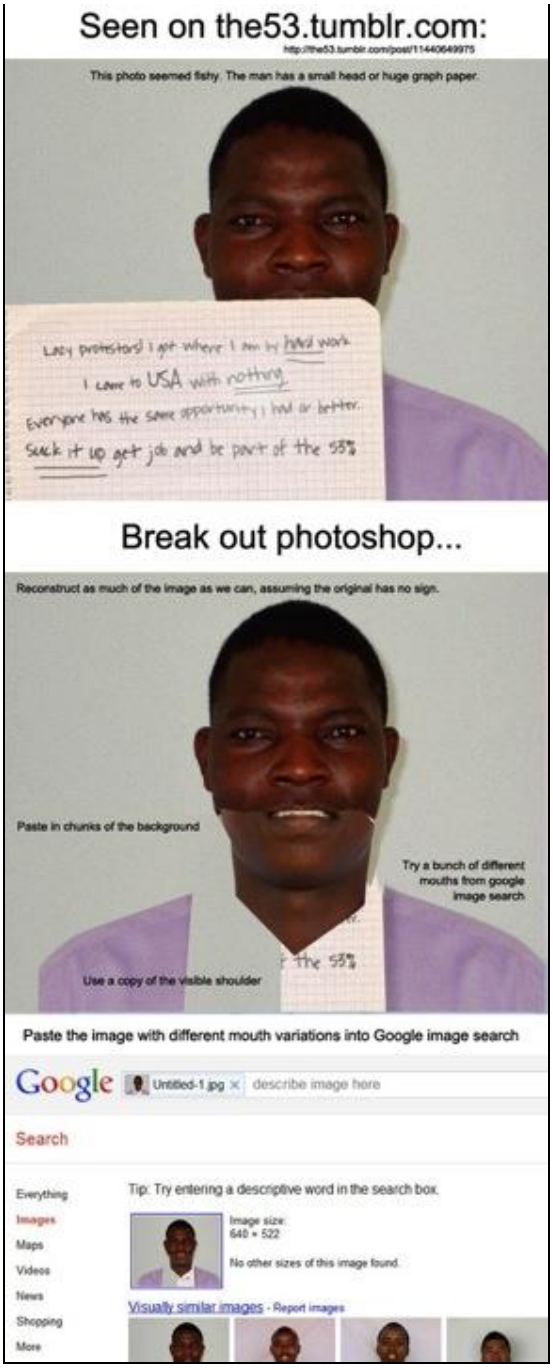

Figure 22. The first half of a vertical post evidencing fabrication of a 53% image.

Figure 23. The second half of a vertical post evidencing fabrication of a 53% image.

With a little knowledge of Photoshop and Google, the annotator is able to make an argument for—and provide evidence of—fabrication in the 53% tumblog. The Percenter memes spawned polyvocal conversation. Image, annotation, and political commentary intertwined.

Percenter images used the participatory processes that undergird memes to engage in multiturn arguments between and even within images. The vibrancy inherent to Percenter images didn't demonstrate "echo chamber" parroting or even simple assertion. Instead, citizens engaged in public commentary aimed toward both implied and specific interlocutors. They were engaging in conversational citizenship. By participating in mediated discourse surrounding OWS, posters and annotators were not just commenting on the activism of others marching in a major city. They were inserting a sliver of their voice into the discourse. Their claims were strands in a discursive thread. Participatory media were mobilized for polyvocal argument.

Populist Participation and Pepper Spray Cop.

OWS image memes were polyvocal in the sense that they facilitated conversational engagement from multiple perspectives. Their polyvocality, however, went even further. They also drew from unconventional source texts to create unconventional commentary. They weren't just examples of polyvocality; they exemplified *pop* polyvocality. Through memes, pop culture texts were employed for explicit commentary on the movement. This use of broad source texts meant more populist participation. A larger segment of the public could both create and engage with political arguments. The use of popular culture texts during OWS commentary, in van Zoonen's (2005) terms, constituted a response to contracted, narrow notions of public discourse. To Dahlgren (2009), popular culture "offers images and symbols that express and evoke emotion, that we use not least in shaping our individual and collective identities" (p. 137). Because of this centrality, political discourse "often makes use of, and is expressed via, forms and languages of popular culture" (p. 137). In the case of memes and OWS, broad expressions of citizenship employed broadly recognized discourses.

For instance, a few weeks into the protest, Occupy Wall Street was remixed into "Occupy Sesame Street" and shared across multiple participatory media networks. The series of images annotated the protest with characters from the iconic PBS children's series *Sesame Street* (Figure 24):

Figure 24. Occupy Sesame Street images shared in late 2011.

When Sesame Street is occupied, police restrain Grover as he pulls away, mouth agape. Cookie Monster is an aristocrat, consuming 99% of the world's cookies. The Count cries with eyes red from pepper spray. The image series used the realities of the movement as a source for creative remix. Big Bird's protest sign is a yellow-clawed version of the oft-used clinched fist in Occupy posters (Figure 25):

Figure 25. A comparison of Big Bird's Occupy Sesame Street clinched claw with an OWS clinched fist.

Bert is dragged off in handcuffs instead of this real-world protestor (Figure 26):

Figure 26. A Photoshopped depiction of Bert being arrested compared with its original inspiration.

In all of these images, moments of protest are transformed by humorous reappropriation. New texts, new remixes, and new annotations mean polyvocal dimensions are added to the conversation.

These images—easy to dismiss as mere creative play or ambivalent humor—become more powerful when *Sesame Street* characters are read as a metaphor for the young protestors being hauled away for nonviolent protest. The images may be an argument about the characteristics of protestors and the resulting injustices of the authorities detaining them. After all, Lievrouw (2011) claims "alternative/activist media projects have an acute sense of *irony* and *humor*, especially in their appropriation of mainstream cultural images and ideas to advance alternative or oppositional meanings" (p. 66, emphasis in original).

This point gets even more salient in the case of Pepper Spray Cop, another iconic remix series. The meme was inspired by an image of police Lieutenant John Pike walking in apparent nonchalance as he pepper-sprayed a group of sit-in Occupy protestors at the University of California, Davis on November 18, 2011. The significant presence of amateur media at the event ensured the disciplinary action was captured The subsequent spread of the footage drew enough attention to become a discursive landmark in the movement, much like Anthony Bologna's police action in New York two months prior. One image in particular, posted to reddit the day after the event, spawned memetic remix across sites (including, eventually, reddit's own popular tumblog; Figure 27):

Figure 27. An image of Lieutenant John Pike pepper-spraying sit-in protestors at the University of California, Davis, uploaded to reddit.

In the days that followed, Lieutenant Pike was cut out of this photo and inserted into several fictional and historical contexts. Below, he makes trips to cultural landmarks, applying his crowd control measures to unlikely targets (Figure 28):

Figure 28. Pepper Spray Cop Photoshop remixes.

He stops at Sesame Street to punish Grover yet again. He makes an appearance at the Last Supper to pepper-spray Jesus and at the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial to spray a mourner as fallen heroes look on.

Pepper Spray Cop was repeatedly portrayed applying his force to fictional innocents from popular media texts (Figure 29):

Figure 29. Pepper Spray Cop remixes focusing on fictional innocents.

The first image victimizes all-American little guy George Bailey from the film *It's a Wonderful Life*. In an iconic scene between George and the wealthy town bully, Mr. Potter, Pepper Spray Cop is inserted to control the situation. His position behind Mr. Potter gives the impression he is a hired goon, dispelling a man who spoke up for equality of opportunity and transparent business practices. In the second, Snoopy—the good-natured troublemaker from the *Peanuts* comic series—is told to "behave" by the staunch authoritarian Lucy. He sticks his tongue out in defiance. He is pepper-sprayed for his independence against oppression. In the third, a character from Dr. Seuss' *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is targeted. Little Cindy Lou Who is being pepper-sprayed despite her hope that Christmas will be a time of prosperity and togetherness. These are pop culture images to be sure, but ones that carry an ethos of innocence and goodwill. That Pepper Spray Cop disciplines these characters is a discursive choice with political undertones.

Pepper Spray Cop also took on historical icons, adding another facet to the social commentary. The same populist humor is applied to more explicitly political sources. It is no surprise that Pepper Spray Cop turns his sights on some of the most iconic displays of protest in the last century (Figure 30):

Figure 30. Pepper Spray Cop remixes focusing on historic moments of social protest.

The first image is of an unknown Chinese protestor, called Tank Man. In the original 1989 photo, he stands resolute in Tiananmen Square, even after Chinese authorities have forcibly removed protestors and sent their tanks through the square. In this image, Pepper Spray Cop has come out to stop the tomfoolery. The second photo—a 1963 capture of Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức burning himself alive in protest of religious persecution at the hands of the South Vietnamese—is another powerful image of social protest. Pepper Spray Cop again interrupts it. The third image turns a social justice victory on its head. The photo is a 1956 shot of Rosa Parks—who famously refused to give her bus seat to a white passenger in 1955—riding the newly integrated Montgomery, Alabama, bus system. Legal integration or no, Pepper Spray Cop is there to make sure Parks' courage does not go unpunished. Each of these historical moments signifies the stern resolution of activists in the face of oppressive state forces. And each is degraded by a rogue lieutenant with a spray can.

Even mainstream moments of American heroism were the subject of Pepper Spray Cop's attention. The following images feature Pepper Spray Cop unraveling the fabric of American strength (Figure 31):

Figure 31. Pepper Spray Cop remixes focusing on patriotic American iconography.

These images represent national fixtures. The first image modifies a painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware River as he prepares a surprise attack on enemy forces in Trenton, New Jersey. The moment is a defining part of the story of Washington's military prowess, resolute character, and unmatched patriotism. Pepper Spray Cop revises that history. George Washington no longer appears in the image. Where he once stood is Pepper Spray Cop, attacking American revolutionaries. The second image is a 1945 photo of American troops raising the flag over Iwo Jima after a long and costly battle with Japan for control of the island. Again, Pepper Spray Cop turns his nozzle on the very people struggling in his benefit. The third image is the most abstract but maybe the most obvious in its commentary. Pepper Spray Cop's weapon is blotting ink over the U.S. Constitution, the document that represents the core of American liberty. These images use the point of view of the American establishment to argue that Pepper Spray Cop is an attack on American ideals.

Taken together, aesthetic choices made in many Pepper Spray Cop remixes make a social point about the events. Participants—remixing from a fixed core—extended the commentary with each new creation. Each share spread that commentary further. The larger picture shows innocents and heroes oppressed and attacked by an instrument of soulless governmental control. In line with Atton (2004), mashup is used to create political commentary. Multiple moments from news, history, and popular culture are combined to form polyvocal mediated commentary.

During the height of OWS, internet memes, pop culture texts, and political engagement intertwined in complex ways. Participatory media practices entered into broader discourses on the protests. When participants on meme sites started sharing 99% photos and Pepper Spray Cop remixes, traditional media outlets carried the story. Pop networks were mobilized for polyvocal participation. If one of the outcomes of OWS was a shift in national discussion, then pop texts and participatory media were a crucial part of that outcome.

Pop Polyvocality

This study is evidence there can be a positive relationship between pop-savvy mediation and polyvocal, populist conversation. Public perspectives on OWS were articulated vibrantly through meme. Participants employed multiple modes of communication and means of argument. Participatory media networks like 4chan, reddit, Tumblr, the Cheezburger Network, and Canvas were mobilized during OWS, weaving tapestries of political commentary. Dahlgren (2009) argues the ability to engage with "new modalities of thought and expression" (p. 110)—and to reappropriate them in unforeseen ways—means the ability to more wholly participate in public discourse. These sites and these practices are the foundational strands in civil society, oscillating between proto-political discourse and political engagement:

> On the one hand, civil society can serve as a training ground that "grooms" citizens, with involvement in nonpolitical associations and networks preparing people for civic political engagement and participation. . . On the other hand, civil society is also the sociocultural terrain in which political participation is played out, where people as civic agents are continually developing their skills and sense of self as citizens. (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 69)

As on-the-ground protests grew in scope and prominence in late 2011, participatory media and memetic practices were employed for assertion and conversation on OWS. The aesthetic practices and humorous tone common on these sites began to carry populist perspectives on the movement. Pop texts and pop networks intertwined as individuals with the literacy to weave the discursive strands crafted commentary from everyday sources.

Those worried about echo chambers should be encouraged in particular by the multiturn conversations that occurred through Percenter images. DeLuca, Lawson, and Sun (2012), in their examination of partisan blogs, may have found a link between panmediation and echo chamber participation. However, the vibrant sites highlighted here housed extensive commentary and polyvocal debate from multiple nuanced perspectives. Not only were images used to represent these perspectives, they spawned intricate text-based discussion on the arguments they presented. All this conversational citizenship evidenced Dahlgren's civic agency. The spread of polyvocal assertions through image memes inspired complex public conversation.

Likewise, those worried about shallow discourse can take comfort in the intricate multiturn commentary occurring through these memetic practices. Even simple images like Pepper Spray Cop were premised on intertextual depth. The OWS debate is an example of polyvocal discourse in mediated networks, at least among those situated in the vernacular of participatory media. Of course, true polyvocality depends on a much wider contribution to the public sphere than the fraction of the population that are active on sites like Twitter, YouTube, reddit, Tumblr, and 4chan. There are still exclusionary gatekeeping practices on meme sites. But the gates are cracked open, if not flung free.

As we work to open the gates further, van Zoonen (2005) asserts the value of pop culture to the public sphere:

> Popular culture does have its flaws, but it needs to be acknowledged as a relevant resource for political citizenship: a resource that produces comprehension and respect for popular political voices and that allows for more people to perform as citizens. (p. 151)

Occupy Sesame Street *may* have undermined the movement, but it may have also aligned protestors with cultural innocents, and authorities with oppression. Pepper Spray Cop *may* have been shallow pastiche. However, it may have been political commentary that served an important argumentative point, making a visual statement about the nature of police action in the protests. If participants wished to engage the University of California, Davis pepper spray incident, they could make a long-form textual argument about state control and civil liberties. They could post it to their blog or pass it around to friends and hope they read it thoroughly and engaged it fairly. They could also show Pepper Spray Cop assaulting George Bailey, negating Rosa Parks' moment of political triumph, or blotting out the Constitution itself. Better yet, they could do both simultaneously. They could intertwine the pop and the political, in order to craft a more participatory argument using more modes of expression. A polyvocal public sphere values diverse perspectives, logics, and ideas.

Pop polyvocality was fundamental to the interrelations between memes and OWS. Members of the mediated public participated in nuanced commentary and conversation by drawing on a broad range of sources. Alongside the daily deluge of jokes and links, participants shared public perspectives on issues fundamental to democratic rule. Through this activity, one of the core goals of the occupation was realized. Members of the public had a means to engage with issues of wealth, power, and inequality. The polyvocal assertions of the mediated public were weaved together. When media made their perspectives "part of broader consciousness" (Costanza-Chock, 2012, p. 381), citizens could engage from many perspectives using many discursive modes. Their voices were amplified as they participated in polyvocal public conversation.

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