

SYMBOLIC DIMENSIONS OF MEDIATED ACTIVISM: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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This paper aims to provide a list of resources and a brief overview of literature that approaches the symbolic dimensions of mediated activism, particularly in an online context. While a great deal of contemporary scholarship on civic activism focuses on the role of new technologies and social media, or the structure of new media networks, an exploration of the role of the symbol in mediated activism may yield unique insights into shared questions about social movements: why some campaigns and media events “go viral” while others fail to do so; how grassroots movements challenge (or reinforce) established political interests; and how new narratives and discourses are constructed by activist groups in emerging sites of contestation.

Such an exploration can derive theoretical scaffolding from a diverse range of fields. Scholars identified with what has been called a “narrative turn” in the study of social movements, such as Joseph Davis, Robert Benford, and Gary Alan Fine, afford primacy to the stories constructed and maintained by social movements, and their effects. Narratives, as organized clusters of symbolic components, offer a useful vantage from which to study the uses of these symbols in activist practices. Drawing on the sociological tradition of Pierre Bourdieu and Weber, forms of capital and power may also be embodied in symbols; via this “symbolic power” and “symbolic capital”, cultural roles and societal power relations are positioned, reinforced, or reproduced. The concept of symbolic or “soft power,” which has extended beyond sociology and sociolinguistics into the sphere of political science, additionally situates discussions of both online and offline activism within a transnational context. The methods of critical discourse analysis may also have utility for approaching these key questions about the role of symbols in marshaling resistance to power.

The ideograph, as outlined by Michael McGee, gives us an additional useful tool with which to study the symbolic components of collective action (1980). Although this concept has most often been applied in the studies of rhetoric, advertising, and political discourse to ask how ideology, as a practice, creates social control, the term may be useful in an understanding of activist action as well. As Celeste Condit and John Lucaites claim, “Ideographs represent in condensed form the normative, collective commitments of the members of a public, and they typically appear in public argumentation as the necessary motivations or justifications for action performed in the name of the public” (1993). The same normative commitments might also be present, and their representation strategically employed, by counterpublics.

Social media activism, a category of practices in support of a cause or issue that can range from signing an online petition, to sharing a message with one's online social network, to displaying a symbol of solidarity (such as changing one's profile picture), but generally require little effort on the part of a user. Critics of "slacktivism" consider these practices to have little practical impact, pointing out that effective movements apply "old-fashioned principles of activism" – careful planning, hierarchical organization, and large numbers of people showing up in person (Morozov 2009; McCafferty 2011). "Slacktivism," according to Morozov, fulfills an identity-building function – or simply inspires a "feel-good" response – with low marginal cost but without inspiring meaningful action.

However, in some cases, the widespread diffusion and propagation of an issue does coalesce into a movement with very tangible consequences. Merlyna Lim provides an expanded analysis of this transformation from acts of "participatory culture" to civic engagement. Using the examples of two successful online collective movements in Indonesia, Lim identifies attributes that contribute to issue diffusion and legitimation. Among other traits, she notes the commonality of "strong symbolic representations" in successful campaigns, and claims that "[issues] that go 'viral' are of a light package, they tap into headline appetites and they embrace a trailer vision. In other words, only simple or simplified narratives can usually go viral" (Lim 2013). Lim thus argues that the social media participation practices derided as "slacktivism" and more substantial political activism are not necessarily opposed; the one can produce the other, albeit not automatically and generally only under certain conditions.

The practice of "code-switching" – alternating between multiple languages or dialects within a conversation – can be implicated in activist practices. Palestinian activists in Israel, during interviews conducted in English, used particular Hebrew terms such as *dukium* ("coexistence") to convey political connotations embedded in the term, and to challenge hegemonic discourses about the region; activists also replaced Hebrew terms with their Arabic counterparts (Faier 8). These hybridizations of linguistic conventions, which simultaneously reject the linguistic terms of dominant groups and reappropriate those terms for subversive use, represent the discourse of a counterpublic. In some cases, the use of language online is itself a site of contestation; in areas where indigenous languages threaten to disappear due to the intergenerational influence of majority languages, on the other hand, code-switching is sometimes avoided as a strategy of reversing language shift (Collins 2005). Netizens in many countries develop new slang terms that can reflect changing cultural identities and linguistic practices, as well as embody a creative resistance to censorship (China Digital Times 2012).

Activist action can also take place via the subversive reconfiguration of existing symbols, as in the phenomenon of "culture jamming" – a term that anti-corporate activists use to describe activities that disrupt corporate symbology or intrude into mass media spaces. Although the term "culture jamming" derives its name from the "jamming" or illegal interruption of radio broadcasts, most culture jamming is instantiated offline, where self-professed "artistic terrorists" graffiti billboards to display satirical messages ("subvertising"), publish magazines featuring fake advertisements parodying those of large corporations, or stage media hoaxes as critiques of a credulous journalistic apparatus. As Mark Dery explains, the "guerrilla semiotics" of this multiplicity of subcultural practices attempt to reappropriate symbolic power through the resemiotization of cultural texts (1999). ICTs can facilitate the distribution of these reclaimed

texts, amplifying their visibility and occasionally turning small-scale disruptions into mass-media events.

Guobin Yang, in *The Power of the Internet in China*, suggests that where state power restricts expression, activists respond with ever-increasing creativity, generating new forms of innovative contention – but that businesses may accommodate or even welcome such response (2009). Yang identifies the “business of contention” as a stabilizing element of China’s virtual ecosystem, a synergy between business and activists; authorities and users, in a continual, implicit process of “edge ball,” constantly test the boundaries of state power in social production, as media outlets (digital and analog) benefit from the attention-generating capacity of controversy or even adopt “packaged dissent” as a market strategy. Yang situates the business of contention within a complex constellation of interactive relations that constitute a locus of change and conflict. Similarly, Trebor Scholz, in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, outlines the functions of symbolic production and activist action as digital labor: social media platforms, built to profit from online “prosumption”, effectively reincorporate dissent into a capitalist framework. Scholz also reasserts that even within profit-oriented mediated environments, meaningful social change is possible: “Instead [of opting out of media altogether], we can produce real counterpublics, support civil disobedience actions, and create networks of solidarity by diversifying/hybridizing our social media practices” (2013).

The “meme,” coined by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) as the atomic, self-replicating component of culture, has itself proven to be a persistent meme, permeating both popular and academic lexicons with the concept of information patterns that evolve algorithmically. Cognitive scientists and anthropologists have attempted to establish a field of memetics in hopes of applying evolutionary models to the development of culture, tracing memetic lineages, or studying the “memomes” or “memeplexes” of individuals or groups (Blackmore 2000; Brodie 1996; Ball 1984; Lynch 1996). The attempt to develop a science of memetics has drawn significant criticisms, including claims that “memeticists” make overly deterministic claims about the propagation of memes ([“The language of memetics...strips aside the concept of human agency”](#)), systematically misrepresent genetics in meme-gene analogies ([“ambiguity in the definition of a meme and confusion regarding the distinction between replicator and phenotype”](#)), and ignore the histories of other efforts in anthropology and semiotics to study cultural evolution.

However, the metaphorical elements that make the meme an attractive and resilient concept – ideas that act like viruses, mutating frequently and unpredictably as they spread through populations, going extinct or thriving according to intrinsic or environmental factors – have nonetheless entered the popular lexicon to describe the spread of informational quanta through social media. The term “Internet meme” also refers to a related group of phenomena that bears some similarity to the theorized meme: generally (often humorous) [image macros](#), viral videos, or catchphrases that propagate rapidly across online social groups. Knobel and Lankshear approach the Internet meme as a new critical literacy practice with the potential to foster social critique, influence popular opinion, or even mobilize a community. Citing examples such as “Godwin’s Law,” which they call a “counter-meme” engineered to combat gratuitous analogies to Hitler and Nazism in online forums, Knobel and Lankshear demonstrate that a “well-engineered” meme – even an Internet catchphrase – can meaningfully alter the state of discourse as part of a set of social interactions within an “affinity space,” with a direct role in meaning-making (2007).

However, they also alter parts of Dawkins' original definition substantially, substituting for his idea of memetic "fidelity" textual qualities of replicability and adaptability that better suit an analysis of the often-protean symbolic configurations that constitute online memes.

Jenny Davis links the Internet meme to Roland Barthes' conceptualization of myth as "second-order semiological system," identifying commonalities of semiotic structure and function between Barthes' examples of mythic signifiers and memes, and claims that "the Internet meme is the predominant (and logical) form of myth in an augmented society" (Davis). Barthes' description of the decoupling of a myth from its construction does appear reflected in the semiotic structure of a meme. However, the characteristics of Internet memes later described (that they are "digitally and physically rooted, widely and quickly dispersed, prosumed and adapted from the bottom up") leaves open questions of the extent to which the Internet meme fulfills the same cultural functions as the myth, and whether or how Internet memes constitute discourse or affect activist practices and identities. The structural comparison nonetheless invites a further discussion of cultural mythologies, in conjunction with Bourdieu and other scholars who draw on the concept of myth, in order to deepen a conceptual definition of mythology and an understanding of its role in shaping unstated cultural narratives, values, and power relations.

Limor Shifman's 2014 book *Memes in Digital Culture* presents a wide-ranging and grounded theoretical overview of the Internet meme, defined not in biological or transmissive terms, but as "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/ or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated , and/or transformed via the Internet by many users." Distinguishing the meme (which, according to her definition, is necessarily collective) from "the viral" (a single, widely-propagated cultural unit), Shifman's analysis of popular virals and memes across numerous cultures, from "Numa Numa" to "We Are The 99%," demonstrates that memes are a relevant, studiable, globalizing, and fundamentally political mode of cultural participation. Her conception of a meme as "a secondary layer of language" or "(post)modern folklore" reflects Barthes' and Davis' claims about the meme as myth, but further develops that concept into a complex communicative link between Goffman's "front stage" and "backstage," and between the personal and the political. While Shifman's definition (and her claim that the meme is "the essence of the Web 2.0 era") risks weakening the utility of the meme concept by expanding it to encompass nearly any element of remix culture, and her discussion of memes does not examine their potential impact on political structures (or lack thereof), she presents a powerful new lens through which to view memetic activity as sites of performative political expression that follow logics of "connective action" and create new polyvocal discourses.

In areas of censorship, Internet memes can function as acts of resistance; the circulation of imagery in explicit or implicit defiance of censors challenges the authority of dominant groups, signifying discontent through satire or other forms of ironic criticism. One well-known example of symbolic resistance online (also examined in Shifman's analysis as a possible means of "democratic subversion") is the Chinese word for "river crab," which is a homophone for "harmonious" – itself a term referencing the CCP's vision of a "Harmonious Society," adopted after the word "censorship" was censored across the Chinese Internet. The name or image of the crab can thus be used to signify discussion of a post or website being "river crabbed," or

“harmonized” – meaning censored by the government (China Digital Times 2012). Lijun Tang and Peidong Yang apply theories of symbolic power, via Pierre Bourdieu and John Thompson, to arguably the most well-known of these Internet phenomena – the Caonima, or “grass-mud horse,” a pun on a widely used Chinese profanity which achieved widespread popularity as a subversion of government anti-obscenity regulation (Tang and Yang 2011). As a challenge to Chinese Internet control, users adopted the symbol of the “grass-mud horse” and subsequently proliferated it through a satirical song containing numerous vulgar puns; the appropriation of the image of the alpaca to represent the mythical “grass-mud horse,” and even a line of stuffed dolls depicting the creature. Tang and Yang examine characteristics of the phenomenon in an attempt to identify characteristics of a powerful symbol, but acknowledge that the emergence of a symbol depends largely upon the existence of receptive cultural conditions, particularly a pre-existing audience. They suggest that while online networks do not facilitate the *creation* of powerful symbols – “producing a powerful symbolic product online very much depends on an insightful interpretation of the social and cultural contexts in which the product is suppose to circulate” – such networks facilitate the production of “follow-up discourse” that magnifies the power of a symbol as it resonates throughout a network. Additionally, Tang and Yang provide an alternative conception of the symbol in an activist context – rather than an instrument of power, a symbol such as the horse is “a text formed out of resistant discursive practice...a crystallization of the subversive sentiments of the public,” which must be understood in a dialectic with resistance discourses in sites of power struggle. However, they pessimistically conclude that such symbolic, discursive texts have little potential to institute social change.

Andrew Boyd adopts a more optimistic outlook in his discussion of the chaotic DIY-inflected protest events of “Retake the Streets” and “Shutdown in Seattle,” comparing the carnivalesque cacophony of these demonstrations with the strategically coordinated campaign of “Billionaires for Bush,” in all of which he participated. Both types of event mobilized a symbolic resistance to dominant financial interests; however, Boyd emphasizes the highly calculated symbolic core of the Billionaires campaign, which facilitated participation while also providing direction to participants, asserting that “message discipline and media savvy” to the rhetorical effectiveness of collective action. This illustrates the same dynamic of collective action that Tang and Yang identified, distinguishing the production of an effective symbol (in this case, the strategic message of the Billionaires campaign) from the solidarity-inspiring function of the network. However, Boyd also claims that “ingenious meme warfare can inject a message into corporate media in spite of editorial frames designed to filter it out,” echoing more hopeful claims about the potential of symbolic activism to subvert dominant media frameworks.

Tang, in collaboration with Syamantak Bhattacharya, also incorporates the symbol into an examination of satire in China. Although satire is said to be “an accommodating choice and weapon for political underdogs and bears no real bite,” leading to feelings of powerlessness, symbolic resistance via satire on the Internet actually has an empowering effect. In Tang’s and Bhattacharya’s analysis, online collective action exhibits a shift in symbolic power dynamics; the “sustained shame and ridicule,” implicitly challenging ruling elites, brought about by an online satire campaign allows these political underdogs to wield symbolic power of their own.

Memetic participation can itself be an act of protest. After the conservative Tunisian Ministry of Education reacted to students staging a version of the whimsical “Harlem Shake” dance (an

Internet meme that began in February of 2013) with condemnation and a formal investigation, a “cultural rebound” (according to Marzouki and Oullier) inspired the rapid spread of the meme, and multiple “Harlem Shake” performances subsequently occurred in solidarity and defiance of the attempt to stifle it. Activist meme-makers staged similar protest performances in Egypt after police arrested scantily-dressed students mimicking the dance. Philip Howard et al. suggest that during the earlier “Arab Spring” uprisings in 2011, local stories of struggle and political change created a “freedom meme” that spread through social networks and sparked conversation about political freedom, recalling Shifman’s concept of the Internet meme as a means of creating new discourses. Lotan et al., examining whether “the revolutions were tweeted,” tracked the spread of information through Twitter hashtags during the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings; they concluded that the “networked news production” co-created and amplified via Twitter represents a “distributed conversation among participants...journalism, in this era of social media, has become a conversation.” Symbols – whether memetic forms of performative protest or viral hashtags that index news – perform a crucial role in mediated activism by creating loci of conversation among diverse actors.

Ethan Zuckerman and Andrew Keller both articulate the notion that technological affordances can modulate the effectiveness of symbols in collective action. In the process, however, both reduce the symbol to a simple indicator of visibility, or a rallying-point for public outcry around which radicalization may occur. Accordingly, they express similar doubts about the ability of complex counterdiscourse to result from Chinese online activism: “While the concept of internet surveillance is very easy to turn into a meme and lampoon via videos and coded language, more complex ideas, such as foreign policy and economics, may not fare so well in such an environment.” (Keller 35) “One possible implication of the Chinese approach to censorship is that simple ideas may be able to spread through the population, but sustained political dialog may be difficult or impossible through social media. An emergent dialog centered on image and remix may prove to be a rewarding public sphere, but it is likely to be a very different space for expression than those postulated by theorists like Habermas.” (Zuckerman 18) This technology-focused approach risks undertheorizing the symbolic dimensions of collective action, overlooking the potential impact of memetic participation, by presupposing symbolic action as a static process. On the contrary, the same creative resilience that characterized Chinese netizens’ subversion of keyword censorship and gave rise to the “river crab” and “grass-mud horse” informs a constant play of innovative contention, subversion, and remix. Lasn’s term “meme warfare” highlights the nature of mediated activism as a perpetual clash of symbols; the roles and effects of these symbols, however, are subject to continual change, as actors adopt new strategies, incorporate existing tactics, and adapt to a shifting landscape of social and technological constraints.

Additional avenues of research may include an expanded analysis of the role of metaphor in activism; an investigation of “mediated corporate activism,” authority-sponsored practices whose strategies mirror those of activists, such as the “50 cent army”; a clarification of the distinctions, if any, between “symbolic activism,” “symbolic resistance,” and “viral activism”; additional alternatives to the memetic model of symbolic reproduction and transfer; and an extended discussion of “packaged dissent” and the capitalist incorporation of activists who themselves employ market strategies. Ultimately, a robust theoretical and empirical interrogation of the role of symbolic discourse in conversation, either maintaining or destabilizing imbalanced cultural

power relations, and either facilitating or inhibiting activists' efforts at creating social change, is a necessary component of an understanding of collective action as a whole.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aziz, F. (2012). "Memes and the profile avatar: online rituals of solidarity and activism." *Culture Visuelle*. 26 September. <http://culturevisuelle.org/blog/11140>

Fatima Aziz examines the role of memes in online rituals of solidarity, contrasting two case studies of solidarity rituals that subverted the act of updating one's profile avatar: one in which Facebook users supported a cricket team by replaced their profile pictures with green-colored pictures of the Pakistani cricket team, the other in which Twitter users (protesting Twitter's suspension of accounts parodying Nicolas Sarkozy) changed their avatars to a satirical clown-nosed picture of Sarkozy. Aziz notes that the visual avatar image presents different possibilities for both play and activist critique; while the avatar's visibility on Facebook suits it for repurposing into a display of solidarity, on Twitter the avatar becomes a symbol of protest and a visual parodic comment on censorship.

Ball, J.A. (1984) Memes as Replicators, *Ethology and Sociobiology* 5:145-161.

Ball makes several comparisons between genetic concepts and memetic concepts, identifying attributes that make some memes more successful than others, and suggesting that instincts and other information in the brain should be thought of as memes.

Benford, Robert D. and David A. Snow. 2000. "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment." *Annual Review of Sociology*, Volume 26:611-639.

The authors consider framing in collective action (derived from Goffman), its features, and its relation to other processes and products of social movements. They conclude that framing is a central component of understanding collective action, and point toward future study of the narrative processes that create those frames.

Bennett, W. Lance (2003). *Communicating Global Activism: Strengths and Vulnerabilities of Networked Politics*. *Information, Communication, and Society* 6 (2): 143-168.

Bennett claims that while the loose, polycentric, ideologically thin structure and issue-based organization of global digital activism presents difficulties for decision-making and coherent identity-building, it also makes these networks resilient and capable of rapid adaptation.

Blackmore, S.J. (1999) *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Blackmore, outlining the science of memetics, examines issues with the meme-gene analogy, and attempts to establish new terms such as the "memplex," complex concepts like religions that spread together. Defining memes as a universal replicator (and genes as a subcategory of memes) characterized by imitation, she applies memetics to a broad range of biological and cultural processes.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu relates language to power and politics, arguing that language is both a communicative medium and a medium of power. Linguistic interactions implicitly and explicitly position individuals in relation to one another, both embodying and reproducing existing social structures.

Boyd, Andrew. "Irony, Meme Warfare, and the Extreme Costume Ball." From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban protest and community building in the era of globalization. Ed R. Hayduk and B. Shepard. London: Verso, 2002.

The chaos of the DIY-inspired, carnivalesque "Shutdown in Seattle" protests, according to Boyd, is both a strength (creating plurality) and a weakness (resulting in incoherence). In contrast, he claims that strategic "meme warfare" campaigns such as "Billionaires for Bush" can be more symbolically effective and have more subversive political potential.

Brodie, R. (1996) *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme* (Seattle: Integral Press).

Brodie advocates for a new science of memetics, extending the meme concept from Dawkins and others. Employing concepts from evolutionary psychology, he presents an introduction to memetics and claims that the emerging science unifies a number of existing fields into a new, interdisciplinary superscience.

China Digital Times (2012). "Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon." March 7. http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Grass-Mud_Horse_Lexicon

This index catalogues and explains a large number of Chinese political Internet memes and subversive symbols. The lexicon, named for the famous "grass-mud horse" symbol satirizing government censorship, documents discourse of parody, creative struggle, and resistance online.

Collins, W. M. (2005). "Codeswitching Avoidance as a Strategy for Mam (Maya) Linguistic Revitalization." *International Journal of American Linguistics* 71(3): 239-276.

Speakers of an endangered language (the Mayan language Mam) vary in their tendencies to code-switch between Mam and Spanish according to education. Teachers' avoidance of code-switching performs an identity-reaffirming function that diverges from the dominant culture.

Condit & Lucaites, C.M. & J.L. (1993). *Crafting equality: America's Anglo-African word*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. p. xvii.

The authors recharacterize the ideal of "equality" as a concept created through everyday experience, particularly through the experiences and interpretations of African-Americans. They trace the history of the term through debates about race relations, challenging prevalent conceptions of the development of the term.

Dawkins, Richard (1976). *The Selfish Gene*. New York City: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-286092-5.

In this book on a gene-centric view of evolution, Dawkins coins the term “meme” as a parallel unit of cultural evolution, a replicator and unit of cultural transfer analogous to the gene, with the potential to provide evolutionary explanations for human behavioral and cultural phenomena.

Davis, Joseph E., ed. (2002). *Stories of Change: Narrative and Social Movements*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Davis argues for the power of narrative analysis in the study of social movements. By examining “stories of change,” he demonstrates the ability of narratives to create meaning, mobilize activist resistance, and build identity.

Dery, Mark (1999). *Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs*. Grove Press.

Dery’s “manifesto” outlines a number of subversive media practices, including subvertising, media hoaxes, and the titular “culture jamming,” conceptually united under the heading of “guerrilla semiotics” – the reclamation and redescription of mass culture symbols. He advocates a critical, anti-consumerist resistance to advertising and commodity culture.

Faier, Elizabeth (2005). *Organizations, gender, and the culture of Palestinian activism in Haifa, Israel*. New York: Routledge.

Faier discusses the ways in which activists in Palestinian non-governmental organizations in Israel develop improvised discourses of modernity and use those ideologies to create identity. The practice of “code-switching,” in this case the use of “Hebrarabic,” is one element of these activist discourses.

Hristova, S. (2013). *Occupy Wall Street Meets Occupy Iraq: On remembering and forgetting in a digital age*. *Radical History Review*, 117, 83-97.

Hristova focuses on two iconic images-turned-Internet-memes (Occupy Wall Street’s “Pepper Spray Cop” and “Doing a Lynndie” of the 2004 Abu Ghraib tortures), that display thematic parallels. She draws on Barthes to explain the function of these symbols: both images highlight visual and cultural “dissonance,” juxtaposing casual expression with violence and brutality in a way that aligns with popular “bad apple” narratives casting Pike and England as “deviant villains rather than as examples of persistent and systematic abusive structures.” Yet Hristova concludes that the thumbs-up/lock-and-load and casual-spraying gestures, as embodied performances that not only structure the meme but whose imitative performance transform visual motif into “bodily hexis” (following Bourdieu), outlasted both the typically short-lived memes and the events they memorialize — suggesting that memes crystallize the memory of these events in iconic images, to be later recalled, and in the embodied, habitual afterimages of gesture.

Jenkins, Henry (2006). *Convergence Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Convergence, according to Jenkins, is a comprehensive socio-cultural shift in which content flows across multiple media, industries, platforms, and audiences. Jenkins also discusses an emerging participatory culture, in which individuals actively engage with transmedia cultural production, intersecting creatively and sometimes contentiously with industries.

Jenkins, Henry (2009). "If it doesn't spread, it's dead (part one): Media viruses and memes." Confessions of an Aca-Fan (personal blog) February 11. http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p.html

Jenkins criticizes the definitional ambiguity of the "meme" and "viral." As an alternative to the biological "viral" model of meme distribution, Jenkins et al. propose the framework of "spreadable media" to focus on consumer agency in production and distribution of media content, particularly grassroots circulation.

Howard, P. et al. (2011). "Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?" Seattle: PIPTI. <http://pitpi.org/index.php/2011/09/11/opening-closed-regimes-what-was-the-role-of-social-media-during-the-arab-spring/>

A mass analysis of social media data, the Tunisian blogosphere, and Egyptian political websites finds that individuals on social media had a strong effect on the Arab Spring uprisings, spreading information and narratives of protest that heralded significant action offline.

Keller, A. (2013). "Of Enclaves and Internet: How Social Media Affects Political Participation in Authoritarian States." *Master's Thesis, Ohio State University*, 1-46.

Keller contrasts the "techno-optimist" "Google Doctrine" (theories that social media and open search catalyze democracy by fostering an informed citizenry) and Cass Sunstein's "enclave extremism" theory (that in homogenous communities with limited discourse, discussion results in group polarization and radicalization) via three protest movements in China. While Keller acknowledges a "democratizing, nascent" civil society, he argues that Internet discussion and activism during these events displayed susceptibility to misinformation, radicalization, and information cascades, but that this enclave extremist influence is limited by the strength of its connection to reality.

Kilpinen, E. (2008). Memes versus signs: On the use of meaning concepts about nature and culture. *Semiotica*, 2008(171), 215-237.

Kilpinen rejects the field of memetics, claiming that while memes usefully attempt a synthesis of culture and "the evolutionary perspective" of nature, meme theory falls short of the existing field of semiotics — not only by reproducing nature/culture dichotomies, but more importantly, by maintaining only a tenuous link between imitation and material reality. He claims that the concept of memes is merely a reinvention of semiotics' sign, but recognizing only interpretation while ignoring representation.

Knobel, Michele and Colin Lankshear, eds. (2007). *A New Literacies Sampler*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

The authors present a variety of cultural activities from blogging to fan fiction, including Internet memes, as “new literacies” – practices of meaning-making, in the context of new media, that constitute and negotiate participation or membership in discourses. Memes, as a richly intertextual mode of cultural production, provide educators with new ways to understand social change.

Lasn, K. (1999). *Culture jam: The uncooling of America*, New York, William Morrow.

Lasn attacks consumer capitalist culture, demanding an organized resistance against corporate media interests and the overturning of corporate personhood. He advocates the subversive tactic of “uncooling” cultural symbols that sustain consumer culture.

Li, H. (2011). Parody and resistance on the Chinese Internet. In D.K. Herold & P. Marolt (eds.), *Online society in china: Creating, celebrating and instrumentalising the online carnival*.: Taylor & Francis. pp.71-88.

Online parody, according to Li, resembles the Bakhtinian carnival: in contexts of hegemonic control, instances of creative ridicule can temporarily liberate people through shared laughter and amplify marginalized voices, demonstrating a limited potential for political resistance.

Lim, Merlyna (2013) Many Clicks but Little Sticks: Social Media Activism in Indonesia, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 43:4, 636-657, [DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2013.769386](https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2013.769386)

Using the examples of two successful movements in Indonesia, Lim identifies elements – a simplified narrative, strong icons and symbols, and facilitating low-risk amateur participation – of movements that appeal to contemporary consumer culture and translate social media activity into political action.

Lotan, G. et al. (2011). “The revolutions were tweeted: information flows during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions.” *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011), 1375–1405.

By analyzing information flows on Twitter (indexed by hashtags) between and across activists, citizen journalists/bloggers, and mainstream media outlets, this article finds that Twitter facilitates the networked co-construction of news between these actor types, and that online individuals played a key role alongside traditional journalistic organizations.

Lynch, A. (1996) *Thought Contagion: How Belief Spreads Through Society - The New Science of Memes* (New York: Basic Books).

Lynch, employing evolutionary biological analogies, enumerates seven modes by which memes (“thought contagions”) spread like pathogens throughout societies. He then relates the emerging discipline of memetics to other fields of science.

Marzouki, Y. and O. Oullier (2013). "The Cultural Rebound Effect of a Meme: How Tunisian Politics Got 'Harlem Shaken'." 18 March. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/yousri-marzouki/the-cultural-rebound-effe_b_2898685.html

The authors draw on psychological theories of rebound effects and their model of "Virtual Collective Consciousness" to explain the response to attempts to prohibit the making of "Harlem Shake" meme videos in Tunisia; they claim that Internet memes, as part of e-democracy, can empower citizens to effect "leaderless revolution."

McCafferty, D. (2011). "Activism vs. slacktivism." *Commun. ACM* 54(12): 17-19.

McCafferty reexamines the debate between proponents and critics of "slacktivism." He reaffirms the centrality of in-person activism, but argues that the "cyber-skeptic" debate should transform into a discussion of how to integrate the connectivity of online initiatives with the robustness of traditional organizations.

McGee, M.C. (1980). The "ideograph": A link between rhetoric and ideology. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66, 1-16.

McGee coins the term "ideograph" to describe an abstract and polysemic "ordinary-language" term used in political discourse to symbolize normative commitments. He defines ideology as a collection of such ideographs, connecting ideology with the rhetoric that constructs it.

Morozov, M. 2009. "The Brave New World of Slacktivism." *Foreign Policy* May 19. http://neteffect.foreign-policy.com/posts/2009/05/19/the_brave_new_world_of_slacktivism

Morozov criticizes the online symbolic participation commonly termed "slacktivism," suggesting that the attraction of "lazy" publicity-building activities such as joining Facebook groups or signing online petitions has the adverse effect of drawing people away from more effective modes of traditional activism.

Rotman, D. et al. 2011. "From slacktivism to activism: participatory culture in the age of social media." Pp. 819-822 in PART 2—Proceedings of the 2011 annual conference extended abstracts on Human factors in computing systems.

The authors raise the question of whether and how social media activism ("slacktivism") translates into "practical activism" and social change. Research directions and theoretical implications are outlined.

Scholz, Trebor, ed. (2013). *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*. New York: Routledge.

This book explores the applicability of Marxist labor theory to digital labor, addressing questions of play and "playbor," free labor, alienation, symbolic production, and the shifting relationship between work and play in the context of participatory culture and peer production.

Shifman, L. (2013). *Memes in Digital Culture*. MIT Press.

Shifman illustrates her novel definition of the “meme” with a discussion of well-known Internet memes, distinguishing memes from “virals” and proposing a typology of the elements that contribute to the success of each. She also discusses memes as agents of globalization and political participation.

Tang, L. J. and P. D. Yang (2011). “Symbolic power and the internet: The power of a ‘horse’.” *Media Culture & Society* 33(5): 675-691.

Examining the subversive phenomenon of the “grass-mud horse” in China, this paper claims that it is difficult for Internet users to create discursively powerful symbols, but that the Internet facilitates the production of “follow-up discourse” when such a symbol does appear. The authors conclude that the viral behavior surrounding these symbols does not seem to lead to constructive social change.

Tang, Lijun and Syamantak Bhattacharya (2011). *Power and Resistance: A Case Study of Satire on the Internet*. *Sociological Research Online*, 16 (2): 11-20.

Satire, according to Tang and Bhattacharya, both reflects widespread feelings of powerlessness and represents a potentially significant weapon of political resistance. Online satire’s ability to spread and persist creates “sustained shame and ridicule” that can weaken even powerful elites.

Yang, Guobin (2009). *The power of the internet in China: Citizen activism online*. Columbia University Press.

Yang depicts the Chinese Internet as a space deeply characterized by contention, encompassing a range of activist activities that respond dynamically to state efforts to contain and suppress them. His research presents a symbolic landscape in which activist, state, and commercial actors engage in a continual and creative struggle of hegemonic reincorporation and counterhegemonic resistance.

Zuckerman, E. (2014). “Cute Cats to the Rescue? Participatory Media and Political Expression.” In Allen, D. and Jennifer Light, eds. *Youth, New Media and Political Participation*, forthcoming (under review, MIT Press).

Ethan Zuckerman considers the affordances and constraints of participatory media technologies in countries like China, whose online activity is heavily monitored. Despite the resilience of these participatory platforms against government censorship, and their potential utility in amplifying and circulating symbols of dissent among non-activists, he notes (following Rebecca MacKinnon) their established vulnerability to intermediary censorship from companies. In addition, he notes the potential or existing threats of online real-name policies, strategic Internet slow/shutdowns, limitations of coded speech, and attention scarcity.