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FCJ-165 Obama Trolling: Memes, Salutes and an Agonistic Politics in the 2012 Presidential Election

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Abstract:

During the 2012 presidential campaign an explosion of photo-shopped images circulated that depicted President Obama as unpatriotic. The ‘crotch salute’, ‘left-hand salute’, and ‘Veterans Day non-salute’ serve as case studies for understanding the role of trolling in the public sphere and Internet politics in an era of social networks and circulation. This paper tracks the cultural practices and logics of ‘sharing’ political memes and conceptualises memes as part of an agonistic public sphere and media ecology. Obama trolling is facilitated through the techno-cultural affordances of memes, which can only become public because of their mimetic form and sterilised partial anonymity. The paper seeks to conceptualise trolling as a broader cultural practice, which can be considered political. Normative assumptions about these memes would portray this trafficking as destructive to deliberative democracy but when understood as a generative cultural practice, trolling becomes central to articulating political emotions in social networks. Photo-shopped Obama salutes, in addition to Big Bird, binder, and bayonet memes, express not only political identities but also larger cultural values within networked popular culture.

If the 2008 American Presidential election is known for being the first modern Internet campaign, then perhaps the 2012 American election should be known as the first real social media campaign. While social networking was a major part of the 2008 campaign, with users enacting socio-technical linkages primarily between Youtube and Facebook walls (Robertson, 2010); the increasing pervasiveness of mimetic communication melded with social networking has once again impacted the political landscape. From ‘Big Bird’ to ‘binders full of women’ (and the made-for-meme Obama ‘Bayonets’ line) memes riff in real-time on contemporary politics. What is different about 2012 is the intersection between the technology, the architectural affordances of social networking platforms, and the penetration of a larger trolling culture. Trolling is colloquially understood as a negative behaviour, particularly amongst traditional media, that desires to bully and vilify unsuspecting netizens, all in the name of ‘doing it for the lulz’. The recent outing of infamous Reddit troll Violentacrez and the tragic suicide of Amanda Todd show the topicality of this hot button issue (Phillips, 2012), drawing increased scrutiny to the ethics of specific trolls. This paper seeks to expand the definition of trolling as a much broader cultural practice. We track the cultural practices and logics of ‘sharing’ political memes and conceptualise memes and trolling as part of an agonistic public sphere and media ecology. Memes are a site for understanding audiences, media flows and the circulation of popular culture and politics. Memes act constitutively and work to make salient disparate media narratives and information within a networked culture. For example, expressions about the alleged Manti Te’o hoax could be read (correctly or incorrectly) through the meme #te’oing, which acts not just as a response of attitudes and feelings but also as a conglomeration of media channels and information. Audiences, through memes, play an active role in re-mixing, re-articulating, and digesting popular culture. While circulating audience articulations of popular culture, memes also form a kind of distribution channel, which serves as a purveyor of political sentiments, values and ideas within the 2012 Presidential campaign.

During the 2012 presidential campaign an explosion of photoshopped images circulated that depicted President Obama as unpatriotic. Normative assumptions about these political Obama memes might portray this trafficking as destructive to deliberative democracy but when understood as a generative cultural practice, trolling becomes central to articulating political emotions in social networks. A brief history of trolling and hoaxing in political communication, as well as pertinent literature within communication and media studies, is offered to contextualise and define trolling as a broader cultural practice. The ‘crotch salute’, ‘left-hand salute’, and ‘Veterans Day non-salute’ serve as case studies for understanding the role of trolling in the public sphere and Internet politics in an era of social networks and circulation. Obama trolling is understood as generative—as a practice that facilitates, through the technological affordances of memes, the exposition of emotions that otherwise would not be expressed within the public sphere. Refraining from denigrating trolling as merely the fringe actions of select groups of trolls might make it possible to see trolling’s centrality to the way that we actually communicate online (with

all its messiness, complexity, oftentimes irrationality and emotions). This agonistic politics of inane memes, deception, and affective play is important for understanding discursive political identities and broader cultural values within networked popular culture.

Trolling in a Political Campaign Context

The networked nature of Internet communication and the compression of time and space that the network affords speed up communicative processes and reduce ‘cultural latency’ (Yakob, 2009) or ‘cultural lag’. Lag is a term colloquially used in computer science to describe a computer with impaired functionality that fails to keep up with the transmission of inputs. Historically, information and political messages could only be spread and disseminated as quickly as the horse could carry a messenger, and even with the telegraph we still had the limitations of a sender/receiver model. Social networking delivers messages instantaneously to an entire network, effectively reducing cultural lag to close to zero. This sets social networking apart from even mass broadcasting mediums like radio and television. The lack of cultural lag changes the nature of digitised politics (and by extension all of politics), which must be attune to the ever-changing slipperiness of the networked cultural landscape. In the presidential debates, for example, the circulation of memes happened before the traditional media framing of the debates within ‘spin alley’ as audiences engaged in a participatory politics.

The lack of cultural lag also required a mode of transmission (delivery channel or medium) that could succinctly express messages and values (most often affective), while connecting and compiling other fragments of modern mediated life in movies, television, etc. More simply stated, politics needed memes to keep up with the pace of digital culture—the pace of digital political campaigning. This is why an understanding of the interconnectedness of ‘feeds’ and political messages on social networking platforms like Facebook, Tumblr, or reddit is important. This is not to say that technological innovations or affordances are deterministic but they can play a role in shaping some cultural production (Baym and boyd, 2012). Despite the best efforts by designers to formalise and sanitise digital sociality into a rational system, the Internet remains a mercurial space of constant adaptation.

Political campaigning has always been inextricably bound up with dubious behaviour and deceit. This brief history, which is by no means meant to be exhaustive, wants to track recent iterations of political trolling that correspond with advances in technology and communication platforms. Much work has been done to point out the chicanery involved in the Watergate break-ins and classic political advertisements such as Lyndon

Johnson's 'Daisy Girl' and John Kerry's 'swiftboating' by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. Political campaigns have always tried to use new mediated technologies to gain a competitive advantage over other parties and candidates. These new spaces of political communication are often susceptible to hoaxes and misinformation (McLeod, 2011). Cultural norms regarding digital technology and campaigns are still in flux and being negotiated. For the purposes of this paper we are mostly concerned with the more recent relationship between the Internet as a technological infrastructure and shifts in political communication.

If we begin with direct mailing in the late 1970's and throughout the 1980's (Godwin, 1988), we start to see the importance of distribution and modes of communication in politics. Political flyers and pamphleteering have always been an essential part of political campaigns but direct mailings using personal and professional information for demographic targeting took things to a new level (performed in conjunction with think tanks and policy briefs, see George, 1997). Political direct mailings mimicked business-marketing tactics and strategies because they understood the influence of sending seemingly personalised, tailored messages to consumers. But these weren't consumers buying something, they were political consumers amidst political campaigns and mailings were often used to spread misinformation about candidates. There is a materiality to direct mailings that is important and different from televised political advertisements. It can actually be held, goes in the home, and can be passed around amongst neighbours and proximal social networks. The mailing leaves a physical marker, a remnant of the message or narrative that is trying to be expressed. Email is a medium that combines direct mail messaging with digitality.

One of the more classic examples of a coordinated campaign that used a combination of direct mail, flyers, push polls and email to trash a candidate was the Lee Atwateresque dismantling of John McCain in the South Carolina Republican Presidential primary of 2000. Nancy Snow, now a political scientist at Cal State Fullerton, who volunteered for the McCain campaign in her hometown of Greenville, South Carolina, is quoted as saying, 'We were starting to get wind that this was going to be a very different campaign. There was this sense that everything was turning negative. People were walking into the office with copies of this particular e-mail and asking us about it...it was so revolting' (Gooding, 2004: 2). The email composed by Richard Hand, professor of the Bible at fundamentalist Christian Bob Jones University, and orchestrated by Karl Rove alleged that 'McCain chose to sire children without marriage'. This racist smear campaign was conducted through flyers left on cars, extensive push-polling, and email, that claimed Cindy McCain was a drug addict.

Despite the importance of email in modern campaigning, very little research has been conducted on the content and form of political emails (Duffy, Page and Young, 2012; Gewirtz, 2007). Certainly researchers have not taken seriously ‘fake’ emails that spread during and after political campaigns. Emails are obviously different from direct mail because they can more easily and quickly be forwarded. Digitality augments the circulation of messages. With every technological advancement and new distribution channel comes a concomitant innovation in political communication. Emails begin to be forwarded to entire social networks and then effortlessly re-forwarded in methods that continue the message’s circulation. This practice might resemble or be linked historically to chain-mail. Chain-mail, however, took much more work and effort to re-send whereas an email only needs the click of a button. Political emails have also become more vehicles for storytelling and the formation of narratives than of propagating facts and statistics. Consider this condensed (and debunked) variation of the ‘death panels’ emails that first spread during the debates on ‘Obamacare’:

I had one of the most troubling, most disturbing conversations ever with Julie’s sister-in-law, Dr. Suzanne Allen, head of emergency services at the Johnson City Medical Center in Tennessee.

We were discussing the ‘future’ and I asked her had she seen any affects of Obama Care in her work?

Oh, yes. We are seeing cutbacks throughout the services we provide. For example, we are now having to deal with patients who would normally receive dialysis can no longer be accepted. In the past, there was always automatic approval under Medicare for anyone who needed dialysis — not anymore.’ So, what will be their outcome? ‘They will die soon without dialysis, she stated’ (Blackburn, 2012).

Notice how the email replicates an interpersonal conversation while still relying on the expertise of the fictitious doctor. While the employment of the doctor grounds the story and its plausibility, the doctor’s purpose is not to rationally inform the public but to warn the public of the emotional threat of death. Many of these emails will falsely attribute a source, such as the Associated Press, to garner enough journalistic authority to be plausible (Burroughs and Burroughs, 2012). This mimicry of journalistic conventions flouts Grice’s Maxims (Secor and Walsh, 2004) and provides just enough legitimacy for the deception to be swallowed and then forwarded along. Forwarded emails have continued to be such a force that even Republican candidates and elected officials have been caught considering them to be factual (Reeve, 2012).

As stated above, these emails are most often forwarded within conservative social networks but this is not exactly the case. When a person forwards an email to a mailing list they are blindly sending the message without any built-in feedback loop. Someone might on a very rare occasion respond with a personal email back to the sender but there is no inherent reciprocal relationship embedded within email. I have personally gone for many years (and probably will go for many more) receiving forwards from an aunt who just assumes that I subscribe to the same political ideology that she does. I won't take the time or risk the social capital to tell her to cease and desist with the emails. In an age of social networking, these feedback loops are now more visible.

Another point to emphasise is the role of blogs in forming metonymic chains that influence political campaigns (Burroughs, 2007). In the 2006 Democratic Senate primary for the state of Connecticut, Ned Lamont beat an incumbent sitting Senator Joe Lieberman. This was partly the result of constructing a transgressive narrative surrounding the now infamous 'kiss' between Lieberman and then-President Bush. That image of 'the kiss', working metonymically and forming a metonymic chain, articulated everything that progressives saw wrong in Lieberman. In the Virginia Senate race of the same year, progressives for years had tried to make the label of racist stick to Senator George Allen to no avail. However, the capture and subsequent posting to YouTube of Senator Allen calling a campaign worker for the Jim Webb campaign 'macaca' brought that narrative together. These examples indicate the political power of the Internet to boil down grand narrative into discernible mimetic bites.

Trolling can be traced back to the beginnings of the Internet on Usenet boards (long before 4Chan and /b/ boards), but memes have a political history that Henry Jenkins (2008) begins to identify during the 2004 campaign. Jenkins explains:

Average citizens were exploiting their expanded capacity to manipulate and circulate images to create the grassroots equivalent of editorial cartoons. These images often got passed along via e-mail or posted on blogs as a way of enlivening political debates. Like classic editorial cartoons, they paint in broad strokes, trying to forge powerful images or complex sets of associations that encapsulate more complex ideas. In many cases, they aim lower than what we would expect from an established publication and so they are a much blunter measure of how popular consciousness is working through shifts in the political landscape.

This interrogation of popular consciousness as a means of surveying the political landscape has only intensified since the 2004 election with the rise of social networking and more tools at the disposal of citizens in a participatory culture. Henry Jenkins' (2006) book *Convergence Culture* outlines these shifts in technology and popular engagement as a part of 'photoshop for democracy'. The 2008 Obama/Joker face image shows the potency and intensification of these mimetic images in political communication. While the origins of the image with the tagline of 'Socialism' are somewhat disputed (Jenkins, 2013; Mizsei-Ward, 2012), perhaps originating on 4Chan, what is important for our study is the emergence of memes in political culture.

Campaigns became increasingly cognizant of the ability memes have to influence political discourse as a broader swathe of the public engaged with this inter-animation of politics and memes through Obama/Joker. Kellner (2009) describes the 2008 election as the fusing of politics with spectacle and entertainment. While Kellner acknowledges the role of YouTube videos like 'Obama Girl' and 'Yes We Can', he still rightfully gives primacy to the role of traditional media in the campaign. What has changed is the increased visibility and presence of social networks in 2012 as opposed to 2008 and the 'personalization of politics' and political identities through social media (Bennett, 2012) and the circulation of memes. Memes can also serve to heighten spectacle, as 2012 became a socially networked battleground for competing political discourses. Not only has the knowledge of memes expanded but public participation in this form of pleasurable 'everyday creativity' has proliferated as well. Hillary Clinton was even the subject of a widely popular and short-lived Tumblr 'Texts from Hillary' in 2012, which culminated in Hillary herself participating with a submission (the co-creators Stacy Lambe and Adam Smith graciously concluded that nothing could top a meme sent from 'Secretary Hillz').

David Gauntlett (2011) doesn't specifically cite memes in his book *Making is Connecting* but they would fit under his theme of 'making is connecting', since memes, especially those meant for trolling, are a creative craft.

'Everyday creativity refers to a process which brings together at least one active human mind, and the material or digital world, in the activity of making something which is novel in that context, and is a process which evokes a feeling of joy' (Gauntlett, 2011: 76).

The tools for generating memes are ubiquitous and the technology for embedding and sharing memes has been stripped of any need for specialised knowledge of Internet code. As more people can act creatively, more people use memes as a medium for connecting. Many websites even offer templates for creating and sharing your own personalised meme.

The Obama/Joker image, however, signals the beginning of a wider ‘language of memes’ and ‘visual vernacular’ (Stryker, 2011) within the realm of politics.

Method

Doing Internet-based research on slippery cultural phenomenon such as memes can, at times, feel like aiming at a moving target (Coleman, 2010). Using the 2012 campaign as the parameters for the field of study has helped to narrow and focus the study. The timeframe for the study covered the years 2010–2012 and in-depth participant observation was performed from December 2011 to December 2012. Roughly 600 hours of participant observation was conducted following and participating in discussions on memes surrounding the Presidential campaigns across a variety of platforms. Without participating in digital spaces an ethnographer cannot gain the perspective requisite to become thoroughly embedded within the living fieldwork. Mediated technology requires that the researcher be a participant in online spaces. In order to tease out the nuances indispensable for a Geertzian (1973) ‘thick description’ the researcher can no longer passively consume at a distance.

Participant observation for the purposes of this study is divided into two differing levels of engagement—active participation and lurking. This was done in order to grasp a wider range of audience and public participation where clicks, likes, and sharing count as collapsing modes of consumption and production. Lurking in online spaces must be a part of how we view engagement. The application of mediated ethnography aims at deepening our knowledge of how media is used in everyday practice (Gillespie, 1995). In addition to participant observation, a thematic or genre analysis (Wall, 2005) was performed on thousands of collected Facebook postings. Theoretical sampling was employed (Altheide, 1996) and exemplary threads related specifically to the photoshopped and decontextualised Obama memes were drawn from for interpretive and ethnographic analysis.

This participant observation was based on public behaviour and specific individuals were not identified; accordingly, specific permissions were not obtained. Key informants, however, were told the purposes of ethnographic interviews and informally gave their permission. All names have been altered.

The Articulation of Circulation

Stuart Hall (1973), in his account of how mediated messages from television are encoded and decoded, offers a four-stage theory of communication that includes distinct moments of production, circulation, distribution/consumption and reproduction. Each stage in this model, which complicates linear sender/message/receiver models in mass communication theory, is a distinct, 'relatively autonomous' process sustained as a "complex structure of dominance", sustained through the articulation of connected practices' or linkages. Each stage in the process is influential in reception and transferring of meaning, which complicates communication and is not reducible to the crude arithmetic of the sender-receiver model. Circulation, however, as a distinct separate moment within Hall's stages of communication, might not receive as much attention as processes of production, distribution or consumption. When applied to our current moment of social networking sites and Internet culture, circulation becomes a seminal moment in encoding/decoding messages and content in digital spaces. The process of circulation within social networks operates primarily at the connotative level as we make value judgments and consume based upon polysemic readings of content within the flow of our respective social networks (Burroughs, 2009).

Social networking sites are the means through which we inhabit and enter the Internet as we increasingly experience the flow of the Internet and popular culture through social networking. Just as Hoggart (1971) identifies the home as a site for understanding how people become enmeshed with particular types of sociality (predominantly different classes for Hoggart), we might locate social networking as projecting differing 'fields of value' and socialising in the same manner as the home. Social networks are sites of deep cultural struggle and meaning making for users. Messages are perceptible to the entirety of a social network, which increases the visibility and vulnerability of users. The spreading of content is always a potentially political action and is not some smooth network logic where information freely flows where it 'should'.

A theory of articulation is applied to users articulating themselves through social networks but also to the technological affordances of platforms themselves. While memes are commonly defined as 'a popular term for describing the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language 'move,' or some other unit of cultural 'stuff'" (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007: 202), there needs to be a recognition that memes operate in conjunction with social networks and the infrastructure of the Internet. These affordances are discursive technologies of struggle as they become intertwined with the 'lived experience' of politics. These technologies are an integral part of how we experience popular and mediated culture. Circulation is identified as an important moment

for digital encoding/decoding, the spreading of content, and as a site of articulation. Three different Obama memes are offered that represent distinct ways that Obama trolling operated during the 2012 campaign. First an analytic distinction needs to be made between trolls and trolling. The behaviour of self-identifying trolls differs from trolling as a larger cultural practice. When someone is sharing an Obama meme they are not necessarily performing the action for ‘lulz’, however, facilitating the circulation of an Obama meme is participating in this general cultural practice of Obama trolling. As Jean Burgess (2008) explains in relation to the (in)famous memes ‘Chocolate Rain’ and ‘Guitar’:

These ideas are propagated by being taken up and used in new works, in new ways, and therefore are transformed on each iteration—a ‘copy the instructions’, rather than ‘copy the product’ model of replication and variation; and this process takes place within and with reference to particular social networks or subcultures (8).

This ‘copy the instructions’ as opposed to the ‘copy the product’ model of replication leaves the insider knowledge of trolls open-ended and susceptible to becoming mainstream. There is a cultural lexicon, which subcultures of trolls share—a state of constantly being ‘in the know’. For trolls, ‘memes only make sense in relation to other memes. Users are expected to keep track of these shifting subcultural strands, making recognition and replication of specific memes and meme-families tantamount to keeping up with the Jones’ (or more appropriately to 4chan, with the Doe’s)’ (Phillips, 2012). However, the tools for the dissemination and re-appropriation of memes have become ubiquitous. Anyone can make a meme and embedding links no longer requires specialised knowledge of computer code (Shifman, 2013). No one group of trolls controls the circulation of memes, but as we consciously share and spread memes we are all a part of trolling. Trolls may not be political but trolling can be.

A theory of articulation and social networking also challenges the prevalent ‘viral’ metaphor that permeates our contemporary discussions on circulation in digital media environments. Marketers and Internet advertisers often tout having the latest formula or method for insuring the latest viral media hit but the labelling of something as ‘viral’ is discursive and creates a false unity. If digital articulations are comprised of non-necessary correspondences that can produce new meanings with every enactment then there isn’t a necessary, predictive formula. This corresponds with Jenkins’ (2013) most recent theory he calls ‘spreadability’. For Jenkins, people find value in a particular piece of content and then choose to spread that within a social network and not as a result of some innate, latent characteristic of content that infiltrates the inner-state of the psychologised self.

Spreadability relies on open-ended participation as diversely motivated but deeply engaged audiences retrofit content to the contours of different niche communities. While the structure of the technology and the affordances of the platforms play a significant role in how content spreads, there is not a determinant panacea that automatically results in something going 'viral'. While Jenkins is invested in constructing the active audience members' agency, we can also think of the technological affordances themselves as integral to a theory of articulation and social media (Brock, 2012). We can keep the label 'meme' while understanding its constitution as inherently socio-technical.

The Non Left-handed Obama Crotch Salute

'One picture speaks a thousand words on the hatred Obama has for the American Republic.' (Rambo, 2012)

'First, no salute. Then, the groin salute. Now, the left-handed insult and with the first lady too?! Founding fathers are face-palming themselves in their graves.' (NoMamsir, 2012)

Obama trolling has its own history that parallels the aforementioned (abbreviated) history of the intersection between political communication and the Internet. It is important to note that this is just a tiny sampling of the explosion of political memes during 2012. It should also be noted that conservative-oriented memes differ slightly from more popular (or 'progressive') mimetic texts in their circulation. You won't see these memes being represented on national meme repositories like Tumblr and Reddit (it will be interesting to see if this trend continues or if memes ultimately prove politically neutral) as routinely as their counterpoints but they do travel within complex social networks. Republicans have been slower adopters of new mediated technologies such as blogs (Burroughs, 2007), which can be attributed to being the party in power during the rise of the blogosphere as an oppositional force but conservatives are at the forefront of mimetic politics. The recent gun control controversy has produced another significant amount of meme generation (as has the 'Pray for Boston' tragedy memes), suggesting that this practice is not isolated solely to the Presidential campaign.

David Frum (2012) draws attention to the depth of conservative media and social networks. He refers to a quip that anchor/personality Greg Gutfeld makes on Fox News about President Obama being out of the closet and 'officially gay for class warfare'. This odd

comment only makes sense when we contextualize his on-air joke with the layers of intertextual conservative linkages.

It's very important to understand that for Fox viewers, Fox is only the most visible part of a vast alternative reality. Fox's coverage of the news cannot be properly understood in isolation, but only in conjunction with the rest of that system—and especially the chain emails that do so much to shape the worldview of Fox viewers.

Fox News as well as conservative talk radio and prominent conservative bloggers are connected all the way down to informal, anonymized emails. Memes are the latest iteration of this deep, affective political play as emails become repurposed as memes. In this Gutfeld example what we don't see is an email that compares President Obama to Elton John and implies that Obama may be having an extramarital relationship with either Kal Penn or Reggie Love.

It's quite clear that in the years ahead Barack Obama will replace Elton John as the reigning, party queen, gay icon. After he leaves the White House and exiles himself in Hawaii come 2013, supposedly to focus on building his presidential library in Honolulu (but, I think, in no small part to scope out the hotties in their board shorts), I bet Barack Obama will nurse his wounds and discover his inner fabulous...Draped in colorful muumuus, with a retinue of hunky shirtless Secret Service studs around him, Barack Obama will find himself in a new kind of paradise no doubt.

While we may want to write off these emails and their penetration into social networks by memes as fictitious, destructive, and misleading, there remains an emotional basis for these messages that is not easily mitigated with more logic-based appeals. There is a deep emotional fear of changing norms and gay culture being articulated.

Ben Adler (2012) points out that a debunked email about Obama's passport and college transcripts received 151,000 results from a Google search. Similar to the meme-based lexicon of trolls, conservatives have their own cultural lexicon that is often hidden and comes from earned insider knowledge when one is privy to these circulating texts, which Adler lambasts as 'crazy conspiracy theory'. There is a process of 'surfacing' whereby this knowledge and cultural lexicon become mainstreamed through memes, it enters one's own social network. While there certainly is a 'shadow conversation' taking place outside the purview of the general public, memes provide an opportunity for creating a new space

with the potentiality of voice and visibility within a public. As was the case with Obama salutes, this socially networked mimetic space is not necessarily transformative and often contributes to reinforcing pre-existing worldviews and value systems. As I mentioned earlier, this can be titled ‘false consensus bias’ where the reader or receiver assume that everyone in their social network thinks and values the same things they do. But throughout my observations I was consistently surprised to see this bias rub against alternative viewpoints in social networks. This rubbing was often met with great surprise by the poster of the meme.

The Obama salutes don’t begin as memes shared amongst social networks but originate as emails. In as early as 2009 an email circulated that questioned why the President of the United States wasn’t saluting on Veterans Day during a ceremony in Arlington National Cemetery (one variation placed the picture at Ft. Hood). This became known as the Veterans Day non-salute and while the photo was not photoshopped it was de-contextualized. Thanks to C-SPAN video coverage of the event it is clear that the picture was taken during the playing of ‘Hail to the Chief’ where it would be inappropriate for the President to salute himself. It was also a Memorial Day observance from May 2009 and not November 2009 like the email claims (the colour of the ties gives it away). The email would re-circulate again in 2010 but this time with the subject line ‘The Crotch Salute Returns’, owing to the placement of the President’s hands folded over in the front of his body. All of this information is easily accessible on multiple non-partisan websites dedicated to debunking falsehoods on the Internet. Some of these websites include the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s FactCheck.org, urbanlegends and Snopes.com. Despite this information being a click away these salutes continue to be circulated and debated.

When confronted with whether or not these pictures are factually accurate there are a myriad of responses that most predominantly include ignoring the poster or cutting straight to the emotion the picture holds (there is also the counter with emotional statistics like ‘80% of the military hate Obama’, Susan Lee 2012). Whether the memes are factually accurate or not is deemed less important than if they are emotionally true. ‘You are all absolutely correct. Forget all the photos, real or not. Let’s look at our economy, wasted money, quadrupled gas prices, lack of security for our country, and the list goes on and on. If Obama was a Republican I would STILL not be voting for him. He truly scares me’ (NatalieLockwood, 2012). Clearly the basic emotion of fear is being exhibited with no care about the veracity of the memes. The Veterans Day non-salute is the first in a mimetic chain that interlocks the individual memes. When the non-salute is repurposed as ‘the crotch salute returns’, this is an intertextual reference to an actual photo taken in 2007 of then Senator and candidate Obama not holding his hand to his heart during the playing of the ‘Star Spangled Banner’. Obama’s hands are again resting in front of him. The accompanying text with the photo erroneously claims that Obama ‘refused’ to put his hand over his heart during the pledge of allegiance.

This fuels a subset of memes devoted to whenever Obama salutes or bows to any foreign dignitary, especially to the Saudi King. In 2009, the Veterans Day non-salute was juxtaposed with a picture of Obama holding his hand over his heart during the playing of the Russian national anthem (thanks to the event being recorded we know that Obama was holding his hand over his heart during the playing of the U.S. national anthem and not the Russian). Comments surrounding these posts repeated claims of Obama being unpatriotic, not American, different, not one of us, and even alien. Certainly there is an emotional need to distance Obama from being a true American and 'one of us' through othering and dehumanisation, oftentimes with racialised overtones.

The 'Left-Handed Salute' is a late 2009 photoshopped picture of Obama side by side with the First Lady Michelle Obama both saluting with the left hand. Unfortunately the hoaxer forgot about a US Marine in the background whose decorations are on the wrong side of his uniform and which side the First Lady typically parts her hair. The original photograph was taken in 2009 at the White House in observance of the September 11th attacks. This same kind of hoax was perpetrated against then Senate majority leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota. A rational response that enforces deliberative democracy fails to recognise that this isn't about validity or true and false but how 'power is constitutive of social relations' (Wenman, 2003).

Internet 'feeds' on Twitter and Facebook instill a temporal, linear logic to the flow of information and sociality. Hall (1973) suggests that the negotiated code of communication 'contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations, while, at a more restricted, situational level, it makes its own ground rules—it operates with exceptions to the rule.' I liken this to the feeds of Twitter and Facebook pages, particularly the Facebook wall. Facebook, through the addition of Timeline to the Facebook profile, institutes a temporal logic that structures communication patterns and sociality. Within these social networking logics, at the situational level, there is a creative public making their own ground rules and then flouting some of those rules through trolling.

The feed is a hybrid state between the interpersonal and mass. It is comprised of the interpersonal sharing of messages that is distinct and unique for the individual consumer but also is a new form of mass mediated communication as the feed is a manifestation of broader societal culture. The linearity of the feed keeps the flow of information moving and heightens the audience's need to keep up with the artificially sped up pace of the feed. This architecture favours a platform where emotions are expressed through images rather than a more deliberative space. Audiences still engage with the flow at different levels, some are more passive consumers of the aggregated content and mimetic communication,

while others in the prosumer mold (Bruns, 2008) are actively engaged in a participatory flow where they are contributors to social networks. The intertextuality of memes, much like television, constructs an 'ironic knowingness' (Caughie, 1990) where the audience is positioned as a dominant spectator capable of mastering popular intertextuality. Social networking sites no longer constitute simply third spaces but rather Facebook and memes, as an agonistic public, are the method through which we enter the Internet and inhabit our politics. Memes and social media can be thought of as political second screens.

Discussion

Circulation and consumption within social media are collapsing, interconnected processes. When someone decides to continue the circulation of an image, idea, or Obama meme, by liking or sharing on Facebook they are engaged in an action of articulation that can be highly political. When sharing these salutes users would regularly add their own message to the content that re-purposes and rearticulates the content within the communicative circuit. Often these emotions can only become public because of their mimetic form and sterilised partial anonymity. You can post or share a meme while still maintaining some distance to the idea being expressed, something you couldn't do if you were to post the message as your own voice.

'Sorry if this offends anyone or starts a political riot on here.. but man this crap just turns my stomach. Get off the effing phone and salute the men who protect our country. Why a disrespectful butt!!' (Brazir Cobb, 2012)

Memes allow political messaging to take the form of just doing it for the 'lulz'. This is why we can label this practice 'Obama Trolling' because despite an underlying political value being articulated the sharing of a meme affords the user proper distance from the actual content of the message. We can associate ourselves with the meme while maintaining plausible deniability. We can be trolling without being trolls.

Having shared many pro-Obama materials within my social network of many conservatives and libertarians I have become aware of how these messages expose contradictions and antagonisms within my own personal social network that I had never anticipated. Social networks are not static entities but dynamic enablers of sociality, yet, constituted through these antagonisms or contradictions all the way down. My participant observation led me to see that people started to self-censor as they became aware that divergent viewpoints

existed in their social network. Forwarded email and even blog postings don't construct an interpersonal awareness at the same level as social networks. Repeatedly users publicly declared that they were going to return their use of Facebook back to what it was 'properly' intended for—the posting of family pictures and updates. Often this distancing from politics only lasted for a couple of days, sometimes only a couple of hours. I was surprised to feel a great degree of social anxiety about my postings and the compulsion to self-censor. I was paranoid that my friend count was steadily declining due to un-friending and worried that my regular postings weren't generating as many likes or comments as before. While at first appearing antithetical, memes and trolling can promote the possibility of dialogue—a dialogue that unearths deeply seeded emotions. Rather than worrying about censoring a Navy SEAL meme that is critical of Obama's handling of Benghazi and removing it from Facebook (Hawkins, 2012), we should trust that unlike the closed system of email an agonistic politics within social networks can be healthy.

When Republican Representative Todd Akin stated in the midst of a competitive campaign for the Missouri Senate his belief in 'legitimate rape' he ignited a public outcry. While this was a horrible thing to have said, the conflict did serve to bring these beliefs long held by a portion of the conservative population into the public arena where they were shot down. However, without the Tea Party faction of the Republican Party backing a candidate like Akin we could not, as a broader society, have processed those beliefs. The sharing of memes, on a small scale, performs this same function. There is a long-standing debate between those who take a more Habermasian approach and conceptualize the public sphere as a rational space for deliberative democracy as opposed to those who prefer an agonistic public sphere (Mouffe, 1999). What is lacking in the deliberative democracy model, especially when applied to online spaces, is an acknowledgement of trolling as a part of the everyday life of the Internet. Mimetic political communication spread through social networks provides a shared symbolic world that can potentially transform 'antagonism into constructive agonism' (Wenman, 2003). Much lamenting about misinformation comes from viewing the public sphere only from a rational lens, whereas a focus on an agonistic politics could see this misinformation as an articulation of an otherwise neglected social or political value or identity. Ryan (2012) finds that online experiments that evoke the emotion of anger in participants actually increase their proclivity to seek out more political information. The question we should be focusing on is not whether or not those sharing memes were dupes and victims of a false misinformation campaign, rather the important question is what are the underlying emotions being articulated through the techno-cultural practice of Obama Trolling. Our social networks are agonistic spaces and produce an agonistic, constitutive, and generative politics we should embrace.

Biographical note

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