

Politics, Memes, and Culture Jamming:
Meme Culture's Potential to Engage Youth in Politics

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In today's world, memes have become a second language. They are used to explain emotions, make fun of our friends, convey inside jokes, comment on the world around us, and so much more. They are a quick way to show a friend how you are feeling or to start a conversation. Nowadays, there is a meme for almost every situation, and the topics range from what your dog is thinking, to politics, and truly everything in between. While memes are often funny and used as a form of entertainment, some memes take on a more serious role in society. Memes have become a way for people to present new ideas and challenge societal ideologies. This is a new and emerging form of activism that deserves our attention. Using DeLaure and Fink's (2017) idea of culture jamming and its modes of operation, I will argue that political memes are a method of culture jamming and could create new ways to engage youth in politics and social issues. I will do this first by defining culture jamming and its modes of operation; then I will explain the idea of political memes and how they function. Finally, I will draw conclusions about the implications of using memes and culture jamming as a political tool from this analysis.

The world is rapidly changing. Our current moment is defined by a sort of technological revolution. People have access to information in ways like never before. Almost everyone has a computer in their pocket and can access nearly any piece of information in seconds. We are in constant communication with the world around us, but this has also come with a cost. While we might be more engaged in the digital world, our real-life interactions are suffering (Keller, 2013). Youth are particularly susceptible to this phenomenon. One of the places this can be seen is within the political system in the United States. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement's (CIRCLE) Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge (2013), 92% of people between the ages of 18-29 have some form of social media. However, according to the United States' Census Bureau (2016) only 39.4% of eligible

voters between the ages of 18-24 voted in the 2016 Elections. Young voters are disengaged from the political process in the United States. Naturally the question becomes how do we get more youth involved in the political process? My answer, social media. Forty-five percent of individuals between the ages of 18-24 reported getting news on political issues via social media (CIRCLE, 2013). Social media is an emerging opportunity to engage young people in social issues and the larger political process. In the social media space, memes are a mechanism that can be used to engage youth, specifically through the tactics of culture jamming.

In order to understand how meme culture could be used to engage youth in politics, we must first understand what culture jamming is. According to DeLaure and Fink (2017), culture jamming can be defined as, “a range of tactics used to critique, subvert, and otherwise ‘jam’ the workings of consumer culture” (p. 6). However, culture jamming has expanded to jam culture in a broader sense than just consumer culture. Harold (2004) argues that culture jamming “usually implies an interruption, a sabotage, hoax, prank, banditry, or blockage of what are seen as the monolithic power structures governing cultural life” (p. 192). I argue that it is a method to critique and jam any dominant ideologies within our society. Culture jamming has several modes of operation that make it impactful in society (DeLaure & Fink, 2017). In order to demonstrate how meme culture is a form of culture jamming, I will look at five of DeLaure and Fink’s (2017) modes of operation.

- 1) Culture jamming appropriates (p. 12). It takes something the average person recognizes and turns it on its head to create a new meaning. Dery (2017) refers to culture jamming as a “creative crime” and to jammers as “artistic terrorists” (p. 47). It is a form of activism that uses rhetorical skill and imagination to infect dominant ideologies with new perspectives. Harold (2004) refers to this idea as “provocatively folding existing cultural forms in on themselves” (p.191).

2) Culture jamming is (often) anonymous (p. 16). Jammers tend to operate in the shadows. The appeal of this is that the focus is shifted from the scrutiny of authorship and is instead transferred to scrutiny of the message itself.

3) Culture jamming is participatory (p. 17). It naturally invites people into a larger conversation. Dery (2017) argues that culture jamming gives the audience control of the message and inherently creates multiple avenues for interpretation. These different interpretations of the jam elicit a response from the audience; that response can take on many forms. However, ultimately the goal is to engage the audience in a new line of thinking or questioning.

4) Culture jamming operates serially (p. 21). This stems from the idea that culture jamming is participatory. When a jam is created, other authors often use the premise to create work that further jams. The result is recognizable campaigns. It also creates a force that is not easily stopped. Once the ball is rolling, simply removing the voice of one author is not enough. The serial nature allows for culture jamming to start movements, and that creates a means of collective action within groups of individuals.

5) Culture jamming is political (p. 19). Its nature is to challenge the dominant ideologies of society and the structure of power that creates them. Deseriis (2017) contends that when a culture jammer challenges a dominant power, their “action can have unforeseen consequences for the entire order of discourse ... and for the institutions affected by the prank” (p. 100-101). This inherently leads to culture jamming having a political tone.

All of these modes of operation define not only what culture jamming is, but also what it does. It is important to note a large critique of culture jamming. Critics argue that culture jamming does not go far enough to promote “real” action and “becomes an end itself” (DeLaure

& Fink, 2017, p. 28). Simply put, critics asks the question, is culture jamming enough? This critique challenges jammers to creating jams that promote action within individuals.

Mememes use all of the above listed modes of operation in order to impact an audience. Mememes are often created by appropriating an image or message to turn the original meaning on its head. What makes these images work is the context that they are presented within. This context is often appropriation. While mememes do have an original creator, in many instances the creator is not known to the audience. This anonymity functions, as I stated before, in focusing the attention of the audience on the mememe itself instead of on the creator of the mememe. In many cases, the viral nature of these images also acts as a sort of anonymity because it becomes nearly impossible to trace the origins of a mememe trend. A mememe's ability to be shared, liked, and commented on, creates a space for people to participate and engage in argument. Mememes are often mimicked and altered to create a series of messages. This is enhanced through the participatory nature of social media. People want to be involved in viral trends, and this creates more of an incentive for individuals to create their own version of popular mememes. This then creates a series of mememes that all speak to the same issue. Mememes can cover a wide variety of topics. However, politics and other social issues are often a theme of mememes.

In order to analyze how political mememes operate as culture jamming, I am going to look specifically at mememe recreations of Obama's famous "HOPE" poster (Figure 1). The infamous



poster was created by artist Shepard Fairey and was widely used during Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign. According to the Nation Portrait Gallery,

The artist had the intention that the image be widely reproduced and "go viral" on the Internet. The result exceeded his greatest expectations.

Campaign supporters and grassroots organizations disseminated tens of thousands of T-shirts, posters, and small stickers. . . . Fairey incorporated the familiar heroic pose and patriotic color scheme (National Portrait Gallery, n.d.).

This image quickly became a powerful icon that was recognizable by most Americans. Not only did it become recognizable, it came to be a symbol for President Obama's campaign and took on the cultural meaning of the values associated with his campaign. According to an article in the *New York Times*, these values included: strengthening the middle class, excellent and affordable education, creating a secure future for average Americans, hope, and change (Beneson, 2012).

In the years following the creation of the HOPE poster, several meme recreations have been made. In order to examine how they act as culture jamming, I will look specifically at three recreations of the poster. The jammers appropriate the



Figure 2

image by replacing the image of Obama with an alternate image or replacing the word hope. In one example, the jammer replaced the word hope with spy and covered Obama's face with a mask of Obama's face (Figure 2). In another, Obama is replaced by Kim Jong-Un and the word hope is replaced by food (Figure 3). In the final example, Obama is replaced by Trump and the word hope is change to nope (Figure 3). Each of these images take on and create a new and different meaning from the original context of the HOPE poster. Each is commenting on a social or political issue.

It is important to note that for all of these memes, there is no credited author. This acts to the advantage of the author because rather than being seen as an individual voice, the anonymity



Figure 3

provides a means for the author to be a voice of “the people”. This allows for the message of the memes to be the source of critique rather than authorship. These memes can also be shared and recreated by any individual with access to social media. This serial nature allows for a continued line of argument, and makes the messages presented by these memes nearly impossible to stop. The appropriation of the image, the anonymity authorship, and the potential for serial participation enables these memes to jam political thinking.

In Figure 2, the jammer is drawing attention to surveillance and the role of the president. This image asks the audience to question who Obama is and what role he truly plays in the country. The color scheme and the picture of Obama’s face are the same as in the original HOPE poster making this meme grounded in the context of values presented by the original poster. However, the jammer is asking the audience to rethink what values Obama really stands for.

In Figure 3, the author is drawing attention to the humanitarian issues in North Korea. Like in Figure 2, the color scheme and design grounds this image in the values of the original HOPE poster. There are several ways someone could interpret this. It is possible that the jammer is trying to draw parallels between Obama and Kim Jong-un. They could be commenting on America’s lack of intervention. They also could be commenting on America’s focus on building a stronger middle class when in other parts of the world there are starving people. Regardless, the jarring image of Obama being replaced by Kim Jong-un asks the audience to think deeper about the values of both world leaders.

Finally, in Figure 4 the jammer is commenting on Trump as president. In the original poster, Obama is staged to look contemplative and strong. However, in this image Trump is pictured at an unflattering angle and his hair, which is often a subject of criticism, is flying out of control. This image juxtaposes the two men and their visions for America. While it does have an obvious bias towards Obama, the image demands the audience to question whether or not Trump represents the same values as Obama.



Figure 4

Each of these memes have used appropriation to create a new conversation around the subject of the image. While all of them have the context of the values associated with the original HOPE poster, they all take on very different meanings based on how the jammer juxtaposed pieces of the images. For example, in Figure 1 Obama is wearing his campaign button which represents his campaign slogan “Yes We Can”, while in Figure 2 the button is changed to a button that says “Red” representing communism, and in Figure 4 Trump is shown wearing a button with a dollar sign representing his ties to big business interests. Each of the changes are used to contrast the values socially assigned to the original poster. Depending on the author’s choices, they are either praising these values or criticizing them. These memes were created by individuals as a way to engage with political and social issues. They are arguments based in values.

These memes can be seen as a sort of guerilla campaign that engages individuals differently than traditional political campaigns. Meme culture has created a new way for the everyday individual to engage in the political process, and it has also changed the rules. Where

traditional campaigns have had target audiences and messages that are curated to fit them, the viral nature of memes leads to them having a widespread and diverse audience. While I would argue that a jammer does have an audience in mind when creating a meme, the way social media operates with sharing, liking, and commenting creates a new definition of audience because the creator never truly knows who the audience could be. Not only is the created meme viewed and shared by its receptive audience, it is also shared and commented on by individuals who oppose it. While there has always been a receptive and an opposing audience to messages, the instantaneous nature of social media has changed the interaction between these audiences and the author. Himelboim, Lariscy, and Tinkham (2012) argue that “information flows in one direction via traditional media (newspapers, television), allowing audiences only to consume information. The Internet (and social media in particular) accommodates multi-directional information flow, allowing users to interact with one another.” This has created a space for dialogue between these groups in a way that has not been seen before.

The anonymous nature of memes also means that there is no way to control the verifiability of the messages they portray. This is a new challenge facing individuals today. Social media has created a platform where anyone can develop content and has given a voice to many groups that traditionally have not had one. However, there is danger in this because determining the truth of messages is then left up to the consumer, and there is evidence to show that we, as consumers, are not good at doing this. “Fake news headlines fool American adults about 75% of the time, according to a large-scale new survey conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs for BuzzFeed News” (Silverman and Singer-Vine, 2016). This raises several questions about the implications of using memes as political tools.

Because many young voters receive political information from social media, it could be argued that political memes could be used as a way to engage with this demographic. These memes have the potential to spark conversations on social media and could lead to youth wanting to be further involved in social issues. This is a new territory for campaigns and creates a unique opportunity for engagement with young voters. This also could create a way for young individuals to be involved with campaigns in a way that is more suitable to their lifestyle. As mentioned earlier, most young people have social media. By encouraging the use of social media as a method to get involved with politics, politics are effectively brought into their world. Because no one controls the creation of memes, memes have the potential to give voices to those who are excluded from traditional political debates and campaigns. The anonymity of memes provides a unique opportunity for individuals to share opinions and views they would otherwise be nervous of sharing. Social media, as a whole, levels the playing field as far as who gets a platform to share their views and ideas. The sharing, commenting, and liking features of social media create a sort of marketplace of ideas. The ideas with the most shares, likes, and comments naturally become the next big thing.

This could be problematic because there is no way to control the truth and validity of memes. Another potential issue with the lack of control of memes and their messages is the potential for these tools to be utilized by hate groups and to promote violence and injustices within our society.

An additional issue with memes being used as a way to engage youth in politics is that they do not provide a concrete way to move engagement from the social media space to real world action. As I stated earlier, a large critique of culture jamming is that it does not do enough to promote real world action. However, I would argue that in the digital age we need a new

definition of action. What constitutes “action”? Are the only people taking political action the ones on the street holding signs or campaigning door to door? Is raising awareness for an issue on social media not in and of itself an action? These are questions I don’t have answers to, but I think they are questions that need to be answered to truly understand the role of meme culture, and culture jamming as a whole, in the political process.

Memes are not a new tactic of culture jamming. However, I would argue that they create a more accessible form of culture jamming for youth. There needs to be more specific research on how young people are using memes and the implications of their meme use. Further research is also necessary to provide methods to move involvement from solely the digital space into real life action, such as voting. Memes and culture jamming as a whole challenge the traditional views of rhetoric. They force scholars to consider how images and the viral nature of internet content effect and shape rhetorical messages. Our culture has shifted to a culture with a shorter attention span (Microsoft, 2015) and I would argue that memes are a response to this shift. They have the ability to convey a message within one image, and as the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. Further research is needed to account for how this has changed a rhetor’s means for conveying meaning and messages.

Memes have the potential to spark new conversations around social issues. They have the ability to jam mainstream culture and challenge our way of thinking through utilizing culture jamming’s modes of operation. They operate through appropriation, anonymity, participation, a serial nature, and they are political. They create a possible new way to involve youth in political thought and engage them a way that is more aligned with their lifestyles and means of understanding the world around them. This creates a new audience with great potential. However, this does not necessarily equate to political action. While meme culture is an

opportunity to engage with youth, there are several challenges to using it as a political tool. This is an area that needs further research because its implications are very unclear. I have argued that political memes are a method of culture jamming and could create new ways to engage youth in political and social issues. I have shown the potential that lies within meme culture, but also the dangers of using it. With further research I believe that the power of the meme is a force that could be used to bridge the disconnect between youth and politics.

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