A Question of Agency: Internet Memes and the Pepper Spray Cop

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The Tale of the Pepper Spray Cop: How the Distributed Agency of Memes Can Challenge Existing Systems of Authority and Accountability

Internet memes are assemblages. As internet memes propagate through and act in the world they often initiate new assemblages, which I will demonstrate through my analysis of the Pepper Spray Cop. This analysis is based on the work of Jane Bennett. Bennett uses the case of the August 2010 North American Blackout to examine how human-nonhuman assemblages disrupt our understanding of agency and thus accountability. Rather than looking for a single cause or agent to blame for the blackout, we should instead use a “theory of distributed agency” (31-32). Bennett’s approach does not remove the weight of responsibility, rather she widens the potential pool of who or what can and should be held accountable for a given outcome. The internet-as-assemble shall thus creates, and I think, thrives by such complications of agency.

Early Conclusions
- Why was the Pepper Spray Cop so successful so quickly?
- OWS context
- Existing meme-creation and meme-distribution assemblages
- The popularity of creating PSC iterations through mash-ups with other well-known memes and iconic images (paintings and photographs)
- The content itself became iconic (as with LOLcats)
- What did this meme do politically? What did it reveal about agency?
- Use of humor as critique
- Staying power – continued impact over time (see update)
- New era—must consider how things will playout in memes

Links to Sources
https://www.ladbible.com/articles/20150107/13292829624/10-years-everyone-who’s-been-using-streisand-effect-while-paying-now-im-going-to-start-raising-take-downs.html
http://peppersprayincop.tumblr.com/image/1482925717

Afterword - Using a Distributed Model of Agency to Study Algorithms and Other Digital Nonhumans

The Streisand Effect and Linda Katehi
"How long is it going to take before lawyers realize that the simple act of trying to repress something they don’t like online is likely to make it so that something that most people would never, ever see...is now seen by many more people? Let’s call it the Streisand Effect."

Mike Masnick
April 2016 -- Pepper Spray Cop Update

Although the initial incident did not lead to big changes, one could argue that the meme has continued to have an impact on the event.

The cop was initially suspended with pay, eventually left the campus police force, and then received payment for psychological damages.

-Linda Katehi remained in her position.
- The students involved eventually won a civil suit.

In April 2016 the controversy reopened as a number of contracts came to light which UC-Davis spent more than $175,000 to "scrub" Google of stories about the incident.

Especially stories which painted Chancellor Katehi in a negative light.
- She has been removed from her position.

Key Questions
- What is the relationship between form, content, and emotion?
- What form of agency do memes have?
- What does the distributed agency of memes reveal more broadly about agency?