

When Paper Goes Viral: Handmade Signs as Vernacular Materiality in Digital Space

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This article examines the role of digitally mediated handmade signs in contemporary social movements. Bringing together theories of memetic practice, vernacular authority, and material traditions, we argue that vernacular materiality occurs wherever users turn to handmade, physical messages and material signifiers to transmit meaning online. Juxtaposing the humble and personalized aesthetics of handwritten messages against the polished, programmed, and virtual aesthetics of digital media, users mobilize vernacular materiality to disrupt hegemonic spaces and narratives by harnessing the affordances of physical and social media.

Keywords: vernacular materiality, memes, participatory culture, social media, social movements, vernacular authority

A deafening clamor filled the locker room, but Malcolm Jenkins stood silently. As dozens of journalists crowded around the Philadelphia Eagles player, Jenkins remained silent and resolute, holding up a large, handwritten sign he had prepared. It read, “More than 60% of people in prison are people of color.” Microphones crowded the player, waiting for him to verbalize words that would never come; instead, Jenkins simply held up another prepared sign, and then another, and another. Each sign conveyed statistics, hashtags, or underreported facts about systemic racism in America.

Reporters asked incessantly about President Trump and the team’s canceled visit to the White House. Jenkins ignored them, choosing to communicate exclusively via his handwritten signs. Confused and frustrated, one of the journalists asked, “Are you not going to say anything today or just gonna use these . . . posters?” In response, Jenkins held up a sign that read, “YOU AREN’T LISTENING.” Refusing to be sidetracked, Jenkins used this specific sign five different times by the end of the three-minute interview.

After conveying all of his handwritten arguments, Jenkins thanked reporters for attending. As he moved to leave the press conference, one reporter asked him, “Is there anything you wanna say on camera, Malcolm?”

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"Nah," Jenkins responded aloud, "I pretty much said everything."

Jenkins later tweeted images of his signs, and a video of his unusual press conference received more than 6 million views on social media (Hensley, 2018; MSNBC, 2018). But Jenkins' messaging strategy is significant not only for his attempts to reframe the conversation regarding athletes protesting against racial injustice. It is also an example of a larger, ongoing trend in social movements on social media: the use of the digitally mediated handmade sign as a vernacular rhetorical strategy.

Jenkins' press conference is part of a long trajectory of vernacular practice involving users holding up personal signs to participate in social movements. Although these practices build on predigital forms of expression and public sign making (e.g., street graffiti and protest signs), the digitally mediated handmade sign has become a prevalent genre of digital expression unto itself. Digitally mediated signs often present handwritten text, produced with easily available writing tools (e.g., pens, markers, or paint) on a variety of physical media surfaces, including paper, cardboard, and cloth. As pictures of users holding their signs spread across networks, other users are inspired to create and circulate their own versions.

"Sign holding" has become so prevalent in contemporary social movements that it constitutes a popular genre of vernacular digital practice, which users commonly call an "Internet meme." In the last decade, a variety of social movements have used sign-holding memes to spread awareness and make arguments across social media, including Occupy Wall Street, Who Needs Feminism?, and Black Lives Matter. The ubiquity and endurance of sign holding as a digital practice raise several important questions for scholars of social movements, memes, and vernacular expression: In an age of high-tech fonts, filters, and perfect fidelity, why turn to paper? What do these images do for those who create and share them as well as for the social movements that are supported by them? And finally, how do digitally mediated handmade signs enable users to seek empowerment by constructing or questioning authority?

In this article, we address these questions by outlining a theory of vernacular materiality in digital space. Bringing together theories of memetic practice, social movements, and vernacular communication, we argue that vernacular materiality occurs wherever users turn to handmade, physical messages and material signifiers to transmit meaning online. Juxtaposing the humble and personalized aesthetics of handwritten messages against the polished, programmed, and virtual aesthetics of digital media, users mobilize vernacular materiality to disrupt hegemonic spaces and narratives by harnessing the affordances of physical and social media.

We begin by exploring what it means to call a digital practice a "meme" and how memetic practices can create publicity when integrated into social movements. Next, we argue that vernacular materiality is potentially empowering for contemporary social movements because it draws on both memetic practices and material-textual traditions, which, in turn, help users cultivate a sense of vernacular authority. By vernacular authority, we mean these communications appeal to a sense of social trust that is positioned as existing outside formal institutions. We then discuss three case studies of digitally mediated handmade signs in contemporary social movements to demonstrate how these memetic practices allow users to construct vernacular authority, disrupt institutional narratives and aesthetics, and build solidarity. We conclude by

exploring the potential risks of these signs, including their co-optation and subversion by oppositional publics. Although these risks are significant, we argue that the digitally mediated handmade sign is a powerful tool for disputing cultural hegemony in the digital age.

Memes as Practices in Social Movements

Internet memes are digital vernacular practices enabled by the affordances of contemporary participatory media (Blank, 2018; Milner, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Shifman, 2014). Internet memes are akin to digitally mediated inside jokes, circulating in and across Web communities. They typically take the form of phrases, .gifs, photoshops, image macros, or videos. Although these artifacts often circulate “virally” (i.e., through an informal chain of interpersonal connections across networks), memetic content is different from viral content because, unlike the latter, it is actively transformed and personalized by users as it circulates (Shifman, 2014). The result is that memetic practices tend to be highly referential, intertextual, and self-presentational, tapping into (and playing with) users’ cultural inventories while also encouraging collaboration (Blank, 2018). Acting as distillations of the networked logics undergirding the Web 2.0 era, memes are a microcosm of user-centered engagement. As Shifman (2014) puts it, “The meme concept is not only useful for understanding cultural trends: it epitomizes the very essence of the so-called Web 2.0 era” (p. 15).

Milner (2016) observes that Internet memes are recurring online vernacular practices (pp. 3, 83), acknowledging that memetic communications result from a process of continuous, iterative negotiation across multiple communicators. A practice-driven framework is inclusive. It still values the importance of individual artifacts and content, but it also understands that these fragments are not created in a vacuum. Put more simply, two memetic artifacts that look superficially different, come from different communities, or are separated by a period of years may still belong to a similar lineage of memetic practice.

A growing body of scholarship has shown that memetic practices are an effective tool for creating visibility, framing issues, and circulating social movement discourses (Hahner, 2013; Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2015; Shifman, 2018). From the jarring and humorous “image memes” of Occupy Wall Street (Milner, 2013), to video testimonials of LGBTQ individuals overcoming homophobic and transphobic bullying in *It Gets Better* (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016), to a storm of Twitter users’ tweets and photos evidencing police brutality to subvert the New York Police Department’s #MyNYPD public relations campaign, memetic practices give rise to a multitudinous array of populist texts that engage with public issues by demanding attention, supporting collective identity, shaping issue narratives and frames, and forging “networked counterpublics” of dissent separate from institutional or mass media gatekeepers (Douglas 2014; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; Mina, 2014; Wiggins, 2016; Yang, 2016; Zittrain, 2014).

Problematically, much of the existing literature on memes and social movements has focused on digitally constructed artifacts, such as photoshops (Peck, 2014), .gifs (Eppnick, 2014), crude digital drawings (Davison, 2014; Douglas, 2014), and computer-mediated text (Brideau & Berret, 2014). But, as Gal and colleagues (2016) note in their study of memetic practices in the *It Gets Better* project, the intermingling of semiprofessional features, amateur aesthetics, and lived-in signifiers can create a greater sense of authenticity for memetic artifacts in social movements (p. 7; see also Shifman, 2018).

We extend Gal and colleagues' (2016) observation by arguing that a multimodal mix of interpersonal, material, and virtual communications is integral to the success of many memetic social movement practices. As Costanza-Chock (2013) argues, successful social movements often engage in "transmedia mobilization," marked both by horizontal organization—encouraging participation from multiple voices and openness to narrative change—as well as the use of "high-tech" and "low-tech" forms of media production in determining the movement's narratives and platforms of circulation (p. 100). The Occupy movement, for example, was marked by "extensive offline, analog, poster and print-based, and 'low-tech' forms of media production," such as handmade signs, banners, fliers, and posters, "in parallel with cutting-edge technology development and use" (Costanza-Chock, 2012, p. 378). Accordingly, this article considers the widespread sharing of personalized, handwritten signs on social media as a particular memetic practice within broader strategies of transmedia mobilization in social movements.

Vernacular Materiality in Digital Space

We define the memetic practice of communicating on social media through handmade media as *vernacular materiality*. These memetic practices result in digital artifacts that are simultaneously individual and collective (Peck, 2019), expressing individual arguments as well as drawing on broader connections to existing memetic and material practices. Specific examples of vernacular materiality may be primarily designed for digital circulation (e.g., sharing a photograph containing a handwritten sign and encouraging other users to do the same), but they may also rely on the networked sharing of embodied actions involving material artifacts "on the street" (e.g., posting a photograph of a homemade pussyhat taken at a protest). Regardless of the specific tactics or origins, strategic uses of vernacular materiality are appealing to users because they build on the intersection of meme culture, vernacular authority, and materiality to spread awareness and engagement by leveraging the affordances of digital communication.

By calling these practices vernacular, we suggest they represent "noninstitutional beliefs and practices that exist alongside but apart from institutions" (Howard, 2011, p. 5). The word *vernacular* can be traced back to the Roman Latin word *verna*, which referred to a home-born slave (Howard, 2011, p. 6). In ancient Rome, most slaves were captured from acts of war or piracy and were not literate in the language of their captors (Howard, 2011, pp. 6–7). Roman law dictated that the progeny of an enslaved woman was also a slave, so these home-born slaves, when educated in the language of Rome, became more valuable to their masters for their ability to complete more technical tasks. Therefore, "a verna was made powerful because she or he had native access to Roman institutional language and yet was explicitly defined as something which was separate from Roman institutions" (Howard, 2011, p. 7). Over time, *verna* gave way to *vernacular*, which for centuries denoted informal and localized forms of Latin that existed "alongside but apart from the formal institutional language of Latin" (Howard, 2011, p. 5; see also Howard, 2008a, 2008b).

Building on this origin, contemporary scholarship in fields such as folklore, rhetoric, and technology studies tends to conceptualize vernacular expression in one of two ways. The first way views vernacular expression as informal, local, or traditional forms of expression. Hauser (1999), for example, suggests that vernacular discourse is a local apparatus of public opinion formation separate from institutions, which includes "[the] mundane transactions of words and gestures that allow us to negotiate our way through our quotidian encounters" (p. 11). Similar scholarship positions the vernacular as

"commonplace" (Lantis, 1960), "everyday" (Primiano, 1995), or "folkloric" (Garlough, 2011). In this view, institutional alterity is expressed in the disjunction between lived experience and institutionally encouraged rules and ways of doing.

The second way views vernacular expression in terms of the practices and discourses emerging from subaltern communities. Gaskins (2019), for example, observes that vernacular theory can illuminate how racially marginalized groups that are systemically underrepresented in technology industries and gatekeeping roles "have voluntarily subverted or remixed dominant technologies using local (cultural) practices" (p. 252). In this line of scholarship, vernacular refers to linguistic practices, artistic and aesthetic productions, and everyday maneuvers practiced by the racially marginalized to engage with, reappropriate, and improvise uses for systems, technologies, and norms designed by the dominant group to exclude and oppress them (Fouché, 2006; see also Ono & Sloop, 1995, 2002). Here, institutional alterity is expressed in ways of being and communicating by groups whose marginalized identities lead them to operate simultaneously under and apart from institutional power structures (Howard, 2010, p. 243).

Although these two views diverge significantly, they both imagine the vernacular in terms of institutional alterity (Howard, 2010, p. 243). Both views are also complicated by the challenges of studying vernacular communication on social media because such expression often lacks clear agents, locations, and intentions. To reconcile these two views and because "discursive performance cannot be essentialized to a single specific intentionality, agency, or location" (p. 509), Howard (2008b) suggests a reconfiguration that imagines a dialectical vernacular. This dialectical vernacular locates vernacularity in a process that "imagines a web of intentions moving along vectors of structural power that emerge as vernacular whenever they assert their alterity from the institutional" (p. 497).

In *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, Milner (2016) draws on Howard's dialectical vernacular to suggest that memetic practices represent a form of vernacular creativity (pp. 95–96). This understanding of vernacularity as fundamentally dialectical illuminates how vernacular interactions are often influenced by institutional choices and reminds us that institutions frequently appropriate vernacular expression for their own ends. As Hess (2010) notes, "Dialectical vernacular discourse in participatory media can be both vernacular discourse that incorporates elements of institutional discourse and institutional discourse that stylistically utilizes vernacular speech" (p. 110). A political campaign, for instance, may use blogging as a way to seem more "everyday" or "authentic" to its base (Howard, 2010), or a corporation may appropriate memetic practices to brand itself as irreverent or transgressive to its followers on social media.

Deploying vernacular expression for persuasive ends is appealing to both users and institutions because such tactics facilitate the construction of vernacular authority. Howard (2013) defines *vernacular authority* as "a central way tradition functions discursively" (p. 76). *Tradition* should not be taken as merely synonymous with *old*; instead, Howard draws on the field of folklore studies to position *tradition* as a perception that emerges from the informal circulation of information (McNeill, 2013). The imagined totality of these informal interactions is potentially empowering because "it seeks to garner trust from an audience by appealing to the aggregate volition of other individuals across space and through time" (Howard, 2013, p. 80). By expressing these spatial or temporal continuities, vernacular communication seeks to cultivate

authority by appealing to a sense of social trust that is positioned as existing outside formal institutions. In other words, when expressions build on shared, informal practices to create appeals based on shared, informal (and often constructed) knowledge, those expressions are locating their authority in the persuasive power of the vernacular (Howard, 2013, p. 81; see also Gencarella, 2009).

When creating signs for circulation on social media, users express these vernacular continuities not only by engaging with contemporary memetic practices, but also by drawing on a variety of material-textual traditions that flourished before the Internet. Most obviously, these practices express continuities to traditions of protest signs, which often interweave personal messages, movement language, popular culture, embodiment, and local identity to create vernacular appeals and challenge institutions or power holders (Garlough, 2011; Schmitt, 2013). As Bennett and Segerberg (2012) note, a structural shift toward decentralization and individualization in contemporary social movements has created a focus on personalized action frames that stress personalizing and sharing social movement messages. And, as Castells (2012) argues, contemporary social movements are fundamentally hybrid, enabled simultaneously by action in both digital and physical spaces. In this way, a protest slogan becomes a hashtag, a hashtag becomes an invitation to personalize and share, and the act of personalizing and sharing, when done en masse, becomes memetic (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

The vernacular potential of these practices also extends into the act of handwriting itself. According to Jordan (2013), handwriting is one of several historic “binding practices,” including personalized signatures and wax seals, that letter writers and receivers have relied on for centuries as a means of establishing the authenticity of the communicator and “binding messages to individuals, even in situations of great temporal, spatial, or institutional distance” (p. 81). Further binding themselves to their texts, users engaging in acts of vernacular materiality visibly attach their bodies to their messages through acts of sign holding or message wearing. Such acts center individual identity and physical embodiment in communications destined for digital circulation, actively rejecting digital logics that frequently detach messages from authors and make the authentication of messages difficult. In addition, insofar as typographic design can convey political ideology, producing a handmade message on paper with the intent of circulating it online may convey a sort of “handicraft idealism,” positioning the handwritten aesthetic as an expression of individual artistry and authenticity that stands in contrast to the technologized, standardized modalities of digital writing (Billard, 2016).

Handmade signs also draw on a vibrant tradition of disempowered groups making tactical use of material objects and “small media”—such as pamphlets, posters, leaflets, murals, and zines—to infiltrate “gated” or controlled spaces and challenge corporate and state-sponsored media narratives (Lievrouw, 2011; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1994). From the wooden shoes, or sabot, reportedly hurled by 19th-century workers into factory machinery to protest industrialism and “sabotage” unjust working conditions (Harold, 2004), to contemporary mobilizations of knitted textiles and other handmade items as a mode of surreptitiously “yarnbombing” and softening impersonal urban spaces (Orton-Johnson, 2014), citizens have long drawn on the creative rhetorical power of material, humble, and available objects to disrupt the dominant logics and exclusionary structures of industrial capitalism and modernity. Sign making also extends a history of women and marginalized groups collaboratively creating media, crafts, and folk art as a means of social activism, community building, and self-expression (Piepmeier, 2009).

In addition to these public advocacy functions, vernacular materiality also channels gendered traditions of more private, interpersonal communications using material media. Images of personal messages, some photographed in the private space of the home, resonate with behaviors such as writing cards, passing notes, and documenting secrets and desires in a journal or diary. In a recent form of digital expression initiated primarily by teenagers and women, described by Hall (2016) as “cue card confessions,” confessants share videos with a series of messages, written on index cards or sheets of paper, making public their experiences of bullying, self-harm, assault, or abuse in an attempt to raise awareness about these problems and let others who experience them know they are not alone. By creating and sharing signs that express solidarity with far-flung strangers, offer testimony of lived traumas, or call for an end to social injustices, users build on the functionality of social media as a site of “care work,” a kind of labor disproportionately performed by women (Portwood-Stacer, 2014). These modes of communication, rooted in the realm of confession, pleas for safety, and notes of encouragement, particularly among women, people of color, and youth, may inject additional connotations of agency, alterity, *communitas*, and care into a media ecosystem that remains notoriously inequitable in its inclusion and representation of disempowered groups.

As we show in the following case studies, by combining these affordances of physical and social media, vernacular materiality provides an important reserve of communicative potential for constructing vernacular authority, disrupting institutional narratives, and building solidarity among social movements in the digital age. To make this argument, we collected approximately 1,055 images of individuals participating in social movements or expressing political opinions by holding handmade signs that circulated on social networking sites, including Tumblr, Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook. This data collection was part of ongoing research into memes, social movements, and digital culture conducted between 2011 and 2018, with the majority conducted from 2014 onward. Within that set, we performed a critical textual analysis of a smaller set of 50 images, guided by Mitra and Cohen’s (1999) framework of attending to the semiotics, intertextuality, multimodality, and global and participatory authorship of digital images as well as the diversity of platforms and contexts in which they circulate. The images we have chosen to highlight in this article represent a synthesis of the trends identified in this qualitative research.

Vernacular Authority: Who Needs Feminism?

In April 2012, a group of Duke University students launched a social media campaign to counter negative connotations of the word *feminism* in mainstream discourse. The campaign started by approaching other students on campus, encouraging them to consider why they felt feminism was important in their everyday lives. Dozens of students wrote their answers on small whiteboards and posed with them for photographs. These photographs were turned into posters the group spread around campus and uploaded to social media (see Figure 1). To promote its campaign, the group created pages on Tumblr and Facebook, a Twitter account, and, subsequently, whoneedsfeminism.com. Initial posts not only shared the images the group had created but also encouraged other users to create, document, and share their own reasons using the hashtag [#whoneedsfeminism](https://twitter.com/whoneedsfeminism).



Figure 1. Images posted to Facebook by the Duke University Who Needs Feminism? Campaign (https://www.facebook.com/pg/WhoNeedsFeminism/photos/?tab=album&album_id=148163118645642).

These tactics built on several popular memetic practices that had circulated online in years prior, positioning Who Needs Feminism? in a trajectory of memetic practice. Specifically, initial posts on the Who Needs Feminism? Tumblr blog built on the handwritten, visual conventions of the We Are the 99% meme.¹ The original images uploaded by members of the Duke campaign (who also moderated the blog) featured dozens of photographs of individuals holding up handwritten signs explaining, in first person, why they needed feminism.

However, given that memetic communication often frustrates authorial intent, the material aspect did not immediately catch on after the blog was opened to user submissions. Of the first 300 user submissions to Who Needs Feminism?'s Tumblr page, only 37% included images of any kind. This proportion fell precipitously over the first few days. By April 14, the vast majority of responses to the question "Who Needs Feminism?" were conveyed purely through digital text. Although the content of these posts matched the Duke campaign's original intention, generic expectations for the memetic form had diverged significantly and at the cost of vernacular materiality.

To realign the memetic practice with expressions of vernacular materiality, the blog moderators actively positioned the material element of this memetic practice as essential to connection, proliferation, and cultivation of vernacular authority. In a May 29 blog post, moderators informed users that they would

¹ Inspired by the Occupy movement, users would photograph themselves holding a piece of paper on which they had written their frustrations with economic inequality (Milner, 2013).

now be prioritizing submissions that adhered to the original memetic format: a photograph of people holding up a piece of paper or whiteboard proclaiming why they needed feminism. For reference, users were pointed toward several examples of how to effectively integrate vernacular materiality into the memetic practice by photographing themselves holding up handwritten signs with personalized messages.

Following the May 29 post, nearly all submissions shared by the Who Needs Feminism? Tumblr integrated some form of vernacular materiality. The action of the moderators created a feedback loop. The photographic version of the meme became the most visible form, which—as the meme became more popular through the rest of 2012—continued to set the tone (in form and message) for new memetic communications.

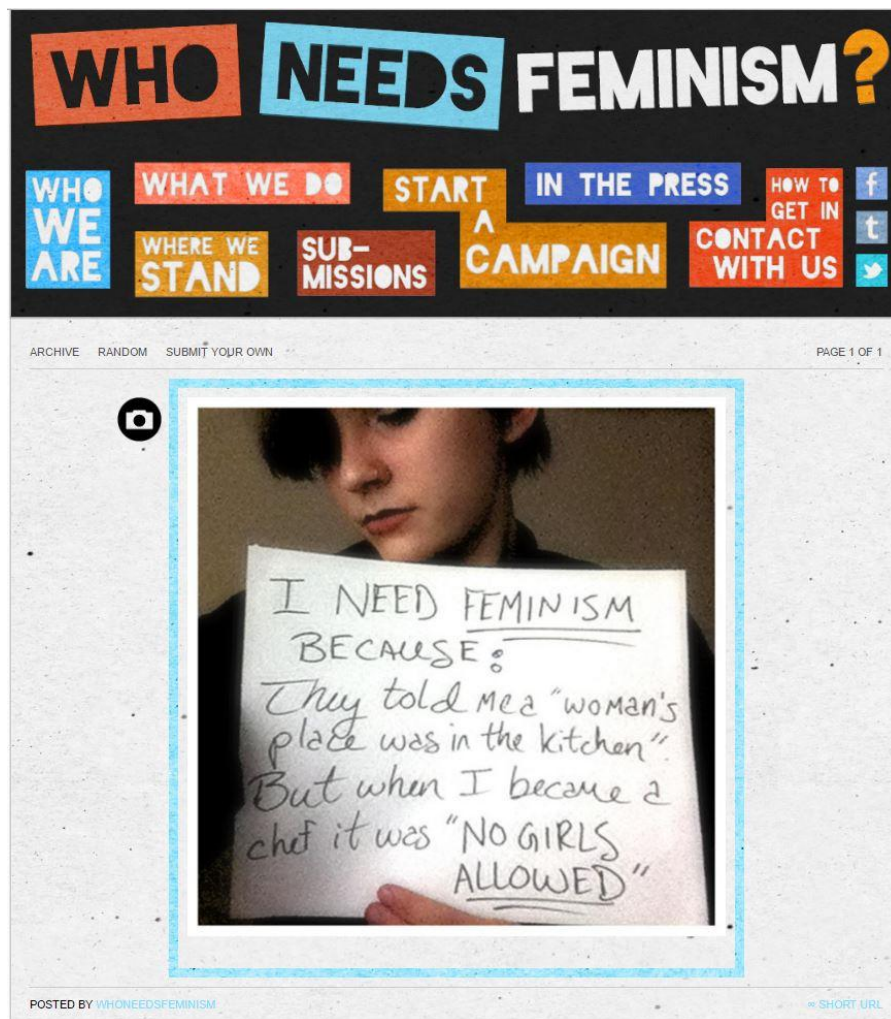


Figure 2. A user-submitted image from the Who Needs Feminism? Tumblr page (<https://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/post/24624950915>).

A June 7, 2012, submission to the Who Needs Feminism? Tumblr provides a typical example of how Who Needs Feminism? enabled users on Tumblr to combine vernacular materiality with individual messages, amateur aesthetics, and memetic practice to cultivate a heightened sense of vernacular authority. The post in Figure 2 features a young woman, shot from a low angle, holding up a handwritten sign. Black sharpie on white A4 paper reads, I NEED FEMINISM BECAUSE: They told me a "woman's place was in the kitchen" But when I became a chef it was "NO GIRLS ALLOWED."

No further comments were supplied, and the user's name was not given. The image received 533 notes (including 297 likes and 222 reblogs), a significant but not unusual amount.

On the textual level, this image begins in the same way as most Who Needs Feminism? memes: with an "I" statement that places the user as an individual standing in alterity to a hegemonic system. Although the specific target of this alterity changes between individual artifacts (and, in many cases, may only be implied in contrast), the messages in this movement frequently and actively perform institutional alterity. In this image, for instance, "They" is used as a metonym, standing in for society at large and systemic gender bias. The user's message also places two common vernacular phrases against each other, noting "[a] 'woman's place was in the kitchen'" and "when I became a chef it was 'NO GIRLS ALLOWED.'" This contradiction, evidenced by her appeal to lived experience, suggests a double-bind scenario and uses hypocrisy to channel hegemonic power against itself.

Visually, the user is solitary, substituting the bustling background of a university quad for a private, lived-in space. Although the original Who Needs Feminism? images were all captured outdoors and in public spaces, this photo was taken against a nondescript interior wall. Many other images use private spaces such as bedrooms, living rooms, or hallways as backdrops. Just as this user is partially obscured by both frame and sign, many users used stylistic choices that obscured parts of their faces or bodies in their pictures. Lighting tended to be a function of nature and convenience, with open windows, laptop glows, and nearby desk lamps doing most of the heavy lifting. Shots tended to be taken from angles associated with amateur photography. These low-angle (looking into the camera of a laptop) and high-angle shots (the smartphone "selfie" angle) remind the viewer of the highly individual nature of participating in this social practice for a collectivized purpose. By drawing on both the private and collaborative dimensions of material-textual tradition discussed in the previous section, these aesthetic choices come together to convey a sense of vernacular authority.

The resulting image appears both unique (demonstrating personal creativity) and collective (expressing continuities to a lineage of memetic and material practice). Vernacular materiality is engaging because it stands directly at odds with the potential for the perfect copy fidelity of digital communication. Even if the resulting image is copied, pasted, and shared countless times across the network, the act of creating a vernacular material object is singular, so when the image is circulated, its material elements frustrate the idea that it is just a repost. This creates a perception of uniqueness that adds to the image's overall construction of vernacular authority because the image is derived from an object that took greater time, effort, and movement to create than a simple status update or tweet encouraged by the affordances of social media. But, at the same time, this act of creative expression is eminently accessible to any user, and as more users begin to participate, acts of individual self-presentation give way to communal forms of

practice. As a result, vernacular materiality in digital spaces serves as a bridge between messages, aesthetics, and practice, linking those facets together while also augmenting their construction of vernacular authority. Vernacular materiality enhances the uniqueness of the individual message, participates in the creation of an overall vernacular aesthetic, and aligns the individual image with a larger body of collaborative, vernacular memetic practice. In aggregate, these tactics build a sense of vernacular authority for the social movement that adopts them while also creating a space for users to counter institutional or mainstream discourse.

Disruption: #WhichHillary and “He’s Lying to You”

In February 2016, Ashley Williams, a 23-year-old organizer, garnered significant media attention by using a handmade sign to interrupt then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton midspeech at a private fundraiser in Charleston, South Carolina. Unlike the paper and cardboard signs discussed previously, Williams’ sign was made of cloth, which enabled Williams to bring it into the tightly controlled space of the fundraiser undetected and unfurl it at an opportune moment. Walking forward from the audience to stand behind Clinton as she spoke, Williams opened their cloth banner that read, “WE HAVE TO BRING THEM TO HEEL”—HILLARY CLINTON #WhichHillary” (see Figure 3). The sign referenced remarks Clinton had made in 1996, in which she described at-risk teens as “superpredators” while expressing support for her husband’s criminal justice reforms, which disproportionately targeted African Americans.



Figure 3. Ashley Williams protests a fundraiser for Hillary Clinton (Lubben, 2016).

The confrontation threw Clinton off script, and a video of it quickly circulated on social media and gained international news coverage. Under pressure, Clinton issued an apology the next day, but reminders of her “superpredator” comments continued to trail her for the remainder of her campaign. Williams’ protest is one of several notable instances in which activists affiliated with Black Lives Matter have used handmade

signs to strategically disrupt staged media events and institutional scripts (e.g., Rhodan, 2016), with the ultimate effect of shaping social movement narratives in mass and social media.

Although activists have long wielded signs and banners to disrupt events and draw public attention via mass media (Delicath & DeLuca, 2003), Williams' inclusion of a hashtag demonstrates an awareness of the potential for memetic digital circulation (McNeill, forthcoming). As Thomas (2018) notes, the proliferation of related hashtags is part of a larger strategy used by Black Lives Matter, designed not only to circulate awareness, but also to encourage users to share their own stories regarding specific injustices. When adopted by users, hashtags such as #WhichHillary function as a form of collective narrative, bringing together "varied but related stories from many different voices" (Thomas, 2018, p. 107) to raise awareness and disrupt institutional narratives.

Although these collective narratives can be born from either embodied protest or purely digital action, Thomas (2018) suggests that accompanying visual media aid the circulation of these hashtags. The act of sign holding constitutes a genre of these visual strategies, even if, as discussed in the previous section, many of the digital responses may not be handcrafted themselves. When sign-holding images go viral, they disrupt not only institutional narratives but also the logic of social media feeds by deploying handmade aesthetics against the digital fonts and text that predominate on these platforms. This capacity enabled Williams' act of sign holding to disrupt a staged event across multiple media. It not only interrupted Clinton's flow during the event but also added handwritten annotations to subsequent images of it, which invited viewers to expand this burgeoning collective narrative by continuing to question the candidate's scripted messages on social media.

The result was that the #WhichHillary hashtag, which had previously been used sporadically on Twitter to call attention to what users regarded as Clinton's hypocrisy on racial issues, appeared in more than 88,000 tweets by the morning after Williams' protest (Lapowsky, 2016). The surge of tweets containing this hashtag suggests that Williams' sign was not only influential at generating negative publicity for Clinton, but also at leveraging the unique affordances of digital technology and participatory culture to spread Williams' message. In short, although Williams' use of vernacular materiality may appear superficially different from the memetic examples discussed above, it is actually relying on many of the same dynamics (i.e., the informal, collective sharing of personalized messages on social media) to spread and sustain this counternarrative. As Janell Ross (2016) of *The Washington Post* observes, "Were it not for Williams and that homemade black-and-white sign . . . there would be little written or said in daily campaign coverage about what that Clinton crime bill did" (para. 9).

Other instances of handmade sign wielding beyond Black Lives Matter reveal how these disruptive tactics reverberate across media and movements. In February 2017, when the pro-Brexit leader Nigel Farage spoke in the European Parliament to support the Trump administration's newly announced Muslim travel ban, a London-based member of the European Parliament, Seb Dance, protested the speech by holding up a hastily written sign that read, "He's Lying to You." News organizations photographed and reported the incident, which was subsequently shared widely on social media. As Dance later explained, his action resulted from frustration "that the sheer mendacity of Trump's justifications for his travel ban were not being challenged" by Farage. Dance (2017) describes how his spontaneous use of the sign was a

desperate attempt at truth telling and “calling out lies” in what was becoming a troubling institutional narrative in both the United States and the United Kingdom that scapegoated immigrants:

I decided I had to try to do something and, noticing the empty chair behind [Farage], I made a sudden decision to grab a piece of paper and scrawl a simple message on it. It wasn't particularly sophisticated, nor—as I may find out rather soon—was it particularly parliamentary behaviour. . . . Above all I felt the urgent need to convey my simple message. No jobs will be created, no industries saved, no community enhanced by scapegoating immigrants for our problems. (Dance, 2017, para. 10)

The instances above highlight the versatility of vernacular materiality for not simply conveying alterity online, but also for operating as a form of disruptive “radical media” in the tradition of graffiti, performance art, and culture jamming (Downing, 2000). It is important to note, however, that the risks and stakes of disruptive sign holding may vary significantly, depending on who is holding the sign and where it is presented. For users participating in *Who Needs Feminism?*, for example, holding up a personal sign indicting the patriarchy from the relative safety of one's home, while a transgressive act, does not carry the same risks of immediate bodily harm and punishment as the Black Lives Matter protestors' mobilization of signs to disrupt live press conferences and fundraisers. Correspondingly, the relative privilege and deference afforded to White, male, elected officials such as Seb Dance make such acts of disruptive sign holding inherently less risky than those coming from members of more politically marginalized groups that wish to disrupt official events.

Whereas protest signs have long been used to challenge dominant ideologies and power holders in physical spaces, the unique affordances of digital media allow sign holders to stage visual critiques that are designed for both the immediate disruption of the face-to-face communicative environment as well as subsequent disruption of institutional narratives through circulation and encouraged collaboration within a wider digital sphere. Handmade signs thus provide a tool not only to publicly display messages of dissent, but also to “jam” the communicative logics of press conferences, staged media spectacles, and social media feeds by juxtaposing vernacular aesthetics, messages, and practices against those of programmed platforms and professional communicators.

Solidarity: Sorry, Everybody; Egypt Supports Wisconsin; and #FromPalestineToFerguson

Vernacular materiality can also express connections among social movements, often spanning geographic, linguistic, and political differences in the process. Here, activists draw on traditions not only of political protest signs, but also of handwritten notes and interpersonal messages that express care and concern for others. Paired with the networked capabilities of social media, these images blur the boundaries of the public and private sphere, as individuals post personalized messages of apology, encouragement, and transnational movement solidarity in digital space. They also challenge the notion that handwriting is “dying” in the digital age, revealing new uses for the handwritten note in a time of increasingly virtual communication (Cox, 2010).

An early example of this phenomenon appeared on November 4, 2004, in the Sorry, Everybody website created by University of Southern California student James Zetlen in the immediate aftermath of the re-election of President George W. Bush. Dismayed by the election results, Zetlen posted an image of himself holding up a spiral-bound notebook with a message that read, "SORRY WORLD (We Tried)—Half of America," along with a doodle of the globe and the words for "sorry" in four languages (see Figure 4). Zetlen invited friends to send him their own portraits and messages of remorse, which he posted to the website. The posts spread quickly through the blogosphere and within a day, the website attracted 2.1 million views (Bronson, 2004). Within 10 days, Zetlen was inundated with submissions from across the United States and around the world and posted more than 2,000 of them to his website. The submissions generally followed Zetlen's original form, with individuals offering portraits of their faces while holding up a handwritten and/or illustrated message on paper or cardboard. Some participants enlisted other material objects to creatively convey their message. As described by the Canadian journalist Heather Mallick (2004),

The site has exploded with photographs of people holding up written apologies to the planet. Clumps of college students arrange their sneakers to spell out "sorry world," 16-year-old girls beg forgiveness for being too young to have voted for John Kerry. "Please don't hate us. We tried our hardest," one Wisconsin woman pleads. People's pets and newborn babies are enlisted to apologize. The site . . . is the first genuine evidence I have seen of a global village that looks like a nice place to live. (para. 10)



Figure 4. James Zetlen's apology note after the presidential election of 2004 (http://www.sorryeverybody.com/index_2004.shtml).

Appearing on the eve of the explosion of social media platforms such as Facebook (created in 2004) and Twitter (2006), SorryEverybody.com modeled how citizens could share private sentiments and grievances online while publicly linking them to those of far-flung strangers, effectively forging global "imagined communities" of shared social and political concerns (Anderson, 2006). But equally significant is the fact users drew on the affordances of both digital media (cameras, blogs, websites) and the medium of handwriting on paper to convey these sentiments. In an era defined by digital communication, handwritten letters and cards have become endowed with connotations of rareness, nostalgia, and sentimentality, which may have contributed to the warm feelings of *communitas* and people-to-people solidarity observed by Mallick and others (Cox, 2010). The Sorry, Everybody project suggests that since at least 2004, Internet users have creatively paired digital and handmade textual practices to not only convey vernacular authority and challenge dominant narratives in digital space, but also to hail imagined publics and establish virtual ties between like-minded individuals in different parts of the world.

This global, connective functionality of vernacular materiality was particularly salient in early 2011, when international media attention was riveted on the democratic uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa known as the "Arab Spring." Halfway around the world, in Madison, Wisconsin, activists occupied the state capitol building to speak out against an ostensibly unrelated concern: antilabor legislation proposed by newly elected governor Scott Walker. Yet, in the Wisconsin protests, several participants carried handmade signs enjoining their fellow protestors to "walk like an Egyptian," a reference to the ongoing protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square that successfully led to the ouster of President Mubarak on February 11. Meanwhile, activists engaged in the ongoing protests in Egypt likewise authored signs expressing solidarity with the movement in Wisconsin (see Figure 5). It was apparent from images of these homemade signs, which were shared widely on social media, that the disparate social movements in Egypt and Wisconsin were watching each other, and sought to link their struggles together and encourage each other in the spirit of democratic action and challenging abuses of power. Describing the feeling of solidarity, activist and blogger Ryan Harvey (2011) wrote,

When the Arab Spring broke out in Tunisian [sic] and Egypt, at the same time as the occupations and mass protests in Wisconsin began, we were paying close attention. Many were inspired by the movements in North Africa and those that soon emerged across the Middle East. Many of us saw photos of Egyptians with Wisconsin-solidarity signs, and it helped globalize the movement's spirit while internationalizing the understanding of this moment. (para. 12)



Figure 5. Muhammad Saladin Nusair poses with sign in Cairo, Egypt, in support of protests of workers in Wisconsin
 (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dblackadder/5464334243/in/photolist-9jS9cn>).

Since 2011, the same tactic has continued to surface in other uprisings unfolding simultaneously in different parts of the world. In the aftermath of the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, in Ferguson, Missouri, in the late Summer 2014, protestors mobilized in Ferguson and across the United States to protest police brutality, the militarization of police, and systemic racism. At the same time, Palestinian communities in Gaza reeled from a surge of Israeli rockets and airstrikes that killed thousands. Although their struggles were not identical, African Americans and Palestinians began to see connections among their communities, noting that both were systematically marginalized and lived in zones “occupied” by militarized forces (Schotten, 2015). These connections were expressed in handmade signs—photographed and shared on social media—that activists on the ground used to communicate their solidarity. “I Can’t Breathe! Justice for #EricGarner #FromPalestineToFerguson” read one sign, held by two boys presumed to be Palestinian, invoking not only the protests in Ferguson, but also the death of Eric Garner, another unarmed African American man, that occurred only a few weeks earlier (see Figure 6; Samidoun Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network, 2014). “We are FERGUSON, We are GAZA, Because we are HUMAN” echoed a homemade sign at a New York City rally in support of Palestinians (Schotten, 2015). Forging conceptual links between disparate social movements, these images reveal the connective and coalition-building power of vernacular materiality. Through practices of imitation and sharing, they fostered a sense

of common cause among activists and their supporters, and amplified messages of mutual care, encouragement, and concern on both social and mass media platforms.



Figure 6. Handmade signs express solidarity between Palestinians and African Americans (Samidoun Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network, 2014).

Conclusion

We have argued that vernacular materiality plays an important role in the strategies of contemporary social movements. By combining handmade aesthetics, vernacular messages, and the logics of memetic practice, activists imbue their messages with connotations of vernacular authority, disrupt the programmed and institutional logics of professional communicators and social media feeds, and build solidarity and sentiments of connection across social movements in different cultural contexts.

Vernacular materiality offers significant potential for supporting social movements, but these strategies are not without risks. Static images are easy to photoshop and risk being appropriated for trolling or hoaxing. Through digital manipulation, a sign may easily become a blank slate, allowing third parties to subvert an image by replacing the original message with their own. For example, an antistereotype sign-holding campaign was appropriated by users on Reddit for a series of jokes, becoming a popular “exploitable image” meme. Another popular hoax seemingly showed Emma Gonzalez, a young activist who survived the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida, ripping up the U.S. Constitution. The Who Needs Feminism? campaign became marred by antifeminist photoshops, as its images were digitally altered, distorted, and recirculated with subversive messages by competing antifeminist social media communities. These photoshops are enabled by the same dynamics of vernacular materiality. These appropriated artifacts propagate because they appear untouched during a brief scroll through an individual’s social media feed and they appeal to a view of the world that users who circulate them are predisposed to believe.

Sign holding may also be easily co-opted by other users. Because memetic practices are fundamentally collective, ownership and intentionality are similarly decentralized. When competing notions of vernacular authority come into conflict, users will often seek to reassert their control over vernacular discourse. These competing assertions frequently deploy or appropriate memetic practices as a form of counterargument. For example, the Sorry, Everybody campaign of 2004 quickly prompted the creation of a counterwebsite, *WereNotSorry.net*, in which Bush voters appropriated Zetlen's sign-holding meme to assert that many Americans were, in fact, not sorry at all about the election result (Morford, 2004). The result of this process is that the collective, decentralized logic of memetic communication enables its own resistance, and the frequency with which we see sign exploitation on the Internet highlights the difficulty of maintaining control over one's message as it circulates across the digital sphere.

Similarly, viewing vernacular expression as a communicative mode suggests that institutions can also use sign holding as a potentially effective way of circulating messages and appropriating vernacular authority. Brands, advertisers, and social media marketers have begun turning to vernacular materiality as a way of standing out in the otherwise homogeneous world of digital text. By co-opting these vernacular practices, brands may potentially benefit by encouraging user-based engagement while also obfuscating their institutional affiliation. The potential for vernacular empowerment is not limited to individuals, so users and scholars alike should remain wary of institutional co-optation of vernacular practice.

Despite these risks, we believe the potential benefits of vernacular materiality outweigh the possible costs. The potential to build vernacular authority, disrupt narratives, and form coalitions helps explain the staying power of this memetic practice as well as how vernacular materiality might empower digital users and social movements.

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