A Laugh Riot:
Photoshopping as Vernacular Discursive Practice

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This essay examines "photoshopping" as an important emerging genre of vernacular practice on the Internet. By sharing digitally altered images across networks, users engage in a vernacular process that creates and participates in discourses concerning shared expectations and communal values. To demonstrate this process, this essay analyzes how photoshopping was used as a response to the pepper-spraying of a group of peaceful protesters on the University of California, Davis, campus. Enabled by the affordances of networked communication, this essay argues that photoshopping represents a powerful new form of vernacular expression for the digital age.

Keywords: Internet, meme, pepper spray cop, photoshop, vernacular discourse, visual rhetoric

In the late afternoon of November 18, 2011, a pair of police officers pepper-sprayed a group of nonviolent protesters occupying the University of California, Davis, campus. The official story was that the protesters had encircled the officers, who, unable to get out and fearing for their safety, resorted to pepper spray as crowd control (Bora, 2011). Bystander photographs told a much different story (see Figure 1).

The incident was filmed and photographed by several spectators. These images and videos captured police Lt. John Pike nonchalantly strolling in front of the seated, peaceful protesters while discharging pepper spray into their faces at point-blank range (CNN, 2011). The protesters hunched over, trying to cover their eyes as Pike walked down the line. Each slumped in pain as the noxious orange mist billowed across the sidewalk. After two full passes Pike ran out of spray. He motioned for the other officers; one began spraying the remaining students while others moved to drag them away from the line. As more officers descended on the protesters, spectators began pushing forward. Vantage points became obscured and chaotic. Spectators recording the event quickly found themselves lost amid the increasingly tumultuous crowd.

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Figure 1. Lieutenant John Pike pepper-sprays protesting UC Davis students as a horrified crowd records the event.

These videos went viral on YouTube almost immediately, and photographs of the event quickly spread across social media websites such as Facebook and Reddit. Public opinion widely reflected shock and disgust over the officers' actions, and within hours the "UC Davis Pepper Spray Incident" had become a national headline. But, beyond the headlines it spawned, the incident is noteworthy because of the ways in which individuals used the digital communication practice of "photoshopping" to engage discursively across networked spaces.

These digitally altered images, or "photoshops," quickly became popular. Dozens of variants were created and circulated during the following week, spawning hundreds of comments on sites such as Reddit, 4Chan, and SomethingAwful. Microblog Tumblr cataloged more than 130 variants with tags such as "Casually Pepper Spray Everything" and "Pepper Spraying Cop" (see Figure 2).
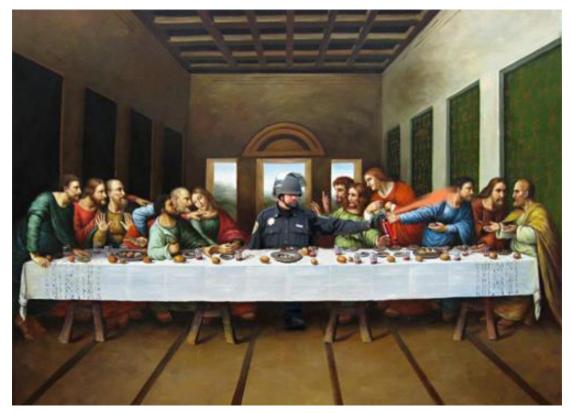
Figure 2. One of dozens of photoshops circulated in the wake of the UC Davis incident.

Enacting playful engagements with the photograph of the incident, photoshoppers used digital photo manipulation software to place Pike into a wide variety of new contexts. Pike was made to apply his signature brand of nonlethal force to a wide array of popular figures, both real and fictional—from George Washington, Frodo Baggins, and *Sesame Street*'s Grover, to a baby harp seal, Bambi, and Jesus Christ. Why did this image spur such a large and diverse response? Why were individuals drawn to create and share these images? Why was such a serious image reimagined at the vernacular level as a medium for digital politics and play?

To address these questions, it is necessary to understand the communicative practice that is at the heart of this phenomenon—photoshopping, the vernacular practice of sharing digitally altered images (or photoshops) across networks. This practice (of which the Pepper Spray Cop is one of the most well-known examples) merits scholarly attention because of the ways it facilitates vernacular discourse and critique. In other instances, photoshopping has been used by digital communities to critique Microsoft's racially insensitive advertising practices, scrutinize riot-control techniques in Vancouver, and bring

attention to poorly photoshopped propaganda circulated by the Chinese government. Therefore, developing an understanding of photoshopping as a vernacular discursive practice is essential to understanding an increasingly prevalent mode of expression in the digital age.

I begin by considering recent scholarship on photoshops and vernacular discourse to suggest that this behavior is best regarded not as a series of artifacts (photoshops) but as a set of vernacular discursive practices where images and conversations continuously build on one another. Observing photoshopping as a practice involves analyzing how images and related discussions work together to assert alterity and manage generic expectations for continued vernacular interaction. I then explain the social dynamics that underlie the formation of these generic expectations and argue that, as an ongoing, iterative process, photoshopping's meanings become emergent from the continuous interaction between image and discourse across networked groups. With this understanding, I return to the Pepper Spray Cop to demonstrate the various ways in which photoshopping constitutes a vernacular discursive practice. By creating, sharing, discussing, and playing with these photoshops, users assert alterity from various institutional structures and create vernacular positions both for the protesters in the photo and for themselves. I conclude by considering the implications of how vernacularity is constructed in these discourses and suggesting that the complex dynamics of photoshopping merit further attention from both new media and communication scholars.

Photoshopping as Vernacular Discursive Practice

Photoshop is the preferred term among Web users to describe digitally altered images (Frank, 2004), and several scholars have recognized photoshops and photoshop-like practices as a discrete genre of digital expression.[1] For example, Frank (2004, 2011) shows how photoshops often mitigate tensions following tragedies. Hathaway (2005) positions the practice as an emerging method of folk expression. Kuipers (2002) observes that photoshops offer "a whole new repertoire of pictorial and linguistic conventions to play with" (p. 457; see also Kuipers, 2005). Howard (2008a) notes that photoshops often use humor to make social commentary. Duffy, Page, and Young (2012) identify several instances of political photoshops involving Barack Obama. Shifman (2007) characterizes manipulated photos as an emergent form of humor enabled by the circulation and replication available in the digital age. And Jenkins (2006) suggests that photoshops have the potential to act as politically engaged communications.

Photoshops are not inherently vernacular, but they emerge as such when the practice surrounding them begins expressing itself in ways perceived as alternate to institutional discourses and pictorial representations (Howard, 2008a). As Howard (2008a) correctly notes, the vernacular is not a material state of being (it is not something that one either has or does not have); rather, it is a quality

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1 Although the term *photoshop* originates from Adobe's popular image editing software, any number of appropriate applications can be used to create digitally altered images.

that emerges in various levels of hybridity[2] when it is evoked through discourse—or through an interplay between reappropriations of visual media and discourse. So, although photoshops—and photoshoppers—may not be inherently vernacular, their potential for combining disparate cultural fragments in novel ways suggests a notable capacity for vernacular reappropriation of institutional images and hegemonic discourses.

In effect, these digitally altered images function as a type of user-driven pastiche for the digital age. Ono and Sloop (1995), in generating a critical framework for vernacular discourses, identify the tendency of those discourses to borrow from—but not mimic—popular culture. Pastiche is a process that cobbles together unique discursive forms out of preexisting cultural fragments. The function of pastiche is to "combine elements of popular culture in such a way as to create a unique form that implicitly and often explicitly challenges mainstream discourse, while at the same time affirming and creating the community and culture that produce vernacular discourse" (pp. 23–24). In the case of photoshops, pastiche's alchemy is literal, describing the combination of two images that create new meaning based on their alteredness. Because, as Ono and Sloop note, pastiche describes a "practice that is everchanging, active, and constantly motivated by a concern for local conditions and social problems" (p. 23), it is then necessary to shift critical terms to view photoshops not in terms of artifacts but as part of a larger vernacular practice.

Photoshopping refers to the vernacular practice of sharing photoshops across networks. Viewing photoshopping as a practice is meant to emphasize not only the ways these images are composed but how users share, discuss, and play with them. Photoshopping as a critical term stresses the importance of how vernacular practices create and play with expectations of group identity and generic form. An analysis of photoshopping accounts for how altered images and discourse work together to propagate vernacular discourses and identities. In other words, photoshops are discrete images; photoshopping is something people *do.*

The emergence of photoshopping as a vernacular practice coincides with the decentralization of institutional control over image manipulation and circulation. Although images were professionally doctored for the greater part of the 20th century, the mass proliferation of personal computing has greatly increased access to photo-manipulation technology (Shifman, 2007, pp. 197–198). Access to the Internet supplements this technology by encouraging users to interact with images in novel, communal ways. Skill and access are still necessary for photoshopping, but it is no longer the exclusive domain of a few privileged institutions and professionals. Institutions still digitally alter images—but while cover models and Big Macs may be photoshopped, they are rarely examples of photoshopping. Such images often lack either an assertion of alterity from the institutional or a recognition of alteredness from the real, preventing them from being considered examples of photoshopping.

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2 Because the vernacular must define itself as alternate from the institutional that enables it, the two are never truly separate and exist in degrees of hybridity (Howard, 2009).

Calling photoshopping a vernacular practice denotes how the Internet enables methods of engaging with visual communications that are perceived as alternative to traditional institutional power structures. As Ono and Sloop (2002) observe, vernacular discourse includes the verbal and cultural expressions that emerge "from discussions between members of self-identified smaller communities within the larger civic community" (p. 13). Hauser (1999) sees the vernacular as "mundane transactions of words and gestures that allow us to negotiate our way through our quotidian encounters" (p. 11). Ono and Sloop's definition emphasizes the role of the subaltern agents propagating hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourses, while Hauser sees vernacular discourse as a local apparatus of public opinion formation separate from institutions. Both of these views are complicated, however, by the challenges of studying assertions of vernacularity in digital communication.

Problematically, vernacular expression on the Web often lacks clear agents or locations. Furthermore, the vernacular is enabled by the institutional and, as a result, is never totally separate from it (Howard, 2009). Because "discursive performance cannot be essentialized to a single specific intentionality, agency, or location" (Howard, 2008b, p. 509), Howard (2008b) suggests a reconfiguration that imagines a dialectical vernacular. This dialectical vernacular locates vernacularity[3] 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 privileging practice over material identity or locality, this analysis seeks to examine how photoshopping helps users construct identities and separate themselves from institutional narratives.[4] The choice to view the vernacular as a quality that emerges in practice builds on a growing body of scholarship over the last decade that looks at vernacular discourses online. Analyses of various Internet discourses have positioned Web memorials (Hess, 2007), digital humor (Shifman & Lemish, 2011), vanity pages (Howard, 2005), virtual religious communities (Howard, 2010, 2011), and production, representation, and

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3 Drawing from Howard's (2008a, 2008b, 2010) work, I use the term *vernacularity* here because it captures the emergent, hybrid nature of vernacular expression in ways that other phrases (e.g., *vernacular qualities*) do not.

4 I am interested in how groups construct perceptions of themselves as being separate from institutions, even when they are not coming from historically marginalized communities (see Ono & Sloop, 1995). This often means a sense of marginalization (though it is not a strict requirement, it is one common way of expressing this alterity), even though the skill, time, and access needed for participation in these digital practices suggests a certain amount of privilege and everyday empowerment. In other words, constructions of vernacular identity are rarely unproblematic, and a trenchant analysis of vernacular expressions must interrogate this. (Indeed, Ono and Sloop's [1995] foundational essay on the subject found that their example of vernacular discourse, *The Pacific Citizen* newspaper, often reiterated hegemonic ideas popular in institutional sources of the time [p. 34].) The marginalized identity created by photoshopping the Pepper Spray Cop overlaps with general criticisms of the Occupy movement—a construction of vernacular authority predominantly by and for privileged young people. Placing the vernacular as a quality that emerges in expression allows for a nuanced understanding of how vernacular discourse can be leveraged for both positive and negative ends.

discussion on YouTube (Guo & Lee, 2013; Hess, 2009, 2010; Smith & McDonald, 2011) as modes of vernacular expression. The study of photoshopping adds to this scholarly conversation by exploring a heretofore unexamined genre of vernacular expression through the practice-driven theoretical framework of Robert Glenn Howard's dialectical vernacular.

Vernacular expression online emerges from a web of dialectical interactions. Certain ways of expressing social relationships emerge around online communities and guide the emergence of communicative events. Whereas off-line groups are bound by locality, online groups form around common interests and shared values. Continually enacting these shared values is a necessary part of digital group maintenance:

> Online communities are radically dependent on the ongoing enactment of the shared expectations that are both witnessed and enacted by participants in the discourse. In such communication, the expectations and the expression of those expectations must occur simultaneously in an ongoing process in order to sustain perceived common identity. If the vernacular process of public self-imagining were to stop, no geographic location would be there to bind the individuals together. (Howard, 2008a, p. 202)

Extending Howard's discussion to include visual expressions as part of those shared expectations offers compelling insight into vernacular discourse online. As Hariman and Lucaites (2007) put it: "Public identity is negotiated in an event-driven process of performance and response" (p. 136), and photoshopping falls under the purview of this vernacular discursive process of public self-imagining. Such communications "are constantly created, adapted and recreated" (Kuipers, 2002, p. 468), suggesting that meaning derives from an ongoing process of vernacular negotiation performed by members of a digital community.

Over time, vernacular negotiation creates shared expectations for interaction. Digital communities continue to function because individuals enact social identities consistent with group expectations and values. These shared expectations are "displayed, reinforced, negotiated, and taught through members' shared behaviors" (Baym, 2010, p. 80), and "any newcomer to an Internet chatroom, or a Facebook page, or even a back-and-forth mobile phone texting scenario, will know that there exists a certain shared body of knowledge about how to behave in such settings" (McNeill, 2009, p. 82). Despite the more fluid nature of digital group membership, every network location maintains a unique set of shared expectations as the product of ongoing social interaction. These shared expectations for social interaction—what noted sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) calls "frames"—exist in a relational web, and individuals approach any event working under the interplay of a significant number of frames. Frames give structure to social situations and can be observed, played with, invoked, called out, and subverted—though never completely transcended nor disregarded.

These frames act as a shared resource for communication, creating the generic expectations that "make up the structured system of conventionalized performance for the community" (Bauman, 1984, pp. 37–38). As soon as recurrent forms of expression are recognized by more than one individual, interpretive

communities begin to develop (Fish, 1980). In the case of photoshopping, Howard (2008a) notes, "These expectations are not born of institutional authority, nor are they the products of mass culture. Instead, they emerge from the bottom up, from the volition of everyday actors" (p. 194). Because of this, the generic expectations for photoshopping often remain implicit and vary across communities and time. In this sense, photoshopping is not taught, but it can be learned. Successful photoshopping involves tapping into a complex web of vernacularly created generic expectations; successfully analyzing photoshopping involves "focusing on the community processes that create, maintain, and re-create these expectations" (Howard, 2008a, p. 194).

However, because photoshopping relies on a social recognition of alteredness, it becomes imperative to recognize the ways in which users play with the expectations they have created. As Ono and Sloop (1995) argue, a danger with pastiche—and often with photoshopping—is that in appropriating mainstream cultural artifacts to create counterhegemonic discourses, these expressions often end up tacitly affirming dominant ideologies. There is always a possibility that photoshopping repackages hegemonic ideas under the guise of vernacular play, but, since photoshopping trafficks in breaking frame by nature, these same practices also offer users the potential to play with and break generic expectations. This play, in turn, can serve as an entry point for a vernacular critique of the practice itself. Breaking the frames that structure these communicative events can result in an individual being called out for inappropriate behavior, or it can serve as an opportunity to innovate generic expectations.[5] The former is an example of the normative nature of these expectations, and the latter demonstrates how they can be generative.

If photoshops play with generic expectations, then photoshopping is the vernacular negotiation of those expectations. Photoshopping is an Internet-specific practice enabled by the faster, farther-reaching, and more fluid group membership endemic to the digital age. The replicability and spreadability inherent to the networked structure allow for the rapid identification and development of shared expectations for new generic forms (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). These expectations standardize a behavior, but they also delineate the space for innovation, renegotiation, and discourse. This analysis of photoshopping endeavors to understand the vernacular processes that create, maintain, and re-create these expectations as well as how users play with and break these frames. To accomplish this, I turn to one of the most noteworthy examples of photoshopping functioning as vernacular discourse—the case of the Pepper Spray Cop.

To study Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping as a vernacular discursive practice, I cataloged more 150 images and observed several dozen discussions in which these images participated. These practices emerged on various websites, the most prevalent being Reddit, 4Chan, Tumblr, SomethingAwful, and Facebook. The target of this analysis is both the images themselves and the user conversations in which

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5 That is not to say that the ability to critique through play is fundamentally supportive of either the vernacular or the institutional. A user could be called out for propagating institutional discourses or for deviating from hegemonic values positioned as aligned with the vernacular values of the group.

they take part. The goal is to understand the development of generic expectations surrounding this practice, how these expectations worked to suggest certain vernacular positions, and how users either accepted or pushed back against these deployments of the vernacular. The specific instances that I discuss below are noteworthy not only for being some of the most popular instances of Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping, but also because they elucidate many of the larger trends surrounding this practice in various observed spaces across the Web.

The Pepper Spray Cop

On November 20, 2011—two days after the UC Davis pepper spray incident and one day after Louise Macabitas's photo gained sudden popularity—a user known as "jefuchs" shared a photoshop of Lt. Pike pepper-spraying the Declaration of Independence on Reddit.com (jefuchs, 2011). Jefuchs' choice of the Macabitas photograph as an object of appropriation is ambiguous, but it should not be overlooked that Pike's prominent placement in the image provides viewers with an easily identifiable central icon absent from many other, more hectic photos of the incident. As Hariman and Lucaites (2007) note in their discussion of images that play with the well-known "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima" photograph, having a strong and identifiable central icon in an image enables play because it allows for substitution (p. 120). In substituting one part of an image for another, viewers are expected to rectify the presented disjunction between what they know of the original and the alterations made by the substitution. And, as Edwards and Winkler (1997) demonstrate in their examination of the same photo, different alterable parts convey different potential meanings—changing the flag may applaud or denounce calls for collective effort, while changing the soldiers calls attention to cultural membership (p. 305). Similarly, even in these early reappropriations of the Pepper Spray Cop, the symbolic roles of Pike and the protesters are well defined.

The jefuchs image (shown in Figure 3) expresses alterity from the institutional by placing Pike in the role of institutional synecdoche. [6] In addition to the formal characteristics that mark Pike as institutional (his uniform, his riot gear), this image also leverages existing user knowledge surrounding the UC Davis incident to position Pike as the embodiment of institutional forces to which these vernacular discourses can develop in alterity. As Hariman and Lucaites (2007) demonstrate in their discussion of metonymy in iconic images, the appeal here is that photoshopping Pike allows users to express frustration with various institutional powers by deploying an abstract concept in corporeal terms (p. 100). In this sense, it is less important to identify exactly which institution Pike stands for (UC Davis, the 1%, Wall Street, etc.) and more important to appreciate the malleability these practices afford users in reappropriating his image to serve as a shorthand for various institutional forces (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 111). It is in this separation from Pike (as institution) that the vernacularity of these practices emerges.

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6 A figure of speech (specifically, a type of metonymy) where a part of something stands for the whole.

Figure 3. One of the earliest Pepper Spray Cop photoshops, this image of Pike pepper-
spraying the Declaration of Independence set the trend for successive iterations.

The Occupy protesters, by contrast, are represented through their absence. The new setting that has replaced them acts as equivocation through substitution, asking users to make a comparison between what they know of the original Macabitas image and the photoshopped variation. The result is a form of interpolation that asks users to identify with the vernacular position constructed by the image against the excessive or repressive institutional action which it critiques. In this instance, the jefuchs image suggests that current institutions and their agents—represented by Pike—are assaulting American values related to free assembly and expression. Despite constituting the majority of the image, the work of the Continental Congress is under attack by a single, institutionally empowered individual. This image suggests a majority that supports American values is being unfairly targeted and marginalized by an un-American empowered minority.

This visual argument—like many of the ensuing discussions and criticisms surrounding these photoshops—is reminiscent of the rhetoric surrounding the Occupy movement, which painted itself as the voice of the democratic 99% struggling against the efforts of the super-rich and institutionally empowered 1%. In this image, the protesters are painted as the marginalized true inheritors of the nation's

foundational beliefs. The photoshop accomplishes this by appropriating, as pastiche often does, institutional imagery (the Declaration) for vernacular ends.

This play toward the vernacular in the jefuchs photoshop started the trend of placing Pike in new situations and contexts. As users discussed and responded to the original post, dominant modes of interpretation arose. User reactions seemed to pick up on the constructions of institutionality and vernacularity in the jefuchs image, which subsequently set the tone for other discourse and images. Initial responses involved humor and admiration, such as a comment made by user "this-color-is-blue," who continued the joke by adding, "Obviously there were too many smelly hippies in that room that needed to get a job." By referring to the signers of the Declaration as "smelly hippies,"[7] this comment, taken as sarcastic humor by other users, demonstrates an understanding that the non-Pike figures in photoshop are meant to stand in for the UC Davis protesters. The appropriation of institutional imagery (the Declaration and its signers) for vernacular ends in the jefuchs image is directly commented on and accepted by this user, who continues to frame the signers (albeit jokingly) as part of a countercultural movement.

Not all users agreed on the vernacular legitimacy of these appropriations, and these playful one-off comments quickly gave way to more heated discussions of Pike's actions, civic life, and U.S. citizenship. Users picked up on the playful tone set by jefuchs and used a similar tone to express their own opinions:

> **The419:** As much as I'm against this cop and for the protesters, this sort of action is totally in line with the declaration, which was a liberal document that fetishized property rights.
>
> As much as we'd hate to admit it, this cop is being American as FUCK.
>
> Which is why I'm proudly anti-american.
>
> **Cabby688:** "We stand to protect all your freedoms, until the moment you decide to actually attempt to use them."
>
> **henrylordwotton:** i think the constitution clearly states that people give up all human rights to any police the second they do not jump to obey. its for our own protection

Although playful, these comments demonstrate the perceived incongruity between Pike's actions and the basic rights for free assembly and protest in U.S. culture. In effect, these users are engaging in a discourse about some of the most basic American hegemonic structures. In the example above, user "The419," criticizes the image for using a second hegemonic symbol (the Declaration) as the basis for its vernacular authority, claiming the only real way to react against something like this is to define oneself as "anti-american." In effect, this user is critiquing the photoshop's vernacular appeal by suggesting that it is

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7 This term is likely meant to denote (through ironic hyperbole) stereotypes in institutional narratives that paint Occupy as a shiftless and narcissistic social movement (Bratich, 2014).

really asking viewers to substitute one symbol of hegemony (Pike) for another (the Declaration). Other users jokingly agreed, rejecting the image's choice between two hegemonies and offering new interpretations that positioned the document as enabling Pike's behavior.

These humorous deconstructions illustrate an odd tension surrounding the Pepper Spray Cop. On one hand, these photoshops and discussions convey overtly political messages, and on the other, they draw upon a shared expectation for humor and play. As a result, the emergent meaning of these interactions is that this practice was both playful *and* political.

Users' interactions mixed these expectations in collaborative, generative ways. In responding to jefuchs's original post, several users expressed concern about the incongruity they perceived between Pike's casual attitude and his severe actions. One such user, "limer," observed an incongruity between Pike's actions and body language, sparking the following discussion:

> **limer:** The Pepper Spray Cop was most casual assault I have ever seen . . .
>
> **Cabby688:** It most definitely was. He looked as if was trying to water his garden.
>
> **Sluz:** I was thinking the exact same thing but you put it into the perfect words.
>
> The only difference is that I don't hold up the watering can in the air like it's some sort of trophy before watering the garden.

User "Sluz" then shared a photoshop that placed Pike in a garden, replacing the pepper spray with a colorful watering can. Several users responded favorably, suggesting that Sluz create a thread to share the image. Another user, "jswhitten," responded with a photoshop of Pike carrying flowers (see Figure 4).

Here users directly built on others' interpretations and created new images based on those interpretations that expanded the conversation started by the jefuchs image. These two images, like the jefuchs image before them, placed Pike in new spaces to highlight the inappropriateness of his actions. These images substituted the crowd for more everyday spaces, highlighting the inappropriateness of Pike's nonchalance in pepper-spraying a crowd of nonviolent protesters. In both the flower and watering can images, vernacularity emerges through how users construct their subjectivities as subjects of coercion by institutional entities. Coercion—that is, persuasion through force or threat of force—is reimagined here as prevalent not just in political or public events (like those in the Macabitas photo or Declaration photoshop) but also in quotidian encounters. This creates a sense of marginalization that transcends this specific incident, using Pike to express anxiety that the influence of institutions in everyday interactions is both ongoing and pervasive. The underlying argument is that institutions (again, embodied by Pike) can engage in excessive displays of coercive force without even wincing, because for them it constitutes a mundane, everyday activity.

Figure 4. Spurred on by the ideas of others, users Sluz (main) and jswhitten (inset) shared photoshops highlighting Pike's nonchalance on Reddit.

These early exchanges reflect a vernacular discourse whose subjects see themselves as marginalized actors resisting institutional coercion through humorous means. Because of this construction, Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping quickly gained a perception as a playful form of political expression among those same users. The following comments, in response to a user posting the Declaration photoshop on 4Chan, illustrate this expectation:

4Chan User 1: This is fucking /b/ [the name of the 4Chan subforum was the thread was posted]. Trying to be all edgy by putting a cop who maced some hippies on the constitution?[8] 0/10

Take your protesting ass elsewhere, faggot.[9]

4Chan User 2: As much as you'd like this to be standard /b/ faggotry, it also has poltical significance.[10]

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8 Several users misidentified the Declaration of Independence as the Constitution.

9 Casual uses of this sort of problematic language are unfortunately common on 4Chan. Although this phenomenon is troubling, it is in no way specific to this case.

10 Because anonymity is common on 4Chan, I use numbers to indicate individuals in this exchange.

As this example illustrates, users who were aligned with the sense of alterity expressed by these images and the surrounding discussions quickly came to regard photoshopping the Pepper Spray Cop as a politically significant behavior—even if most did not elaborate on how or why.[11] This exchange is indicative of a wider perception among users that this vernacular practice served as a legitimate form of political expression, facilitating vernacular civic engagement while also engaging in publicity that countered institutions and institutional narratives.

Influenced by these initial iterations, Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping developed a shared expectation for contrasting Pike against new environments. Users began sharing images that juxtaposed Pike against Mount Rushmore, had Pike replacing the Statue of Liberty, and showed Pike pepper-spraying George Washington as he crossed the Delaware River. Images of Pike using nonlethal force on the subjects of *The Scream*, *Guernica*, and *Nighthawks* circulated widely, as did Pike's inclusion in scenes from *The Wizard of Oz*, *Bambi*, *The Sound of Music*, *My Little Pony*, and *Titanic*. Over the next several days, Pike immolated Buddhist monks, marched with tanks in Tiananmen Square, and fought against Luke Skywalker and the rebel alliance. Although users photoshopped Pike in dozens of situations, these artifacts were bound by a sense of incongruity between action and situation.

These incongruities were often understood differently by different groups, but the resulting constructions of marginalized vernacular identities were frequently similar. These variant interpretations—and what gets overlooked in their constructions of vernacular discourse—are evident in discussions surrounding a photoshop shared by Reddit user "kojak2091" of Pike pepper-spraying a woman in Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (kojak2091, 2011). In this image (see Figure 5), as in previous examples, the peaceful bystanders of Grande Jatte serve as stand-ins for the UC Davis protesters. The viewer is meant to sympathize with these bourgeois Parisians whose leisurely Sunday afternoon is interrupted by Pike. Despite obvious parallels between mainstream discourses surrounding the Occupy movement (characterizing them as privileged young hipsters [DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012]) and the figures in the painting, no user mentioned this unflattering comparison. Indeed, this reading was completely overlooked by users and stands contrary to the sense of institutional alterity established by user conversations surrounding this image.

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11 Those unsupportive of Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping were split on whether they saw it as a form of political expression. To some it was not political (the 4Chan user cited here frames it as a poor attempt at such), while other users who balked at the practice's popularity still acknowledged it as a form of political expression.

Figure 5. A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of UC Davis.

Instead, users were quick to point out the incongruities between Pike's actions and the peaceful backdrop of the painting:

> **G59:** He is trapped and desperate because they've all viciously surrounded him!
>
> What he's doing is clearly an appropriate form of retaliation!
>
> **Spattem:** Its active resistance!
>
> **Frightened_Inmate_1:** That woman is obviously resisting, and wielding what I can only assume is a dangerous weapon.

In referring to the active resistance of a crowd that is obviously passive, these users are expressing their feelings about the UC Davis incident through playful means. The statement above by user "G59," for example, explicitly calls out the official police statement following the incident by offering a similar rationalization for the use of pepper spray in *Grande Jatte.* In this way, G59 demonstrates an understanding of the image's vernacular appeal as emerging in its alterity to official rationalizations of the event. This suggests a feeling of marginalization through not only coercion but obfuscation.

For other users, the incongruity was that Pike looked *more* appropriate in this photoshop than he did at UC Davis. As user "WildeNietzsche" noted, Pike seemed more at home on a Sunday stroll than in a riot: "If a cop looks this casual when using pepper spray, you know he shouldn't be using it." User "Shinji_Yo" had a similar interpretation, likening Pike to a neighbor casually watering his lawn. In these interpretations, the user has completed the image in a different way but toward similar ends. Like the flower and watering can photoshops, the incongruity is not between the protesters and Pike but between Pike's body language and his actions. The underlying judgment that perceives the image's alterity—that Pike's actions constituted excessive force—remains consistent, but these users arrived at it by perceiving the incongruity in *Grande Jatte* somewhat differently.

However, by playing with Pike's excessive use of force, some users believed photoshopping trivialized the event. Several users deemed photoshopping an inappropriate response to the incident. User "MadeByMonkeys," for example, vented frustration at the *Grande Jatte* thread, arguing that "This event should NOT be trivialized." Other users, such as "Albaek," were careful to separate their enjoyment of the photoshopping from the seriousness of the incident itself, "I know it's wrong for laughing at someone casually spraying pepper spray, but I really find this funny. Not the actual event though, hell no." Many others reveled in the increased publicity photoshopping had brought the issue:

> **EvilTwinPixie:** I've got to say, I think I'm pleased that this is becoming a meme. It's a joke that knows which side it's on—the side that says the actions of the cop were extreme and ridiculous—and it's getting the whole thing a LOT more attention. Also, few better ways to take the wind out of a self-important asshole's sails than by turning them into a clown for all the world to laugh at.

This exchange plays upon an underlying tension often exhibited by the vernacular reappropriation of popular images. As Hariman and Lucaites (2007) write in their discussion of images that play with the iconic photograph of the *Hindenburg* disaster, "The jokes about the *Hindenburg* are managing a pervasive, systemic, and generally repressed sense of fear, while they (paradoxically) have to work against a process of routinization to which they themselves contribute" (p. 261).

These instances of photoshopping highlight the inappropriateness of Pike's actions, but in doing so, they also contribute to routinization of the event. By repeatedly sharing photoshops that placed Pike in incongruous situations, users risked depreciating the impacts of those incongruities. On one hand, these incongruities unnaturalized Pike's actions by contrasting them with hyperbolic or fantastic circumstances. They took a real-life occurrence and, though the use of substitution, demonstrated the disconnect between Pike's actions and the ideal world. This allowed users to suggest standards for judgment while also remaining playful, engaging in what many saw as a vernacular form of civic discourse. On the other hand, some users worried that overexposure rendered those incongruities banal. This illustrates that photoshopping has the potential to increase publicity and act as a form of political expression, but it also risks rendering the grievous mundane. When alteredness becomes the rule, it risks losing the key aspect that made it novel—difference.

Users often pushed back against this potential for routinization by overstepping the socially constructed bounds of the genre. By violating the norms of these shared practices, users sparked conversations about not only Pike's actions but the social function of Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping.

In a November 21, 2011, 4Chan thread dedicated to Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping, initial responses expressed appreciation for the topic and lauded the humor of the shared images (Anonymous, 2011). The thread continued with successive images and discussion until one user posted a photoshop of Pike spraying a self-immolating Buddhist monk (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. The suggested comparison of Occupy protestors to a self-immolating Buddhist monk broke frame and sparked controversy between users on 4Chan.

In this image, posted by an anonymous user,[12] a comparison is suggested between the Occupy movement and the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc.[13] Whereas comparing Occupy to the Declaration

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12 Again, anonymity is standard on this website.
13 As Michelle Murray Yang (2011) notes, this iconic photograph is often appropriated to symbolize protest against oppression.

of Independence, the rebel alliance, or the Parisian bourgeoisie had created few dissenters, comparing a man burning to death with protesters commonly stereotyped as privileged hipsters proved too much a disconnect for some. Another user immediately took issue with this image, posting, "Fuck you dude this monk was doing something good for this world. Have a little respect for the people who have the will power to actually do something and stand up for what they believe in." As this user's comments suggest by contrast, this image presents an unfair comparison, because Occupy is a movement without clear goals and with little actual fortitude in the face of adversity. This image has broken frame by trying to construct a vernacular identity for the Occupy UC Davis protesters through what many users saw as an undeserved comparison.

Amid the posting of various photoshops, users continued to discuss whether the self-immolation photoshop had gone too far:

4Chan User 1: How is burning yourself alive good for this world?

4Chan User 2: The self immolation pictured is from Thich Quang Duc in which they were protesting to the discrimination of buddhists under the roman catholic Administration of president Ngo Dinh Diem in south vietnam. This helped to bring the situation to light.

This well-known event helped to inspire the Arab spring but you guys wouldn't know what that is.

Also this year, protest toward the Zenawe regime and its campaigns of oppression against the Ethiopian population.

Also i am not new here i just have respect for some people

4Chan User 3: he was protesting, just like the people are doing now (except he is a lot more badass). It has nothing to do with respect. Hell it might even be respectful if anything.

This third user pushes back at the criticism of other users, suggesting that protest has a variety of valid expressions based on circumstances. Still, this user is careful to differentiate that Thich Quang Duc is "a lot more badass" than the UC Davis protesters. The second, too, is careful not to locate a defense of the photoshop in a direct comparison. Instead, the second user refers to how both the iconic self-immolation and these photoshops are bringing publicity to an important issue, skirting the question of a direct comparison between movements.

In this case and others, users became uncomfortable when photoshoppers appropriated certain images. To some, deviating too far from the group's shared expectations of photoshopping rendered the play no longer amusing. Others defended photoshops that pushed the boundaries of the genre. This disparity of shared expectations encouraged further discussion about Pike's actions and whether the comparison was valid. These discussions, in turn, conveyed judgments about what constituted effective and justified protest. In this way, breaking frame offered generative potential. It created an occasion that

challenged the way users saw the Pepper Spray Cop, and asked them to rectify and rationalize their opinions with the extreme incongruity presented in the image.

These plays to the extreme were not the only ways in which this photoshopping broke from expectations. Even the basic act of Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping was deemed as breaking frame by those who saw it as a departure from their shared expectations for everyday interaction on these websites. Many users bemoaned that Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping had become either too political or too playful. These users objected because it violated their expectations for social interaction in their online communities.

For some users, Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping broke from their shared expectations by politicizing what they deemed to be nonpolitical or entertainment spaces. As one user on Reddit commented:

> **viralizate:** I'm sorry to say this and I'll probably get down-voted but this is political and this shouldn't be here! I'm sorry Americans reddit is not american only and some of us don't mind (or don't give a fuck to put it bluntly) about the USA news, specifically OWS [Occupy Wall Street]. There are subreditts for that, use them. Reddit is a big place, post where it is relevant, a lot of reddit is already dedicated to OWS. Sorry and thank you!

When pressed, user "viralizate" expressed he was getting "bored" and suggested that the site's more authentic function was entertainment, not politics. Other users expressed frustration that these threads were not political enough. One anonymous user on 4Chan expressed frustration that other users only seemed interested in making light of the situation:

> **4Chan User:** Too bad people are shitting this thread up with LOL and LMAO!!!!1!111!. Seriously, fucking quit. Also, I commend /b/ for making quality [original content] for once. Nice job guys.

This comment chides individuals for posting simple responses, claiming they are not taking the practice seriously enough, while commending others for engaging well by posting original content.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, both of these comments negotiated the generic expectations surrounding Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping in similar ways. Both users identify Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping as a politically significant form of vernacular expression. Both convey that the shared expectation for their website is nonpolitical and entertainment-oriented interaction. Both users reference these shared expectations of behavior for their respective online communities and use those expectations to suggest why this type of photoshopping should or should not be continued. But, despite these similarities, they arrive at diametrically different conclusions about the appropriateness of Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping. In the former case, the user invokes shared expectations to suggest that the

community has broken frame and should return to more everyday interaction. The latter user does the opposite, suggesting that this emergent form of behavior is progressive and should become the new norm. What links these cases is that they are both engaging with the generic expectations surrounding Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping.

By offering divergent interpretations of the community's shared expectations, these users are engaging in a vernacular critique. They are drawing attention to the shared expectations for engagement that have developed in their communities and are trying to renegotiate them. This type of discourse functions as a deliberative check on the process of photoshopping, challenging other users to discuss and rationalize the appropriateness of this set of shared behaviors. By breaking frame and calling attention to the practice of photoshopping, these users questioned the social function and role of creating, sharing, and discussing these digitally altered images in their networked communities. This level of reflexivity suggests a complex, multitiered discursive practice.

The Last Laugh

As the case of the Pepper Spray Cop demonstrates, the practice of photoshopping tends to assert vernacularity in multiple ways but toward similar ends. These images asked users to empathize with protesters, creating vernacular discourses that represented both. In these discourses, users often propagated a sense of marginalization by institutional forces, framing themselves as victims of everyday coercion, force, and obfuscation. Similarly, the practice of sharing these photoshops was framed by users as an alternative discourse that represented freedom of expression, civic engagement, and exposing abuses of power in a flawed system of institutions. In effect, photoshopping came to represent a fight against these institutions and the marginalization they represented.

If the link between problem and solution seems vague, it is because Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping is subject to many of the same criticisms leveled against the Occupy movement. Bratich (2014) notes several mainstream criticisms of Occupy, including that it functions as expressive (and not "real") politics, it fails to make actionable demands, its participants are chiefly concerned with self-image, and it focuses on communication and culture instead of affecting measurable change.

In light of these criticisms, it is essential to remember that the marginalized identities propagated by those engaging in this vernacular practice are constructions made by those same users. And, just as these users continually developed vernacular self-identities through images and discourse, so too were the images and discourse influenced by the more mainstream rhetoric of the Occupy movement. As a result, questions of privilege tended to be ignored by users (as in the *Grande Jatte* example) in favor of continuing to develop a marginalized narrative of vernacular identity. In this way, the vernacularity of their images and rhetoric may be construed as problematic insofar as photoshopping appeals most significantly to groups that already spend a notable portion of their time online. These factors (skewing toward certain age and class demographics) are elided by the resultant vernacular rhetoric.

A more troubling obfuscation involves Pike's role as a generic stand-in for institutions. Across these photoshops, Pike is a synecdoche for attacks on free speech and abuses of authority by institutions. This function, which enabled this practice to remain malleable across digital spaces, also served to remove the image from the event. The resulting communications reflect a generic displeasure with institutions while neglecting the specific grievances that led the UC Davis students to protest. This broad construction of vernacularity allowed Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping to gain a broader audience at the expense of some of its own transformative potential.

Still, despite these issues, this instance of photoshopping was successful in not only drawing widespread publicity to an abuse of power but bringing together varied Web users and inspiring civic conversations in typically uncivic spaces. In their study of the Occupy movement and social media, DeLuca et al. (2012) note that, by facilitating discourse in alternative media spaces, this instance of photoshopping represents a crucial process in a networked society (pp. 487–488). And, as Bratich (2014) reminds his readers, the lasting appeal of Occupy was not that it was a unified countercultural social movement but that it was,

> an emergent ensemble of heterogeneous actors (human and non) converging and diverging during/in a flash. Occupy was a platform for action, developing a singular art of organizing encounters to reappropriate the means of production of subjectivity (which nowadays primarily involves media objects and communication forms). . . . Occupy's cultural dimension was thus an ontological process—always "adapting, transforming, and modifying itself in relation to its environment." (p. 1)[14]

Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping is an example of a practice adapting to new environments, a platform for users with various interests to collaborate and create these vernacular subjectivities. The lack of acknowledgment of privilege is certainly problematic, but it is also not inherently exclusionary or determinative.

These constructions weren't monolithic and, in many cases, users engaged in vernacular critique and debate to question the arguments of others toward both hegemonic and counterhegemonic ends. Furthermore, the dual expectations for politics and play that developed encouraged users to innovate and push the boundaries of the practice. When a user went too far and broke frame, it inspired conversations that reflected on both the process and role of photoshopping in that Web space. So long as Pike and his signature brand of nonlethal force remained malleable, the practices surrounding him remained protean— evidenced by the myriad ways users appropriated him as a way to express frustration with institutions, only a few notable instances of which I have had the space to discuss here.

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14 The quote from Gary Genosko's "The Life and Work of Felix Guattari: From Transversality to Ecosophy" that concludes this passage from Bratich (2014) resonates appreciably with Ono and Sloop's (1995) observation that pastiche "is everchanging, active, and constantly motivated by a concern for local conditions and social problems" (p. 23).

Photoshopping is becoming an increasingly common practice, and the Pepper Spray Cop is not an isolated case. Digital communication carries the potential for a wide range of vernacular discursive practices. What we can learn from Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping is how these user-based visual appropriations are valuable not only as forms of personal expression and civic engagement but as a complex example of how Web users continually negotiate *themselves* in multimediated ways through vernacular discursive practices online.

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