HOME   ABOUT   LOGIN   REGISTER   SEARCH   CURRENT   ARCHIVES
ANNOUNCEMENTS   SUBMISSIONS

Home > Volume 19, Number 4 - 7 April 2014 >Vie

In defense of "slacktivism": The Human Rights Campaign Facebook logo as digital activism
by Stephanie Vie

Abstract

This paper examines the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Marriage Equality logo as an example of a meme to further understandings of memetic transmission in social media technologies. The HRC meme is an important example of how even seemingly insignificant moves such as adopting a logo and displaying it online can serve to combat microaggressions, or the damaging results of everyday bias and discrimination against marginalized groups. This article suggests that even small moves of support, such as changing one's Facebook status to a memetic image, assist by demonstrating a supportive environment for those who identify with marginalized groups and by drawing awareness to important causes. Often dismissed as "slacktivism," I argue instead that the digital activism made possible through social media memes can build awareness of crucial issues, which can then lead to action.

Contents

Introduction
Theoretical background of memetic theory
The Human Rights Campaign logo meme
Critical assessment in replicating memes
Conclusion

Introduction

In early 2013, something interesting happened on the social networking site Facebook; for a short span of time in March, many users adopted the exact same profile picture (the small image that represents that user to the rest of the Facebook population). An active Facebook user in March 2013 might have logged on to see his or her timeline overtaken by small red squares, many with an equal sign inside [1]. This small red image was a modified logo for the Human Rights Campaign, or HRC, to represent marriage equality. Figure 1 shows the HRC's initial Facebook post on 25 March 2013, which encouraged users to adopt the image as their profile picture.
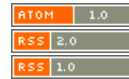
A B O U T   T H E   A U T

Stephanie Vie
University of Central

Figure 1: The Human Rights Campaign's March 2013 Facebook post.

University of Central
Florida
United States

Associate Professor

Department of Writing
and Rhetoric

The HRC describes itself as "the largest civil rights organization working to achieve equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans ... . Founded in 1980, HRC advocates on behalf of LGBT Americans, mobilizes grassroots actions in diverse communities, invests strategically to elect fair–minded individuals to office and educates the public about LGBT issues" (Human Rights Campaign, "About Us," 2013). The simple symbol had been liked over 25,000 times and shared 78,000 times in the first 24 hours of its transmission alone (Yang, 2013). The ease of spreading information in a site like Facebook made the HRC logo wildly popular, particularly in the United States, for a brief period of time. As the HRC logo spread, variants appeared that played on the theme of a red square with two objects inside. These remixes — mutations of the original logo — were shared alongside the original HRC logo and became part of the phenomenon.

The transmission, replication, and mutation of the modified HRC logo in March calls up intriguing questions about the role of identification with Internet memes disseminated in online social networking technologies. While many adopted, and later adapted, the HRC logo for their Facebook profiles, others critiqued the campaign and, by extension, users who changed their pictures to the modified logo. The transmission of this logo highlighted variable reasons why individuals might have adopted the logo. While many may have posted it to show support for gay marriage equality, others may have placed it in their profile to follow the crowd — many other friends were doing it, so they joined in. Adoption of the logo therefore may not necessarily have indicated that the Facebook profile owner felt strongly about supporting gay rights equality. In fact, some staunch supporters of gay rights equality refused to adopt the HRC logo because of their concerns regarding the HRC's past treatment of transgendered individuals (agnesgalore, 2013; Clifton, 2013; Comer, 2013). Finally, remixing or adapting of the logo again varied in intent. Many remixes were created to show support for gay marriage rights, but others may simply have served to showcase the remixer's image manipulation skills or sense of humor. As the image spread further still, many of the remixed images potentially lost the original message of gay marriage support and could have appeared to readers as advertisements for products or companies. These images, while ostensibly still created in support of gay marriage rights, showed little fidelity to that original message.

In early 2014, the number of Facebook users who still have the HRC logo or a variant as their profile picture is much lower than at its peak in March 2013. Despite its lack of longevity (which, in any case, seems to affect most Internet memes), the HRC logo meme was successful as it was "sufficiently strong and salient to capture online and offline broadcast media attention" [2]. Indeed, as the meme spread, major news outlets like ABC News, *Time, Scientific American, New Yorker, Washington Post*, and *Atlantic* all took note, while multiple elected officials, such as governors and state Senators, changed their profile pictures alongside celebrities like George Takei, whose Facebook profile post about marriage equality on March 25 received nearly 13,000 shares. Along with gathering media attention, the logo reached individuals interested in learning more about the HRC and its mission, more evidence of its success. Overall, the HRC logo appeared over 18 million times in Facebook's News Feed, and the HRC's nine separate Facebook posts over a five–day span in March 2013 garnered more than 50 million impressions, which resulted in record traffic to the HRC's Web site, HRC.org (Human Rights Campaign, "Marriage at the U.S. Supreme Court," 2013).

In this paper, I examine the Human Rights Campaign Marriage Equality logo as an example of a meme in order to further understandings of memetic transmission in social media technologies. While the HRC logo is an excellent illustration of the power of memetic replication in reaching broad audiences, many other Internet memes that are not associated with noteworthy causes can also be deemed successful given Knobel and Lankshear's (2007) definition of strength and salience. Thus, the HRC logo is not simply an example of a successful meme. Instead, this meme is particularly noteworthy because it illustrates the role of identification — particularly group or communal identification — in replicating memes. As well, the spread of the meme within a larger cultural ecology showcases the role of kairos in capturing an audience's attention. Finally, the Human Rights Campaign logo is an important example of how even seemingly insignificant moves such as adopting or remixing a logo and displaying it online can serve to combat micro–aggressions, or the damaging results of everyday bias and discrimination against marginalized groups (Sue, 2010). While such moves have been dismissed by some as "slacktivism," I argue instead that the spread of memes is

an opportunity for digital activism, or instances of social and political change made possible through digital networks [3]. Memes related to causes, like the HRC logo, help draw attention to societal issues and problems and can result in increased feelings of support for marginalized groups.

Theoretical background of memetic theory

In his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins first introduced the term "meme"; using the Darwinian model of natural selection, Dawkins (2006) argued that memes were a new form of replicators, things like songs, processes, catch phrases, and so on that propagate "in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" [4]. Much like genes, memes could replicate, undergo natural selection, and evolve. Memes, also like genes, had an element of selfishness in their replication, spreading indiscriminately without considering their usefulness or potential harm to their hosts (Blackmore, 1999). Dawkins (2006) embedded his study of memes within a cultural framework, attempting to answer what he saw as the "formidable challenge of explaining culture, cultural evolution, and the immense differences between human cultures around the world" [5]. Memes operate within cultures and are responses to the desires, interests, and needs of the specific host culture within which they emerge and spread. Successful memes are attuned to the social and cultural specifics of their audience; they play on familiar visual or textual concepts or rely on culturally relevant songs, jokes, or sayings.

Thus a meme can be considered a unit of information able to "infect" a host who then assists the meme in its replication, what Dawkins (2006) described as a literal parasitization of the brain. They must have copying fidelity, variability, and longevity in order to be successful (Dawkins, 2006). Copying fidelity means that memes must be as close to the original as possible in order to be successful (and here, success equates to replication). However, unlike genes, mutation in memes is encouraged, which is variability; a meme must retain enough of its original form or ideas to be recognizable, but its continued transmission depends on its changing to meet the hosts' needs. Finally, longevity simply means that the longer a meme is transmitted and varied, the more potential it has to influence others.

Because of their replicative nature, examining individual memes is useful for examining the spread of concepts, ideas, and thought processes. For example, memetic theory has been applied to concepts as varied as the spread of urban legends (Vie, 2005), Linux computing (Kuwabara, 2000), the message board 4chan.org (Trammell, 2014; Knuttila, 2011), Twitter hashtags (Yardi, *et al.*, 2010), and remix videos focusing on human rights campaigns (Gregory and Losh, 2012). Not coincidentally, these examples are all connected in some way to computerized environments, which Kuwabara (2000) points out are particularly well suited for memetic replication; as he notes, digital technologies have low costs associated with the replication of digital data and have high–speed data transmission rates, making the Internet "a breeding ground for digital goods online." In particular, social networking technologies like Facebook have been designed with features that make memetic replication easy (Shifman, 2011). Posting images, sharing them with friends, and collecting Facebook likes on images are all elements that can lead to the rapid spread of Internet memes. I turn here once again to the specific example of the Human Rights Campaign meme to illustrate how it operates as a particular element of individual and group identification within a larger kairotic cultural ecology.

The Human Rights Campaign logo meme

The Human Rights Campaign has relied on a simple logo — a blue square featuring a yellow equal sign inside — since 1995 as an immediately recognizable symbol representing the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. In March 2013, to bring attention to the U.S. Supreme Court cases on Proposition 8 and the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), the HRC modified its famous logo by simply changing its colors. Figure 2 shows the original Human Rights Campaign logo to the left of the modified red HRC logo.
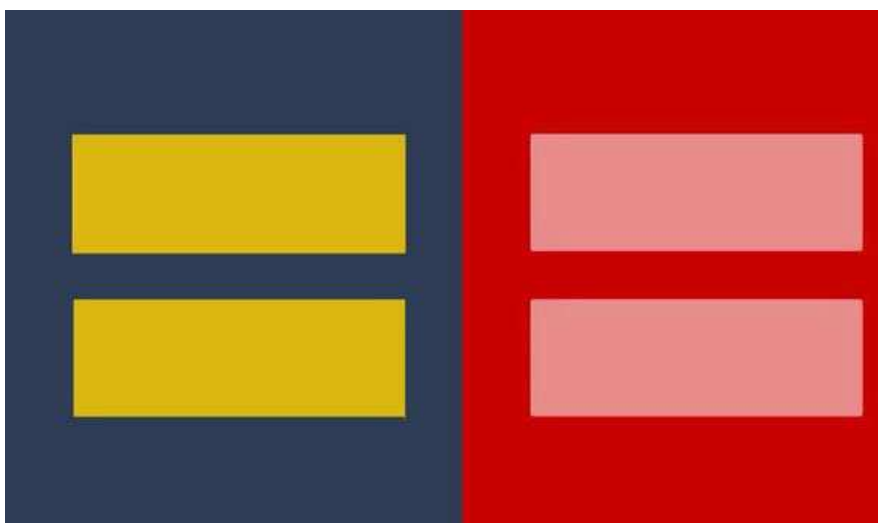

Figure 2: The original (left) and modified (right) Human Rights Campaign logos.

The Human Rights Campaign encouraged Facebook users to post the modified red logo as their default profile picture on 25 March 2013, one day prior to the U.S. Supreme Court's beginning deliberations on Proposition 8, California's same–sex marriage ban. Within 24 hours, almost three million people had replaced their Facebook profile pictures with this logo, an increase of 120 percent in the usual number of profile picture modifications (Bakshy, 2013).

As the HRC logo spread, it was also remixed; countless variations on the theme emerged on Facebook. Many carried on the original thematic intent of the HRC logo — for example, several variants depicted images relevant to LGBT issues or images that showed gay and lesbian couples (some real, others fictional). Figure 3 shows some of these examples, such as the Statue of Liberty kissing Justice; *Peanuts* characters Peppermint Patty and Marcie; and *Sesame Street* characters Bert and Ernie [6]. These images highlight the fidelity of the original meme — the colors, overall shape and layout, and connections to the theme of equal marriage/LGBT issues remain intact.
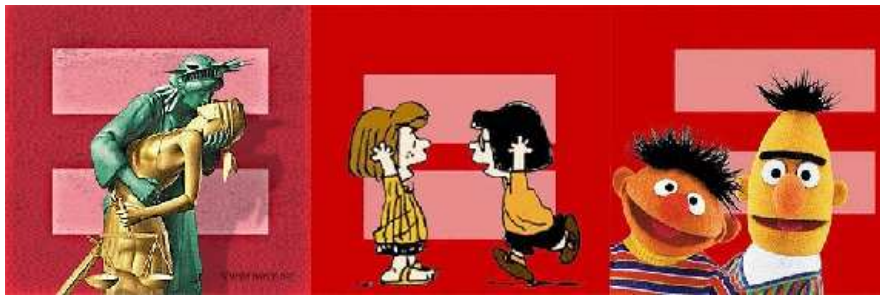

Figure 3: Variant memes retaining LGBT focus.

Even though these memes are clearly variants, both variability and copying fidelity are balanced; in this way, the HRC logo meme was likely more successful than it had been if it had simply stayed exactly the same throughout its transmission. Part of that success is driven by the clear replication of the HRC logo (the red color and the equal signs remain intact in the three examples above) with the inclusion of popular culture examples — examples that are likely to appeal to the audience because of their familiarity.

Memes that rely on familiar elements (popular songs, cartoon characters, literary tropes, and so on) succeed because these familiar elements allow for both individual interest as well as group identification. Group identification is a necessary aspect of the spread of memes, particularly through variance; as Milner (2012) noted, "transformation [of memes] requires an understanding of representational conventions associated with specific groups or individuals" [7]. Similarly, Lewis (2012) has argued that participatory memes depend on appeals to group and even global identification [8]. That is, unless memes rely on collective symbols "immediately understood by members of the same speech community" [9] they are likely to fail. The cultural familiarity for Americans of *Sesame Street* and *Peanuts* (a television show and a comic strip, respectively, that many American adults would remember from childhood) allowed these variants to resonate with viewers. Similarly, the iconic figure of the Statue of Liberty is immediately recognizable for most Americans. Each image not only is visually memorable but also represents particular values: the Statue of Liberty, for instance, is more than just a statue but stands in for patriotism, freedom, immigration, and Americanness. The successful variants of the HRC meme that used various iconic figures relied on the deep meanings embedded within a specific culture to survive and thrive.

Other variants on the original image, however, moved far past the intent of the HRC logo, with its support for equal marriage rights and explicit connections to the LGBT community. These variants successfully capitalized on the kairotic moment of transmission: The rhetorical concept of kairos, or timeliness, refers to a moment in time that is just right for communication to happen. In the kairotic moment, the time is right, the audience receptive, and the communicator ready. Kairos is part of a cultural ecology that encompasses "rhetorical circumstances and exigencies, which include the orientations of both speaker and listeners, the moment, the place, and so forth" [10]. Similarly, Smith (2002) defined kairos as a time of tension, conflict, and crisis; a problem has been posed that demands a specific solution but this problem also brings with it opportunities for accomplishing things which could not be achieved at another time [11]. Both Sipiora and Smith's definitions illustrate that kairos is complex: To achieve success within a kairotic moment, communicators must react promptly and accordingly in response to the audience's needs. The variants of the HRC logo were kairotic in that the spread of the original logo was wide enough that other images with red backgrounds and objects contained in that red square would be likely to make sense to viewers. As well, the HRC logo memes were kairotic in that they responded to a larger exigence: the tensions and conflict regarding gay marriage rights in the United States that had culminated in the Supreme Court's decision on the Defense of Marriage Act.

While kairotic, these variants did not always retain enough copying fidelity to be considered a transmission of the original meme.
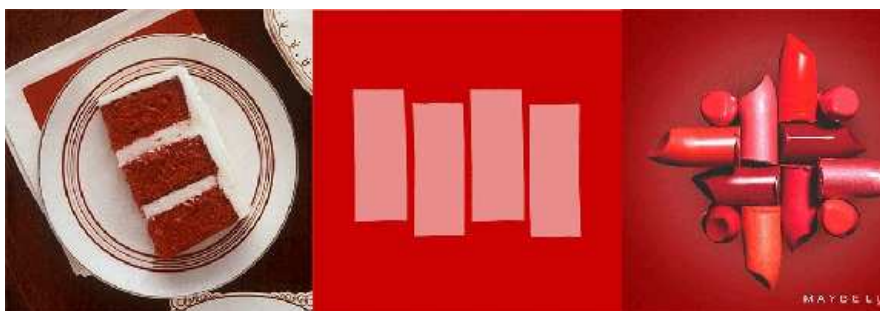

Figure 4: Variant memes not retaining LGBT focus.

A great number of Facebook users were transmitting these kinds of images through their profile pictures, but the images did not reliably retain the information embedded in the original. In other words, if a viewer did not know an image with two objects on a red square

background had originally been intended to show support for marriage equality, many of the images shown in Figure 4 would not necessarily have tipped that viewer off.

Martha Stewart Living magazine's delicious slice of cake, though appealing, would simply look like a fancy dessert on a lovely plate when taken out of the context of the meme being transmitted. The accompanying written text stating "equality is sweet" was the strongest signal to viewers that this image was indeed a variant of the HRC logo. The second image in the collage references the punk band Black Flag; the orientation of the four bars mimics the band's logo. The Maybelline image, while following the red color scheme, has completely changed the orientation of the lipsticks; besides moving significantly away from the original layout of the HRC logo, the Maybelline image looks more like an advertisement for a new line of cosmetics than an image in support of marriage equality, highlighted by the fact that the image was accompanied only by the phrase "Make a bold statement in red." These images illustrate a tipping point where the meme had, for some audiences, moved away from a focus on marriage equality or LGBT issues and simply used the color red and a square shape.

At this point, the meme was no longer transmitting the original message clearly; copying fidelity had been subsumed by variability, particularly in the latter two examples from Black Flag and Maybelline. However, in some cases, these variants with reduced copying fidelity may still have had an effect on the spread of the original meme because the variants were hosted by "influencers" in the network, individuals who have the ability to influence large numbers of people because they have desirable attributes such as high levels of credibility, expertise, enthusiasm, or connectivity (Bakshy, *et al.*, 2011). In the examples above, Martha Stewart, for instance, could be perceived as an influencer given her status as a public figure with over 800,000 likes on Facebook; her 25 March 2013 Facebook post with the modified HRC "cake" logo received over 16,000 likes, 18,000 shares, and over 850 comments on the picture [12], many responding favorably to the image (such as one comment stating "I officially have more respect for you. ... I've always had respect for [Martha Stewart], it just grew even more"). Martha Stewart's brand thus increased its credibility among viewers who also supported gay marriage rights when they saw her modified HRC logo Facebook post.

These variant examples illustrate corporations' interests in capitalizing on the kairotic moment surrounding gay marriage rights. The popularity of Internet memes has spurred many corporations to co–opt popular cultural messages to sell products — see, for example, Spike TV's use of the 2005 Internet meme "Leeroy Jenkins" in its 2006 series of commercials "Leeroy Live." Interestingly, the Leeroy Jenkins meme still circulates in 2014, making it particularly long–lived. With regard to the HRC logo, multiple retailers created their own variants of the HRC logo that purportedly showed support for gay marriage rights but edged close to seeming simply like advertisements: Men's clothing retailer Bonobos created an HRC meme featuring its khaki pants; Bud Light's logo used two beer cans; and hotelier Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants created an HRC logo with two pillows and the tagline "We're comfortable with equality."

Figure 5: Variant memes from retailers that edge close to advertisements.

These examples point out the complicated role corporate identification takes on with regard to memetic transmission. A company like Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants — one of the few to score a perfect 100/100 on the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index (which assesses corporate policies and practices relevant to LGBT employees) — has values that overtly align with the HRC logo and what it represents [13]. Similarly, Anheuser–Busch (makers of Bud Light) has been boycotted for its support of LGBT causes in the past [14]. Bonobos, however, has ostensibly shown no significant support for LGBT issues despite its willingness to create a modified HRC logo; this adoption may be seen as "cause marketing," marketing that demonstrates the company's interest in social responsibility and giving back (Smith and Alcorn, 1991). The appropriation of cultural memes for capitalism by corporate entities is a fruitful area for future research in meme studies given that research suggests over two–thirds of global consumers prefer to buy from companies that are socially conscious and give back to society in some way [15].

The ease of replicating the HRC logo meme on Facebook showcases a critical aspect of replicated memes with regard to the intersection of group identification and kairos. That is, many individuals who changed their Facebook profile picture to the red logo did so because of the kairotic timing. As well, using this image as a profile picture could indicate to viewers the user's support of gay marriage, allowing likeminded individuals to visually assess those on their side. Here was an easy–to–make change that ostensibly illustrated the owner of the profile showing support for marriage equality; by posting the HRC logo or one of its variants or by clicking "like" or commenting positively on an HRC logo, a user was able to show his or her alignment with a communal identity in support of gay marriage rights. Other individuals created images that fought against the message of equality and supported Proposition 8 and the ban on gay marriage; these allowed for a different kind of group identification for Facebook users, one that registered opposition to the cause. As the Human Rights Campaign Marriage Equality logo was quickly transmitted, these anti–equality variants were shared as well. For example, the Archdiocese of San Francisco posted a red plus sign with the hashtags #GodIsLove #traditionalmarriage #trcot [16].

While the HRC logo meme was short–lived, its spread was substantial. The Human Rights Campaign logo was a significant element in the larger overall kairotic moment that led to the Supreme Court's dismissal of Proposition 8 in California. When the HRC released a statement of accomplishments in 2013, they noted that one of their priorities was to highlight the HRC as major leaders in this fight and that they accomplished this through the modified logo:

> On Tuesday, March 26th ... more than 700,000 unique visitors came to our website in a 24–hour period. 86% of site visitors were new. In less than 48 hours, more than 100,000 people signed onto HRC's "Majority

Opinion" petition ... . The petition was shared over
30,000 times, and we recruited more than 67,000 new
supporters to receive email updates about our work.
(Human Rights Campaign, "Marriage at the U.S.
Supreme Court," 2013).

The memetic success of the HRC logo and its variants is again intriguing not simply because
of the rapidity of its spread, but because of what it suggests about the roles of kairos and
collective identification in social media technologies. The transmission of the logo demonstrate
that timeliness is key when choosing whether to adopt a circulating Internet meme, but
identification (and particularly group or communal identification) is equally important. It also
points out future research on the role of cause marketing with regard to corporate
appropriation of memes.

Critical assessment in replicating memes

As this section will illustrate, the choice of whether or not to adopt something like the HRC
logo can in fact be a complex decision that involves personal identity as well as group
affiliation. It involves reading even a simple Internet meme as a text with embedded and
multiple meanings, depending on the audience's understandings of and reactions to the text.
It also involves seeing a meme as a moment within a larger kairotic cultural ecology. The HRC
logo is noteworthy because it calls into question users' critical assessment processes
before aligning themselves with images in support of a group or political campaign. This
assessment is part of the process of identification in the rhetorical sense. That is,
identification becomes a focus of a text — here, an Internet meme. Through the process of
identification, individuals become closer and align in groups with common interests: "Members
of a group promote social cohesion by acting rhetorically upon themselves and one another"
[17]. Identification can also be a means of uncovering rhetorical motives in a text that might
otherwise go unrecognized or unseen (Burke, 1969).

For example, in the case of the HRC logo, many people who passed on the HRC logo may not
have viewed it as a meme with rhetorical motives. That is, they may have simply seen the
logo as an interesting image to place in their profile for a brief period of time, rather than
intending specifically to pass on the message of the HRC. The variants that lacked copying
fidelity in particular may have not immediately struck viewers as passing on a message of
marriage equality. One individual posted on a Facebook thread critiquing the HRC logo, "I did
not know when I used this icon that it was associated with HRC — I apologize. I really liked
the sentiment behind the image though" (Guerilla Feminism, 2013) [18]. However, other
individuals did see the adoption of the HRC logo as a means of support for gay marriage,
marriage equality, and the defeat of Proposition 8 in California. Those individuals who chose
to adopt the HRC logo and its variants because they believed it to be a strong message of
support for gay marriage rights may have decided to do so because of group affinity — these
individuals had gay friends, family members, or acquaintances and wanted to do something
to show support for them.

Alternatively, some gay individuals may have adopted the HRC logo in a show of group
affiliation; the image, for them, would align with their identity (gay and in support of equal
marriage rights) and their decision to adopt the image was a means of substantiating that
identity. As another commenter (who identified as genderqueer) on a blog thread critiquing
the image stated, "I admit, I have one of those little red and pink 'marriage equality' badges
... I actually didn't know they originated with the HRC — I just happened to agree with the
sentiment and modified one for my own use. Neither did I know of the HRC's poor behaviour
with elitist exclusions of Trans–folk and people of colour. Not cool and very disturbing"
(TransGriot, 2013). These reactions demonstrate the various responses to the symbol — not
all adopters of the logo were fully informed of the HRC's values and, in fact, some were
unaware the image was associated with the HRC at all.

Others active in the LGBT community consciously rejected the HRC logo over concerns about
representation: for them, some of the actions made by the HRC in the past left them with a
feeling of misrepresentation. That is, LGBT individuals who rejected the HRC logo sometimes
did so because they felt the Human Rights Campaign as a whole had made improper choices
in representing issues important to the community, particularly transgender individuals
(Mecca, 2012). For instance, one commenter on the Facebook critique of the HRC logo argued
that "I was all ready to support the HRC until I discovered how they have consistently
ignored, silenced, and subtly attacked trans* people and trans* issues. ... That's not cool.
Fight for all or fight for none" (Guerilla Feminism, 2013). Still others argued that critiques of
the HRC logo are "more than simply raging against the Gay Inc. machine. Scrutinizing
marriage as an institution and acknowledging broader community issues while supporting
marriage as an option for all couples are not mutually exclusive ideas or actions" (Clifton,
2013). Various blog posts, news articles, and even YouTube videos spread that attempted to
explain the complicated history of the Human Rights Campaign with regard to representation
of individuals identifying as transgender, non–White, immigrant, and other marginalized
groups.

What is evident from the range of reactions is that identification with Internet memes is highly
complex. One problem with a visual representation of a complicated subject — like the
example of the HRC logo — is that no one logo is able to capture the complex nature of
identification with the Human Rights Campaign and what it stands for. Thus the role of critical
assessment becomes especially important; that is, individuals must possess the necessary
skills to research causes and organizations that attract their attention. A commenter to the
Guerilla Feminism Facebook thread urged users to participate in this kind of critical
assessment: "I also think that it is good practice for folks to look into ALL non profits before
they give blanket support for any cause because it sounds good. ... just like for–profit
corporations, we should pay attention to where the money is coming from and where it is
going" (Guerilla Feminism, 2013).

However, in the face of the speedy transmission of Internet memes, taking the time out to
critically assess an image in this way may be less appealing than simply passing on the
meme. As Shifman (2011) notes, "human agency should be an integral part of our
conceptualization of memes by describing them as dynamic entities that spread in response
to technological, cultural and social choices made by people" [19]. Users need the
technological literacies required to research the original intent of memes and ensure that
copying fidelity is assured when spreading memes (Kien, 2013). Yet Internet memes are
created to catch on and be passed on quickly "without being hindered or slowed by mental
filters" such as critical assessment (Bennahum, in Lankshear and Knobel, 2003). A tension will
likely remain between the swift transmission and rapid peak of Internet memes spreading
and the careful attention required to critically assess political campaigns, companies, and
causes before supporting them. This tension will have no easy remedy.

Conclusion

Given the complex nature of Internet memes in support of causes, some might question whether there is there any benefit to passing them on. It might seem as though the small example of the Human Rights Campaign logo ultimately doesn't make much of a difference in terms of activism; after all, what kind of lasting effects can be felt from seeing someone change their Facebook profile picture to a particular image for a short time? This line of thinking is similar to Malcolm Gladwell's (2010) assertions about the role of social media in activism in his article "Small Change"; he argued that "Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice." Gladwell and others have dismissed Facebook activism as "slacktivism," activities that are low–key and easy to participate in, increasing the "feel–good" factor for participants, but that do little to affect major change (Christensen, 2011). Slacktivism further can be defined as as "having done something good for society without actively engaging in politics, protest, or civil disobedience, or spending or raising money" [20]. Thus slacktivism is critiqued as an easy–to–engage–in effort that makes little difference in the world.

Yet in a world where microaggressions of all kinds are very real, the virtual support shown in one's community through sharing images of goodwill and support can in fact make a difference. Microaggressions — constant, continual experiences of subtle racism, sexism, and heterosexism — have cumulative detrimental effects such as lowered self–esteem, health, well–being, and access to opportunities [21]. A young, closeted, gay man who sees messages of support about gay rights splashed across his Facebook News Feed on a regular basis might see them offer an intangible sense of acceptance and support. A lesbian who lives in an area where homophobic slurs, graffiti, jokes, or other forms of everyday violence are common might find solace in seeing her Facebook News Feed filled with images celebrating and supporting gay rights. Virtual support, while intangible, is *still* support [22]. These kinds of digital activism over time can lead to more substantive off–line action.

In an ideal world, we would be able to support only those causes that were clearly and overtly good. However, our world is a messy one and as a result, individuals must struggle with the tensions between supporting a cause even when flawed and not showing support at all. In the case of the HRC logo, many individuals found that support of the HRC could be beneficial given its visibility and reach. For example, a commenter on the Guerilla Feminism thread expressed her initial reluctance thusly:

> Everyone who has faced difficulties because of their
> sexuality were literally flooded with a wave of support,
> by seeing friends, loved ones, acquaintances,
> celebrities, even giant corporations like Bud Light,
> showing that they cared. For people who are ostracized
> ... it told them that there are people out there who
> actually give a damn. (Guerilla Feminism, 2013)

A commenter on the *New Yorker* noted that "I've heard from gay friends that every pink profile photo they witness is a heartwarming counterbalance to the discrimination they face every day" (Buchanan, 2013). As individuals adopted the logo and the news media picked up on the story, passing on the meme became not just about individual identity ("I personally support gay marriage") but a massive group identity ("We — and there are many of us — support gay marriage"). When memes move from individual identity displays to collective identity movements, they have the power to impact lasting material change in the world. While change may start as minor change, perhaps simply raising awareness of issues, memes are well suited to do just that (Christensen, 2011; Breuer and Farooq, 2012). And raising awareness is a crucial first step towards significant and lasting change in the off–line world.

Indeed, the power of Internet memes lies in their ability to draw attention to issues and causes worth our interest. Memes are embedded within the larger cultural ecology and work in a reciprocal relationship: "Popular culture and politics cannot be fully separated. They are discursively structured in many similar ways, and they inform each other, feed off each other" [23]. Once our attention is diverted to issues worth our interest, we can then take action. Just as "Rock the Vote" and other voter mobilization efforts have paid off in increased voting habits among youth, the circulation of images in social networks — including memes — can have significant effects. A 2010 study of 61 million voters published in *Nature* showed that a single Facebook social message from a friend noting "I Voted" increased voter turnout directly by about 60,000 voters and indirectly through social contagion by another 280,000 voters, for a total of 340,000 additional votes. The authors therefore argued that "online political mobilization works. It induces political self–expression, but it also induces information gathering and real, validated voter turnout" [24]. Similarly, Gehl (2013) asserts that the power of social media induced bodies "to get into public squares and to get into polling booths," with the result that "radical political change is indeed possible."

In examining the potential power of Internet memes, then, looking to an example like the Human Rights Campaign logo allows us to see how memes spread within kairotic cultural ecologies. They draw on both individual and group identities and they allow for rapid visual representation of alignment with a cause. The HRC logo is embedded in a complex ecology of issues — gay marriage rights; transgender rights; the rights of other marginalized groups such as people of color and undocumented immigrants. The spread of memes like the HRC logo illustrates that memes are not simply minor moments of slacktivism, but are part of a complex web of digital activism that involves creating content, transmitting memes, and remixing messages that can have significant impacts on off–line behaviors. FM

About the author

Stephanie Vie is an Associate Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Central Florida. Her research focuses on writing, literacy, and identity in social networking technologies. She is currently at work on a book–length project examining acts of composing in social networks.
E–mail: Stephanie.Vie [at] ucf [dot] edu

Notes

1. Though the spread of the Human Rights Campaign logo was particularly noticeable within the United States, some Facebook users suggest it also appeared in countries such as Costa Rica, the United Kingdom, and Canada. See http://www.hrc.org/blog/entry/facebook-analyzes-the-impact-of-the-hrc-logo-meme for more.

2. Knobel and Lankshear, 2007, p. 204.

3. Joyce, 2010, p. ix.

4. Dawkins, 2006, p. 192.

5. Dawkins, 2006, p. 191.

6. Off–line, support for the overturning of Proposition 8 was reinforced by other visual memes such as the *New Yorker's* "Moment of Joy" cover featuring *Sesame Street* characters Bert and Ernie snuggled up on a couch watching the Supreme Court. To view the cover, visit http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2013/06/new-yorker-cover-bert-ernie-gay-marriage.html. This visual reinforcement depicts how both online and off–line memes worked together within a memetic ecology attuned to the kairotic moment regarding gay marriage rights in the United States.

7. Milner, 2012, p. 90.

8. Lewis, 2012, p. 116.

9. Wodak and Reisigl, 2001, p. 381.

10. Sipiora, 2002, p. 4.

11. Smith, 2002, p. 52.

12. As of 25 November 2013.

13. Read more about Kimpton and the LGBT community at https://www.kimptonhotels.com/services/glbt-community.aspx.

14. See a selection of responses, both positive and negative, to the Bud Light HRC logo at http://www.businessinsider.com/bud-lights-facebook-page-2013-3.

15. Nielsen Company, 2012, p. 3.

16. The hashtag #trcot stands for Top Roman Catholics on Twitter.

17. Burke, 1969, p. xiv.

18. This apology is interesting because it highlights the tensions between individual identification and communal/group identification with memes. That is, the individual who adopted the HRC logo did so because she wanted to show support for equal marriage rights; this was an illustration of individual choice to align with a particular meme. The individual then apologized for adopting the logo once she was informed that the group found the meme inappropriate given its association with the HRC; the group's choices about what to support were in contrast to the individual's desires.

19. Shifman, 2011, p. 189.

20. Neumayer and Schoßböck, 2011, p. 78.

21. Sue, 2010, p. 6.

22. Material examples of off–line support similarly exist such as the Livestrong Foundation's yellow wristbands to fight testicular cancer, pink ribbons to fight breast cancer, and red dresses in support of the American Heart Association's "Go Red for Women" campaign. What is unique about the circulation of online memes that offer support (like the HRC logo) is the ease with which individuals can remix them.

23. Dahlgren, 2009, p. 141.

24. Bond, *et al.*, 2012, p. 297.

References

agnesgalore, 2013. "Why I almost defriended everyone who had an HRC logo ...," at http://agnesgalore.tumblr.com/post/46709012222/why-i-almost-defriended-everyone-who-had-an-hrc-logo, accessed 25 November 2013.

Eytan Bakshy, "Showing support for marriage equality on Facebook," at https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook-data-science/showing-support-for-marriage-equality-on-facebook/10151430548593859, accessed 25 November 2013.

Eytan Bakshy, Winter A. Mason, Jake M. Hofman, and Duncan J. Watts, 2011. "Everyone's an influencer: Quantifying influence on Twitter," *WSDM '11: Proceedings of the Fourth ACM International Conference on Web Search and Data Mining*, pp. 65–74. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/1935826.1935845, accessed 30 March 2014.

Susan Blackmore, 1999. *The meme machine*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Robert M. Bond, Christopher J. Fariss, Jason J. Jones, Adam D.I. Kramer, Cameron Marlow, Jaime E. Settle, and James H. Fowler, 2012. "A 61–million–person experiment in social influence and political mobilization," *Nature*, volume 489, number 7415 (13 September), pp. 295–298. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/nature11421, accessed 30 March 2014.

Anita Breuer and Bilal Farooq, 2012. "Online political participation: Slacktivism or efficiency increased activism?" at http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2179035, accessed 25 November 2013.

Matt Buchanan, 2013. "Painting the Internet pink," *New Yorker* (27 March), at http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2013/03/painting-the-internet-pink.html, accessed 28 February 2014.

Kenneth Burke, 1969. *A rhetoric of motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Henrik Serup Christensen, 2011. "Political activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or political participation by other means?" *First Monday*, volume 16, number 2, at http://firstmonday.org/article/view/3336/2767, accessed 25 November 2013. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v16i2.3336, accessed 30 March 2014.

Derrick Clifton, 2013. "What's behind criticisms of those red equal signs in your Facebook

Feed?" *HuffPost* (29 March), at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/derrick-clifton/human-rights-campaign-same-sex-marriage_b_2973131.html, accessed 25 November 2013.

Matt Comer, 2013. "HRC denies wrongdoing in alleged transgender flag incident at Supreme Court," *QNotes* (28 March), at http://goqnotes.com/21794/hrc-denies-wrongdoing-in-alleged-transgender-flag-incident-at-supreme-court/, accessed 28 February 2014.

Peter Dahlgren, 2009. *Media and political engagement: Citizens, communication, and democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Richard Dawkins, 2006. *The selfish gene*. Thirtieth anniversary edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

Robert W. Gehl, 2013. "What's on your mind? Social media monopolies and noopower," *First Monday*, volume 18, number 3, at http://firstmonday.org/article/view/4618/3421, accessed 28 February 2014.
doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v18i3.4618, accessed 30 March 2014.

Malcolm Gladwell, 2010. "Small change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted," *New Yorker* (4 October), at http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell, accessed 25 November 2013.

Sam Gregory and Elizabeth Losh, 2012. "Remixing human rights: Rethinking civic expression, representation, and personal security in online video," *First Monday*, volume 17, number 8, at http://firstmonday.org/article/view/4104/3279, accessed 25 November 2013.
doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v17i8.4104, accessed 30 March 2014.

Guerilla Feminism, 2013, at https://www.facebook.com/guerrillafeminism/posts/566178226786143, accessed 25 November 2013.

Human Rights Campaign, "About us," at http://www.hrc.org/the-hrc-story/about-us, accessed 25 November 2013.

Human Rights Campaign, "Marriage at the U.S. Supreme Court: A transformative moment for equality," at http://hrcportlandgala.org/Forms/SupremeCourt_Accomplishments-FINAL.pdf, accessed 25 November 2013.

Mary Joyce, 2010. "Preface: The problem with digital activism," In: Mary Joyce (editor). *Digital activism decoded: The new mechanics of change*. New York: International Debate Education Association, pp. vii–xi.

Grant Kien, 2013. "Media memes and prosumerist ethics: Notes toward a theoretical examination of memetic audience behavior," *Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies*, volume 13, number 6, pp. 554–561.
doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1532708613503785, accessed 30 March 2014.

Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, 2007. "Online memes, affinities, and cultural production," In: Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (editors). *A new literacies sampler*. New York: Peter Lang, pp. 199–228.

Lee Knuttila, 2011. "User unknown: 4chan, anonymity and contingency," *First Monday*, volume 16, number 10, at http://firstmonday.org/article/view/3665/3055, accessed 25 November 2013.
doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v16i10.3665, accessed 30 March 2014.

Ko Kuwabara, 2000. "Linux: A bazaar at the edge of chaos," *First Monday*, volume 5, number 3, at http://firstmonday.org/article/view/731/640, accessed 25 November 2013.

Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel, 2003. *New literacies: Changing knowledge and classroom learning*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Lynn C. Lewis, 2012. "The participatory meme chronotope: Fixity of space/rapture of time," In: Bronwyn Williams and Amy Zenger (editors). *New media literacies and participatory popular culture across borders*. London: Routledge, pp. 106–121.

Tommi Avicoli Mecca, 2012. "Don't support Human Rights Campaign" (7 February), at http://open.salon.com/blog/avimecca/2012/02/07/dont_support_human_rights_campaign, accessed 25 November 2013.

Ryan M. Milner, 2012. "The world made meme: Discourse and identity in participatory media," Ph.D. dissertation in Communication Studies, University of Kansas, at http://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/dspace/handle/1808/10256, accessed 28 February 2014.

Christina Neumayer and Judith Schoßböck, 2011. "Political lurkers? Young people in Austria and their political life worlds online," In: Peter Parycek, Manuel J. Kripp, and Noealla Edelmann (editors), *CeDEM 2011: Proceedings of the International Conference for E–Democracy and Open Government*, pp. 131–143; Proceedings available at http://www.donau-uni.ac.at/imperia/md/content/department/gpa/zeg/bilder/cedem/cedem11_final_version.pdf, accessed 30 March 2014.

Nielsen Company, 2012. "The global, socially–conscious consumer," at http://www.fi.nielsen.com/site/documents/NielsenGlobalSocialResponsibilityReportMarch2012.pdf, accessed 28 February 2014.

Limor Shifman, 2011. "An anatomy of a YouTube meme," *New Media & Society*, volume 14, number 2, pp. 187–203.
doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1461444811412160, accessed 30 March 2014.

Philip Sipiora, 2002. "Introduction: The ancient concept of kairos," In: Philip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin (editors). *Rhetoric and kairos: Essays in history, theory, and praxis*. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 1–21.

John E. Smith, 2002. "Time and qualitative time," In: Philip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin (editors). *Rhetoric and kairos: Essays in history, theory, and praxis*. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 46–57.

Scott M. Smith and David S. Alcorn, 1991. "Cause marketing: A new direction in the marketing of corporate responsibility," *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, volume 8, number 3, pp. 19–35.
doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/07363769110035054, accessed 30 March 2014.

Derald Wing Sue, 2010. *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley.

Matthew Trammell, 2014. "User investment and behavior policing on 4chan," *First Monday*, volume 19, number 2, at http://firstmonday.org/article/view/4819/3839, accessed 28

February 2014.
doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i2.4819, accessed 30 March 2014.

TransGriot, 2007. "Why the transgender community hates HRC" (8 October), at
http://transgriot.blogspot.com/2007/10/why-transgender-community-hates-hrc.html,
accessed 28 February 2014.

Stephanie Vie, 2005. "Cokelore, kairos, and viruses: What memetic theory has to teach us
about teaching," *Professional Studies Review*, volume 2, number 1, pp. 1–12.

Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl, 2001. "Discourse and racism," In: Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah
Tannen, and Heidi E. Hamilton (editors). *Handbook of discourse analysis*. Malden, Mass.:
Blackwell, pp. 372–397.

Mackenzie Yang, 2013. "What is the red equal sign all over Facebook and Twitter?" *Time* (26
March), at http://newsfeed.time.com/2013/03/26/what-is-the-red-equal-sign-all-over-
facebook-and-twitter/, accessed 25 November 2013.

Sarita Yardi, Daniel Romero, Grant Schoenebeck, and danah boyd, 2010. "Detecting spam in
a Twitter network," *First Monday*, volume 15, number 1, at
http://firstmonday.org/article/view/2793/2431, accessed 25 November 2013.

Editorial history

Received 26 November 2013; revised 28 February 2014; accepted 2 March 2014.

SHARE

A Great Cities Initiative of the University of Illinois at Chicago University Library.