wHaT dO yOu mEMe?

The (In)visible politics of subversion at work in internet culture

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Abstract

TL;DR: Internet memes matter to International Security Studies.[1]

Internet memes function to implicitly challenge established power structures by subverting the authority traditional speakers of security have in our world and thus transforming the mutually constitutive relationship that exists between actors and audiences. This is achieved through humorous analogies engrained in references to specialist cultural knowledge. In essence they represent a visual vernacular that is seldom acknowledged within academic circles. This discussion seeks to establish that memes represent a form of political participation by developing a series of typologies to break down some of these vernaculars. In doing so it becomes possible to see how memes say something about the world we live in, ascertain how they convey meaning, and decipher what impact their existence has on the actor-speaker relationship of second-generation securitisation theory.

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[1] TL;DR is a common acronym for too long didn't read. It is commonly included in text heavy posts by the writer to summarise their point.

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Introduction

To the casual viewer there is something incomprehensible about memes: crudely formed and seemingly pointless one may wonder if they 'do' or 'say' anything at all.[2] They've never toppled a government, nor caused a war, so why would they warrant attention from scholars of International Security?

It is my opinion that they do something rather more important than simple entertainment: they shape our perceptions, act as vessels of satire, and subvert the narratives that govern our day to day lives and engagement in politics. As such, they warrant greater attention than they have thus far been given. What is more, they represent a very different kind of political engagement and indicate a need to re-evaluate the ways in which scholars interpret and categorise them as modes of communication and their impact upon audience participation.

This realisation is underpinned by a sociological conceptualisation of security, which interprets securitisation as a mutually constitutive and contextual process involving both actor and audience, rather than a momentary act.[3] Whilst subtle, this distinction allows for greater attention to be paid to the less obvious ways that images interact with global politics. Though scholars of security have begun to recognise the significance of images within their research, this often takes the form of 'iconic images' that have a direct impact on policy and those in power.[4] By decoding the ways in which memes engage with the political at a more mundane level, it is possible to show how they function to gradually dissuade the audience by undermining the legitimacy of securitising actors, and thus constrain the actor's ability to enact measures that cross the threshold of acceptability.

The discussion presented here hopes to go some way toward addressing this gap by drawing upon literature from an array of disciplines. Together use of cross disciplinary insights allows for greater understanding into what memes communicate, how they convey meaning, and the impact that they have by implicitly challenging established power structures.[5]

Outline

This discussion will firstly address the ways in which scholars of International Relations and Security Studies have engaged with visual and before highlighting some of the theoretical underpinnings that constrain existing analyses. It will then move on to outlining how technological changes have impacted the functionality of visual frameworks. Emphasis will then turn to establishing the different ways in which memes indirectly shape the discourse

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[2] Limor Shifman. "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres". *Journal of Visual Culture*. Vol 13 No.3 (2014). p.340. Wee Yang Soh. "Digital Protest in Singapore: The Pragmatics of Political Internet Memes". *Media, Culture & Society*. February 27 2020. p.5. Särmä. "Collaging Iranian missiles: Digital security spectacles and visual online parodies" in *Visual Security Studies* ed. Andersen and Vuori. London: Routledge, 2018. p.114-5.

[3] Thierry Balzacq. "The Three Faces of Securitisation: Political Agency, Audience and Context". *European Journal of International Relations* Vol.11 No.2 (2005): 171-20.

[4] Hansen. "Theorizing the Image for Security Studies: Visual Securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis". *European Journal of International Relations* Vol.17 No.1 (2011): 51-74. Roland Bleiker. *Visual Global Politics*. New York and London: Routledge, 2018. Rune S. Andersen and Juha A. Vuori. *Visual Security Studies.* London: Routledge, 2018.

[5] Jacques Rancière. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

between securitising actors and audiences using a series of in-depth case studies organised by the memetic typologies used. Finally, it will draw together these strands of enquiry through four observations that illustrate how memes function to subvert the authority of securitising actors and alter the facilitating conditions of any future securitising moves.

Methodology

As this discussion progresses it will become evident that adopting a single theoretical or methodological stance in such a dynamic and fast paced area of research risked overlooking key facets of the practices at work in this field. As such, the methods used vary, and draw upon ideas from a multitude of disciplines.

A principle challenge of this discussion is that there are limited positivistic or direct links between memes and politics. I argue that memes constitute a form of political participation, however, conventional methods deployed to measure participation are ill-equipped to provide insights into how memes interact at a micro level.[6] As Shifman notes:

> "Whereas traditional political-science accounts of participation have focused on easily measurable practices, such as voting or joining political organizations, in recent years the perception of what constitutes political participation has been broadened to include mundane practices, such as commenting on political blogs and posting jokes about politicians".[7]

Moreover, the sheer number of memes circulating online and the speed at which they are produced means that numerical positivist measures can never be truly inclusive and would become obsolete within seconds.[8] For instance, the table below shows data from three member only groups on Facebook.[9] In order to gain access to the content posted, users must answer a series of questions and agree to the codes of conduct outlined by the group's admins. This ensures that all users are verified individuals and not artificially created accounts.

Group	Members	Joined in the past week	Posts in the last month
Casual Nihilism™	133,357	1,475	4,572
The Road to Eldorado Goldposting	231,350	784	93,896
A Campaign for Historically Accurate Memes	42,715	3,453	113,664

Figure 1

From the numbers shown, we can see that the content posted is extensive, numbering well into the thousands.[10] Content is also posted continuously, and is seen by a significant number of users, all of whom have made an active decision to join the group and by implication the discourse. Moreover, this data represents just three groups, from one social media network, at one specific point in time. These numbers are an illustration of why quantitative analysis

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[6] Attempts have been made to empirically link campaign images to voter intention. See p.8.
[7] Limor Shifman. *Memes in Digital Culture*. London: MIT Press, 2014. p.120.
[8] Särmä. "Collaging Iranian missiles". p.126
[9] Data sourced from Facebook. Accessed 21 July 2020. 12:52BST.
[10] Gillian Rose. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, 3rd Edition. London: SAGE Publications, 2012. p.10.

alone cannot keep pace with the scale at which memes operate, the ease with which they can proliferate in online communities, or indeed what they say about politics, and how they say it.

In order to achieve this level of depth, a variety of qualitative techniques are utilised to 'deconstruct' the multimodal levels of meaning at work in memes.[11] At the broadest level, this study utilises visual discourse analysis and the insights of social semiotics to unpack these meanings.[12] However, within VSS this can take many forms and applying such methods to memes is a recent and evolving development.[13] As Rose notes, conventional discourse analysis can be divided into two sub-sections, each of which allows for new levels of interpretation and thus asks different questions of the images studied here.[14] The first, 'Discourse I' essentially addresses what discourse – be that written, spoken, or seen – says, and how it says it. In the context of this discussion, this involves focussing on how a meme is constructed in order to convey its message to us as the viewer though discerning the visual format, intervisual links, templates used, the anchoring text, and any visible alterations to the original mimetic chain. By contrast, 'Discourse II' focuses more attention on how discourse is used to perpetuate established power structures, in other words, asking what do memes do and how do they challenge/reinforce hegemonic discourse?.[15] This will be addressed by linking visual securitisation theory to the way in which actors are depicted in memes, and how this depiction alters their standing in the audience's eyes. These questions are of significant importance and together, go some way toward answering the question of how memes function to subvert and implicitly challenge dominant structures in International Security and beyond.

However, before going any further I should acknowledge that the case studies and examples presented here represent just one avenue of exploration. They emphasise political and cultural references that I am familiar with, largely based on the views of people who I encounter and engage with on my social media networks and are thus somewhat (auto)ethnographical. As becomes obvious, the modes of communication in such posts vary significantly, and are chosen and included here largely based on my 'ability' to understand the language being used and recount it in an acceptable format. To some this may reflect an instance of 'biased selectivity', but in drawing the reader's attention to this issue at an early stage I seek to emphasise that interpretation of memes is not an objective phenomena, and is underpinned by a certain ontological standpoint that governs the message we 'see' in any given image.[16] In essence,

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[11] Barthes, Roland. "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. pp.152-163 Michael Emmison, Philip Smith and Margery Mayall. Researching the Visual 2nd Edition. London: SAGE Publications, 2012. p.46-55. Rose. *Visual Methodologies*. p.107-21. Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Katrine Emilie Andersen, and Lene Hansen. Images, emotions, and international politics: The death of Alan Kurdi. *Review of International Studies* Vol.46 No.1 (2020): 75-95.

[12] Louis Grundlingh "Memes as speech acts". *Social Semiotics* Vol.28 No.2 (2018). p.150.

[13] Shifman. *Memes in Digital Culture*. Soh. "Digital Protest in Singapore". Patrick Davison. "The Language of Internet Memes" in *The Social Media Reader*. Ed. Michael Mandiberg. New York: NYU Press, 2012. Ernesto León De la Rosa Carrillo. *On The Language of Internet Memes*. PhD diss. University of Arizona, 2015. Ryan Milner. *The World Made Meme: Discourse and Identity in Participatory Media*. PhD diss. University of Kansas, 2012. Särmä. "Collaging Iranian missiles".

[14] Rose. *Visual Methodologies*.

[15] Rose. *Visual Methodologies*. p.219-251.

[16] E. H. Carr. *What is History*. 2nd Ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961. p.23. For a more in-depth discussion of positionality in meme making see Särmä. "Collaging Iranian missiles".p.127

images, and in particular memes, are not objective, nor can they be read in an objective manner: they are formulated to tell a story or offer critical engagement and are thereby subject to inherent bias.

Literature review

This discussion is a multidisciplinary endeavour. Whilst grounded in International Security it draws together insights from all corners of serious and non-serious, political and non-political, visual and non-visual scholarship. One result of this is that the discussion dedicates significant space to examining different literatures. In doing so, I seek to emphasise that memes represent a genuine and legitimate form of communication: the methods used to deconstruct and ascertain their function reflect practices that scholars have been pursuing for quite some time, though in different contexts. Thus, the findings included in this discussion should not be thought of as 'new', rather, a reflection of the disparity between what Halberstam terms as 'high' and 'low theory', and an effort to step away from the constraints of rival intellectual camps.[17] Indeed, as Särmä emphasises:

> "IR as an academic discipline generally has a strong preference for 'high theory', 'high politics', and 'high data' and scholars engaging with popular culture have argued for the need to bring in 'low data' to get a fuller picture of 'high politics'. Introducing parody images and meme-making as everyday participation and spectatorship of world politics generates low data and low theorizing and consequently adds a new dimension to how IR perceives high politics issues such as nuclear politics and security."[18]

Whilst seemingly unrelated, these multiple literatures underpin and reinforce the legitimacy of the argument made here, and thus what we miss by adhering to practices of hegemonic research.[19] The purpose of this section is therefore to map out two parallel developments: firstly, the growing discourse surrounding visuality in International Relations; and secondly, the significant transformations in digital media. Together these two areas reveal not only that visual and security are intrinsically linked, but also that technological advancements have facilitated proliferation of the visual on an unprecedented level.[20] Moreover, they point to an erosion of the disparity between speaker and audience in security discourse and empower audiences to move from passive spectators to active participants.[21]

Visuality in International Relations

In the opening to Visual Global Politics, Roland Bleiker declares that "we live in a visual age. Images and visual artefacts shape international events and our understanding of them. Photographs, film and television influence how we view and approach phenomena as diverse as war, diplomacy, financial crises and election campaigns".[22] The book itself is part of a broader series bringing together researchers from all corners of International Relations, and

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[17] Judith/Jack Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011. Särmä. "Collaging Iranian missiles". Christine Sylvester. "Whither the International at the End of IR1". *Millennium* Vol. 35 No.3 (2007): 551–573.

[18] Särmä. "Collaging Iranian missiles". p.116.

[19] Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure.* p.11-12.

[20] Bleiker. *Visual Global Politics*. p.6. Tim Highfield & Tama Leaver (2016) "Instagrammatics and digital methods: studying visual social media, from selfies and GIFs to memes and emoji". *Communication Research and Practice* Vol.2 No.1. p.49. W. T. J. Mitchell. *Cloning Terror: The War of Terror, 9/11 to the Present*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. p.2.

[21] Andersen and Vuori. *Visual Security Studies.* p.9-10. Frank Möller. "Leonardo's security: The participant witness in a time of invisibility" in *Visual Security Studies.* Ed. Andersen and Vuori. p.133.

[22] Bleiker. *Visual Global Politics*. p.iii.

prides itself on being "the first comprehensive engagement with visual global politics".[23] In many ways, its ideas and findings reflect core themes of this discussion and it has undoubtedly advanced the research agenda of visuality in IR significantly. However, its publication date, two years prior to the time of writing is somewhat telling: inclusion of the visual in global politics is still very much in its infancy. That is not to erase or negate the time and effort that scholars have taken to reach this point, nor the insights that have advanced visuality in other disciplines; however, it is clear that images say something about the political, they have tangible implications, and they do it via channels not yet acknowledged.

For many scholars, the events of 11 September 2001 and subsequent 'War on Terror' represent something of a turning point. Whilst Mitchell declared a visual turn in 1986, it was the vividity with which the public were able to recall *seeing* the twin towers collapse live on TV that made scholars truly recognise the significance that visuality has on the world around us.[24] Studies have since emphasised the "highly optical character" of terror strategies and the way that images have a unique capacity to evoke emotion, shaping the "constitution and construction of security".[25] In a similar vein, theorisation of the 'CNN Effect' – "the saturation of Western viewers with non-stop, real-time news footage of wars and military actions on television and the Internet" – points to the policy making power of real-time media coverage and how this power interacts with the decision making processes at the heart of government.[26] Meanwhile other research avenues have shown correlations between visual perception and voter intention in the context of democratic elections, suggesting that photographic imagery has the potential to impact the disposition of audiences on a national level.[27] Scholars have also made clear links between policy and iconic photojournalistic images such as Alan Kurdi,

[23] Bleiker. *Visual Global Politics*. p.iii.

[24] David Campbell and Michael J. Shapiro. "Special issue: Securitization, militarization and visual culture in the worlds of post-9/11". *Security Dialogue* Vol.38 No.2 (2007). p.139. Frank Möller. "Photographic Interventions in Post-9/11 Security Policy". *Security Dialogue* Vol.38 No.2 (2007): 179-196. Liam Kennedy. "Securing Vision: Photography and US Foreign Policy." *Media, Culture & Society* Vol. 30 No.3 (2008): 279–294. Mitchell. *Cloning Terror*. p.3. Roland Bleiker. "Visual Security: Patterns and Prospects" in *Visual Security Studies.* Ed. Vuori and Andersen. London, United Kingdom: Taylor and Francis: 189-200. James Der Derian. "Imaging Terror: Logos, Pathos and Ethos". *Third World Quarterly* Vol.26 No.1 (2005). p.26. Lene Hansen. "Security" in *Visual Global Politics*. Ed. Roland Bleiker. Oxford: Routledge, 2018: 272-278. Hansen. "Theorizing the Image". p.54. Klaus Dodds. "Steve Bell's Eye: Cartoons, Geopolitics and the Visualization of the 'War on Terror'". *Security Dialogue* Vol.38 No.2 (2007): 157-177. Christian W. Erickson. "Counter-Terror Culture: Ambiguity, Subversion, or Legitimization?". *Security Dialogue* Vol.38 No.2 (2007): 197-214. Louise Amoore. "Vigilant Visualities: The Watchful Politics of the War on Terror". *Security Dialogue* Vol.38 No.2 (2007): 215-232. Marshall J. Beier. "Grave Misgivings: Allegory, Catharsis, Composition". *Security Dialogue* Vol.38 No.2 (2007): 251-269.

[25] Der Derian. "Imaging Terror". p.26. Andersen and Vuori. *Visual Security Studies*. p.4

[26] Piers Robinson. *The CNN Effect: The Myth of News, Foreign Policy and Intervention.* London: Routledge, 2002. Steven Livingston and Todd Eachus. "Humanitarian crises and US foreign policy: Somalia and the CNN effect reconsidered". *Political Communication* Vol.12 No.4 (1995): 413–429. David D. Perlmutter. "Photojournalism and Foreign Affairs". *Orbis* Vol.49 No.1 (2005):109-122.

[27] Examples of this include the Barack Obama 'Hope' poster by Shepard Fairey. Renita Coleman. "Framing the pictures in our heads: Exploring the framing and agenda-setting effects of visual images" in *Doing News Framing Analysis: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives*. Ed. Paul D'Angelo, Jim A. Kuypers. New York, Routledge: 2010. Andrew W. Barrett and Lowell W. Barrington. "Bias in Newspaper Photograph Selection". *Political Research Quarterly* Vol.58 No.4 (2005): 609-618. Maria Elizabeth Grabe and Erik Page Bucy. *Image Bite Politics: News and the Visual Framing of Elections.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Renita Coleman & Stephen Banning. "Network TV News' Affective Framing of the Presidential Candidates: Evidence for a Second-Level Agenda-Setting Effect through Visual Framing". *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* Vol.83 No.2 (2006): 313–328. Rebecca Verser and Robert Wicks. "Managing Voter Impressions: The Use of Images on Presidential Candidate Web Sites During the 2000 Campaign". *Journal of Communication* Vol.56 No.1 (2006): 178-197.

'Napalm Girl', or the 'Hooded Man' which have seared themselves onto collective memory, and have had tangible implications for global politics.[28] As Adler-Nissen et al note in their discussion of Kurdi, the three-year-old boy whose body washed ashore during the European refugee crisis in 2015, the photos had the power to "shift the epistemic terrain of the migration discourse from numbers and statistics to an identifiable human with a face, a body, and a life story".[29] Common to all of these literatures is the clear connections made to the emotive power that iconic images have in political discourse, and shows how images have the capacity to challenge, shape, and determine the direction of politics through emotion by tapping into collective identities. Together they point toward the realisation that these findings can also be applied to the multitude of images that circulate on social media and provide greater insight into the ways that they spread.

However, it is arguable that the emphasis on iconic imagery is symptomatic of the entrenched perception that photographs represent an objective truth. According to this logic, photographs enable to viewer to see "the lived reality, behind the abstractions of political theory, casualty statistics or news bulletins".[30] In essence they are perceived to capture the event in real time without interpretive bias: a notion that stems from the fact that photographs are a direct visual reproduction of something that has happened. Contrastingly, other visual and documentative forms such as drawings, diaries, paintings, reports etc all involve an element of interpretation. For instance, a diary entry of a historical event is essentially subjective. The individual who witnessed the event has acted to write it down, but in that action, it is inevitable that some interpretation has been added, some details omitted.[31] Thus, photographs are seen as a way of conveying an objective truth to the audience in a way other means are not, and indicate why photojournalism is privileged in VSS analysis.[32]

Yet as Chouliaraki emphasises, "the spectacle of war always emerges within specific 'spaces of appearance' – institutionalized sites of spectatorship, where the regulation of visual performance is absolutely crucial".[33] This suggests that iconic photos are not objective truth tellers but instead constructed visual material that can be staged, cropped, or altered to fit the perception that the photographer is trying to convey. This observation is particularly pertinent in an age where photographic manipulation is far more attainable and emphasises why cross disciplinary insight ought to be incorporated into visual analysis. Historical source analysis treats all images, even photographic reproductions with the same critical questions, namely: what is the purpose of the source; what is its message; why was it published at that specific

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[28] Mitchell. *Cloning Terror*. Adler-Nissen et al. "Images, emotions, and international politics". p.75-95. Frank Möller. "The looking/not looking dilemma". *Review of International Studies* Vol. 35 No.4 (2009): 781-794.

[29] Adler-Nissen et al. "Images, emotions, and international politics". p.76.

[30] John Berger. *About Looking*. Quoted in Bleiker. *Visual Global Politics*. p.10.

[31] Emmison, et al. *Researching the Visual*. p.32. Carr. *What is History. p.7-31.*

[32] Roland Bleiker "Pluralist Methods for Visual Global Politics". *Millennium* Vol.43 No.3 (2015). p.877-8. Perlmutter. "Photojournalism and Foreign Affairs". David Campbell. "Geopolitics and visuality: Sighting the Darfur conflict". *Political Geography* Vol.26 (2007): 357-382.

[33] Lilie Chouliaraki. "The humanity of war: Iconic photojournalism of the battlefield, 1914–2012" in *Visual Security Studies.* Ed. Andersen and Vuori. p.74.

time; what can where it was published tell us about its bias etc.[34] In VSS's treatment of images these questions tend to be set aside in favour of focussing on the outcome of the image. As Hansen notes, images such as the US flag being raised at Iwo Jima or the Soviet victory in Berlin are viewed from an epistemic position that overlooks any meaning derived from the artificial process of their production. In turn, this negates both the complex processes that create the images, and the process through which they circulate and become iconic, instead privileging measurements of their impact.[35] This sentiment is further reinforced by Andersen and Vuori, who note that visual analysts "frequently appear more interested in asserting that pictorial power abounds in contemporary visual culture than in trying to investigate its constructedness".[36] This realisation unveils two critiques of VSS: firstly, attention is less frequently paid to the ways in which images are constructed to convey meaning; and secondly, that in assuming photographs are a true representation, VSS privileges them within visual analysis, obscuring other visual material that conveys a more nuanced position.

Hansen's work on the 2005 Muhammed Cartoon Crisis thus provides a refreshing alternate stance within VSS literature. Drawing upon Williams and his call for greater engagement with the visual in the context of securitisation, Hansen links the publication of the cartoons with a broader context of demonization and anti-Muslim sentiment, ultimately drawing parallels with Campbell's theory of self-other dichotomies that drive poststructuralist interpretations of global politics.[37] Crucially, Hansen notes the conceptual difference between cartoons and photographs, emphasising that "while they might represent the same event, photography is believed to document, whereas cartooning is expected to offer a critical narration".[38] This insight is essential to the examination of political memes and points analysis toward the expectations associated with creating and engaging with them. Hansen also provides several observations of political cartoons that can be used to garner greater understanding of memes. For instance, acknowledgment of the immediacy, circulability, and ambiguity of images, in addition to emphasis on "strategies of security depiction" including whether an image functions to demonise, belittle, familiarise, or depict suffering. When the image demonises, the result is that the threat is thought of as something "to be conquered" whilst belittlement "makes the threat manageable".[39] In the instance of Kurt Westergaard's 'Bomb Cartoon', which depicts a closeup of the Prophet Muhammed with a bomb enclosed in his turban, it is noted that the "boundary between demonization and belittling is a grey zone rather than an absolute distinction", however, the evocation of a clear visual link between the Muslim faith

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[34] This is something that current students are trained to do from an early age, particularly those who have studied history in their schooling thus far. For examples see the archive of OCR Past Papers here. Significantly the demographic that studied these courses are the same demographic as those found in online meme communities today, suggesting a correlation in attitudes toward critical thinking. Dominic D. Wells. "You All Made Dank Memes: Using Internet Memes to Promote Critical Thinking". *Journal of Political Science Education*. Vol.14 No.2 (2018): 240-248. Carr. *What is History*. p.23-31.

[35] Hansen. "Theorizing the Image". p.56.

[36] Andersen and Vuori. *Visual Security Studies.* p.8.

[37] Michael C Williams. "Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics". *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 47 No. 4 (2003). p.527. Hansen. "Theorizing the Image". p.59-60. David Campbell. *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

[38] Hansen. "Theorizing the Image". p.60.

[39] Ibid. p.59.

and terrorism fuelled accusations of Islamophobia and ultimately resulted in an international diplomatic crisis.[40] However, the logic of Hansen's argument suggests that the securitisation of the cartoon existed prior to the change in policy: in other words, the cartoon had to be securitised by an external actor for policy to alter. In the context of the argument presented in this discussion, it is worth questioning this order of events, and suggesting that the image itself does not have to be securitised (or indeed iconic) to exert influence on policy. It is not so much that they represent an instance of a securitisation in and of themselves, rather that they contribute toward the mutually constitutive process of securitisation as a whole. However, in order to elaborate on this point attention must divert briefly to the theoretical underpinnings of VSS.

The Limitations of Visual Securitisation

Crudely speaking, both traditional and critical security studies define security in terms of referent objects; the former typically relates security to the physical integrity of nation states whilst the latter broadens this concept to elevate alternate referent objects. The Copenhagen School, launched in 1991 by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde argues that the referent object is decided by a process of securitisation, in which an actor uses discourse to construct an existential threat, and in doing so legitimises actions to mitigate that threat which fall outside of normal behaviour.[41] As Buzan et al emphasise:

> "'Security' is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics…something is designated as an international security issue because it can be argued that this issue is more important than other issues and should take absolute priority".[42]

Yet this conceptual framework has been subject to a degree of criticism, particularly by those authors such as Balzacq and Côté who are associated with the more sociologically minded Paris School.[43] Balzacq argues that the underlying logic of the Copenhagen School relies on a theoretically straightjacketed understanding of the speech act, stressing an inherent contradiction in Buzan et al's assertion that securitisation is both an instantaneous speech act and an "essentially intersubjective process".[44] Whilst subtle, this distinction is key, particularly in regard to relationship that images (and memes) have to security. Buzan et al state that "it is the utterance itself that is the act. By saying the words, something is done", evoking the idea that securitisation is a mechanical procedure: the inputs and outputs are fixed and thus the act is instantaneous.[45] In contrast, the Paris School seeks to emphasise that securitisation is a

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[40] Ibid. p.68.

[41] Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. London: Lynne Rienner, 1998.

[42] Buzan et al. *Security*. p.23-4.

[43] Adam Côté. "Agents Without Agency: Assessing the Role of the Audience in Securitization Theory". *Security Dialogue* Vol.47 No.6 (2017). Thierry Balzacq. *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve.* London: Routledge, 2010. Balzacq. "The Three Faces of Securitisation". Thierry Balzacq, Sarah Léonard and Jan Ruzicka. "Securitization'revisited: Theory and Cases". *International Relations* Vol.30 No.4 (2016): 494-531. Matt McDonald. "Securitization and the Construction of Security". *European Journal of International Relations* Vol.14 No.4 (2008): 563-587.

[44] Buzan et al. *Security*. p.30. Balzacq. *Securitization Theory*. Balzacq. "The Three Faces of Securitisation".

[45] Buzan et al. *Security.* p.26. Côté. "Agents Without Agency". p.542.

"process that occurs within, and as part of, a configuration of circumstances, including the context, the psycho-cultural disposition of the audience, and the power that both speaker and listener bring to the interaction".[46] In terms of analysis, this means that recognising securitisation as a process as opposed to an act allows attention to be paid to the ways in which securitisation is shaped and altered by context, and accordingly the interactive relationship between actor and audience. Crucially, it also enables analysis to incorporate the ways in which an actor persuades the audience, and the audience shape the actors capacity to securitise, using "metaphors, emotions, stereotypes, gestures, silence, and even lies" or in the instance of this discussion: memes.[47]

This understanding is crucial to exposing the limitations of existing VSS frameworks. As touched upon previously, one of the preconditions Hansen emphasises is that "the securitizing capacity of images is expressed by their status as icons", suggesting that the image must have a privileged epistemic status prior to the securitisation move that serves to enhance its resonance.[48] This falls in line with the tendency of scholars to address securitisation on a macro level, looking principally at visual artefacts that have a direct, and comparatively instant securitising capacity such as 9-11, Kurdi, the Abu Ghraib photographs, or indeed the Muhammed 'Bomb Cartoon'. By shifting the emphasis from instantaneous act to mutually constitutive process, the Paris School enables us to direct focus toward the ways in which images, and memes in particular, shape audience perception, their disposition toward securitising actors, and thus the actors' ability to enact securitising measures. In short, recognising securitisation as an interactive process gives greater agency to the audience: accordingly, their perception and belief in the legitimacy of the securitising actor determine the outcome of the securitisation move.

As noted by Bleiker, the visual is all around us, thus, placing emphasis solely on the most iconic images neglects the more mundane, everyday micro securitisations that happen through visual material. Hagmaan for instance uses Deleuzian theory on 'societies of control' to emphasise how seemingly mundane choices such as wall colour, lighting, and waste disposal are "systematically redesigned to tackle subjective insecurity and enhance social control".[49] In essence, Hagmaan taps into an implicit acknowledgement that the objects we see all around us and encounter in ordinary life are indicative of securitisation moves on the micro level: a reflection supported by Enloe's argument that "the mundane matters".[50] Moreover, micro securitisations function to implicitly alter the perception of those who encounter them, making the move toward macro securitisations appear less drastic in relation to what has come before. Following this logic, the visual artefacts we encounter in our day-to-day interactions on social

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[46] Emphasis added. Balzacq. *Securitization Theory*. p.2

[47] Ibid. Côté. "Agents Without Agency". p.542. Balzacq. "The Three Faces of Securitisation" p.172, 179.

[48] Hansen. "Theorizing the Image". p.54

[49] Jonas Hagmann. "Security in the Society of Control: The Politics and Practices of Securing Urban Spaces". *International Political Sociology* Vol.11 (2017). p.426.

[50] Cynthia Enloe. "Flick of a Skirt: A Feminist Challenge to IR's Coherent Narrative". *International Political Sociology* Vol.10 No.4 (2016): 320-331. Andersen and Vuori. *Visual Security Studies*. p.10. Bleiker. *Visual Global Politics*. p.3. Shifman. *Memes in Digital Culture.* p.120.

media are indicative of securitisation moves on the micro level, and ultimately shape reactions to future security moves.

The Transformation of Global Media

Arguably the development underpinning these insights is the proliferation and commodification of digital media technology within a broader context of globalisation.[51] In 2019, data suggested that 83% of the UK population own a smart phone, whilst in the USA this number stands at approximately 79%.[52] Not only does such technology accelerate processes of globalisation and greater interconnectivity between people, it allows for daily life to be captured, for social networks to connect people regardless of geographical proximity, and for millions to post, view, react, and comment on visual content in real time. This convergence has enabled "online visual media to play a key role in the practice, the politics, and the protest against security".[53] Indeed as Särmä emphasises, "often these days we encounter a parody image before we encounter the event that gave rise to the parody" in turn impacting a reader's initial perception, reaction, and disposition to any given event.[54]

This transformation has structural implications: Kaempf for instance notes that "the digital media revolution has shaken the structural foundations and hierarchies of the old media landscape. Its interactive nature has dissolved the old separation between sender and receiver…[enabling] the average citizen to become a media consumer and producer at the same time".[55] As becomes clear, this observation is particularly pertinent to the realm of meme making and suggests that memes are a manifestation of both the transforming media landscapes, and the channels through which speakers communicate with audiences, ultimately eroding "long-established hierarchies of who gets to speak about security and how".[56] Kaempf attributes this transformation to the accessibility and availability of digital media compared to the specialised infrastructure of 'old' media such as newspapers, radio, and television. The level of expertise required for such mechanisms to operate once relied on "professionally trained journalists, editors, typesetters and producers" all of which incur a level of expense typically afforded by an elite few, most notably, "empires", "states", and "media conglomerates".[57] In contrast, the infrastructure of digital media has reached the point where all that is required is a phone and access to the internet: financial assets are less of a prerequisite to the sharing of information, resulting in a proliferation of actors beyond elites. Indeed, as Shifman notes, "digital culture seems to represent a new amalgamation between top-down mass-mediated genres and bottom-up mundane types of rhetorical actions" and

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[51] Andersen and Vuori. *Visual Security Studies*. p.4. Mitchell. *Cloning Terror*. p.2.
[52] NewZoo. Global Mobile Market Report 2019. https://newzoo.com/insights/trend-reports/newzoo-global-mobile-market-report-2019-light-version/.
[53] Andersen and Vuori. *Visual Security Studies*. p.4
[54] Särmä. "Collaging Iranian missiles". p.115.
[55] Sebastian Kaempf. "Digital Media" in *Visual Global Politics*. Ed. Roland Bleiker. p.100.
[56] Andersen and Vuori. *Visual Security Studies*. p.4
[57] Kaempf. "Digital Media". p.99.

thus "blur" the previously clean cut "lines between the production and consumption of content".[58]

Technology is also driving new ways of conveying tone and emotion through written discourse. Crystal for instance traces the development of internet linguistics from the apparent "linguistic disaster" of the early 2000s to the "remarkable expansion of the expressive options available in a language – far exceeding the kinds of stylistic expansion that took place with the arrival of printing and broadcasting".[59] Crystal also touches on an important aspect that this discussion applies to the decoding of memes:

> "The interaction between sender and receiver is different from traditional conversation. The anonymity of participants alters familiar communicative expectations. Written language on a screen does not behave in the same way as writing on a traditional page. We write it differently and we read it differently. It is easy to be ambiguous, misleading, or offensive".[60]

The implication of this is that new and innovative linguistic techniques have been adopted in online communities and are now so common that they represent a visual vernacular with which to read and convey social cues.[61] Crystal also emphasises the lack of simultaneous feedback in written conversation, noting that facial expressions, hand gestures, tone, body language, essentially what he terms as "kinesics and proxemics" are largely absent from internet exchanges.[62] Thus, grammatical techniques have evolved: the most prominent examples of this are the alternation of capitals within a word in order to imply sarcasm, the use of ellipsis to denote a pause, or switching to capitals entirely to imitate shouting.[63] This shift, as Baheri indicates, "allows us to associate expressions of opinions and feeling with gifs, pictures and visually stylized texts. It enhances our visual thinking and makes us more creative with the use of verbal language. It allows us to subvert standard grammar constructions and experiment with changing verbs to nouns and vice versa".[64] In the realms of meme making, where emphasis is on being able to 'read' the image rapidly, linguistical techniques such as this are key to conveying additional information whilst sustaining the brevity of the post.

To add another layer of complexity, it is also arguable that this type of communication is demographic specific. For those who Rushkoff terms the "children of chaos" – those born around the turn of the century – the linguistic techniques outlined above come naturally: they are incorporated unconsciously into our daily routines of communication, in part because we

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[58] Shifman. "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres". p.342
[59] David Crystal. *Internet Linguistics: A Student Guide.* Oxford: Routledge, 2011. p.5-7, 14-15, 19-21.
[60] Ibid. p.7.
[61] Gretchen McCulloch. Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language. London: Random House, 2019.
[62] Crystal. *Internet Linguistics.* p.23.
[63] Detailing all these variations is beyond the remit of this discussion. For further illustrations see McCulloch. Because Internet". Allthingslinguistic. Tumblr, 2018. https://allthingslinguistic.com/post/171535130454/diabolical-mastermind-maskedlinguist-rale. Tania Grey. Tumbex, 2019. https://www.tumbex.com/tania-grey.tumblr/post/189193424090/also-boomers-the-written-format-is-much-more. Trylonandperisphere. Tumblr, 8 July 2016. https://trylonandperisphere.tumblr.com/post/147113954600/twentyonelizards-fihli-poseidhn-steveogers.
[64] Tia Baheri. "Your Ability to Can Even: A Defense of Internet Linguistics". *The Toast.* Published 20.11.2013.

have developed alongside them.[65] In some ways this amounts to what Scott would term as a 'hidden transcript', that is discourse that "consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript… produced for a different audience and under different constraints of power than the public transcript".[66] Scott ties hidden transcripts to the concept of subliminal dissidence, arguing that the interpretive gap between public and hidden transcripts is indicative of a system of domination, much in line with Rancière's notions of the 'distribution of the sensible' and 'dissensus'.[67] If this view is taken, it becomes possible to argue that internet linguistics, and by extension their use in memes, represent both an acknowledgement of a system of domination, and resistance against the practices of aesthetic censorship. Thus, internet linguistics are representative of something inherently political: as Rancière emphasises, "politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak".[68] By transforming who has the ability to understand, see, and speak the visual vernacular of memetic communication, the evolution of technology has facilitated how ordinary people engage with the political and thereby threatens the hierarchies that sustain security construction.

[65] Linda K. Börzsei. "Makes a Meme Instead A Concise History of Internet Memes". *New Media Studies Magazine* Iss.7 (2013). p.25. Baheri. "Your Ability to Can Even".
[66] James C. Scott. Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. p.5.
[67] Ibid. p.5. Rancière. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. p.8.
[68] Ibid. p.8 new page????

Political Meme Typologies

The next part of this discussion will attempt to sketch out a series of typologies for studying and decoding political memes, before exploring the ramifications they have on visual securitisation theory. The purpose of this is to highlight the level of depth and nuance that these visual artefacts convey and thus emphasise the legitimacy of their inclusion in academic theory.[69] Whilst scholars have sought to categorise memes in the past, it is the explicitly political context that differentiates the typologies below from previous theorisation.[70]

These typologies are illustrated through case studies that show how different memes function according to different logics of meaning. Whilst all these meme types display politicisation in their content it is important to note that each has a very different purpose, and thus convey different messages. The first of these is memes that elicit a generalised response to a situation: reaction memes. Their meaning is clear to decipher and functions to create a unified reaction amongst a community of viewers. A second type, closely related, is that of memes that provide an implicit (or indeed explicit) critique of a situation. Where reaction memes tend to display a general response that the viewer can empathise with such as rolling your eyes or shrugging your shoulders, comment memes articulate a more specific opinion or stance on a subject. The final type proposed are action memes: these articulate an opinion and call upon the viewer to perform an act as part of a wider community of viewers who perform the same action. These types are summarised in the table below.

Type	Function	Purpose	Example
Reaction	-Convey a generalised point or stance -Articulation of an emotion in response to something -Relies on a visual stereotype to convey message	-Amusement -Creates a sense of community -Challenges the general system, not specifics	Side eye Chloe Awkward Look Monkey Puppet Jealous Girlfriend Karen
Critical	-Convey a specific opinion -Articulation of opposition or dissidence -Not simply a reaction but a concise response	-Highlight/ critique an action or policy -Convey meaning via complex mimetic trails and visual vernacular	Mocking SpongeBob It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia Gru's Plan
Action	-Articulation of an opinion and a call to action	-Organisation of a collective action with the clear intent of disruption -Concealed within non-sensical collective movements	TikTok Trump Rally Area 51 #blackouttuesday

Figure 2

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[69] Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure.* Shifman. *Memes in Digital Culture*.
[70] Shifman. "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres". p.344-352. Milner. *The World Made Meme*. p.11-13 L. E. Silvestri. "Memeingful Memories and the Art of Resistance". *New Media & Society* Vol.20 No.11 (2018). p.4002-3. Shifman. *Memes in Digital Culture*. p.40-2.

Reaction memes

Reaction memes are perhaps the clearest to understand in a political context. They function not to 'say' anything specific but nevertheless convey a visual stereotype of an emotional reaction that viewers feel an affinity with. By articulating and visualising this reaction, the meme often functions to validate and draw together individuals who share the same feelings about a particular topic. This typology draws from the findings of Grundlingh, who conceptualises memes as an illocutionary act within Austin's theorisation of speech acts.[71] The images chosen often correspond with commonly used visualisations of emotion. For instance, the template of Side-Eye Chloe (Figure 3.1) denotes a sense of judgement and disbelief: the

Figure 3.1 and 3.2

little girl looks directly at the camera with one eyebrow raised and her mouth set in a grimace.[72] The girl's reaction to something unseen is transposed across multiple meanings and cues the viewer to recognise and share in the response when provided with contextual reference. An alternate example is Awkward Look Monkey Puppet (Figure 3.2) which shows a monkey glancing at the camera and then looking away, trying not to look back at the sight that caught his attention. In this instance, the viewer is cued to feel a sense of awkwardness in a similar way to the 'elephant in the room' analogy; which typically implies something that everyone is aware of, yet no one wants to acknowledge or talk about openly.[73] As with Side-Eye Chloe, the meme is then contextualised through its accompanying text.

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[71] Grundlingh "Memes as speech acts".

[72] All credit goes to the creators of the memes featured in this discussion; I do not claim any creative ownership. However, citing them is impossible due to their anonymity and proliferation throughout internet communities without adequate attribution. Any citation I were to include would likely be a misrepresentation. @Brad. "Side Eyeing Chloe". *Know Your Meme.* 2014. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/side-eyeing-chloe.

[73] @Philipp. "Awkward Look Monkey Puppet". *Know Your Meme.* 2019. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/awkward-look-monkey-puppet.

What is significant about this type of meme is their ambiguity.[74] The image used indicates the presence of a reaction such as judgement, awkwardness, or ridicule, yet doesn't typically function to say anything more elaborate or nuanced. In essence, the resonance of the image stems from its ability to convey to the viewer that another person feels a similar way.[75] Soh suggests that this type of ambiguity is crucial in environments where dissidence or negative reactions on social media are subject to censorship.[76] Linking his insights to the 2017 presidential election in Singapore, the results of which are contentious, Soh argues that memes represent a form of "pragmatic resistance" in an attempt to "navigate the fine line between mobilizing their civil-political right to protest and transgressing laws with unstated boundaries".[77] The lack of tracible authorship, combined with a message that can be easily
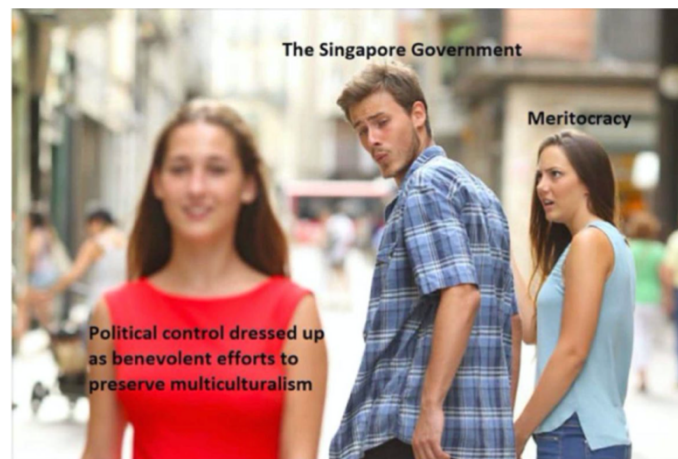

Figure 4

written off as 'just a joke', enables Singaporean residents to circumnavigate the government's regulation of social media content (Figure 4).[78] Effectively, the agency to interpret the meme lies with the viewer: the memes can be interpreted differently, and any association with dissidence quickly discounted if challenged by law enforcement.

Another important aspect of these typologies is the shared community they seek to create.[79] One result of the transformation of digital media outlined above is that the internet has the capacity to connect people across the world. Communities are not centred around geographic locations but exist online, and function to connect individuals who share the same passions, opinions, or cultural knowledge. This interconnectivity plays into psychological group dynamics that function to embolden individuals to annunciate their opinions based on the fact that likeminded people are listening, engaging, and supporting them. As Hansen notes, the power of the images lies in their capacity to "mobilise individuals, in particular to make them feel like

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[74] Hansen. "Theorizing the Image". p.58. Soh. "Digital Protest in Singapore". p.3-4.
[75] Shifman. "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres". p.342-3.
[76] Soh. "Digital Protest in Singapore". p.3.
[77] Ibid. p.4.
[78] Ibid. p.9.
[79] Shifman. "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres". p.342.

they are part of a larger community".[80] Consequently, a person is far more likely to voice an opinion to a group of people that they know agrees with them, share the same knowledge, and can thus laugh at the same joke: in itself a reflection of our innate desire to belong and feel validated.[81] By conveying a reaction in the form of a meme, viewers can 'belong' to a community of people who also reacted in the same way.[82] Their opinion on the subject is shared by others, and thus they feel validated in their response. Indeed, Soh's findings reinforce this stance, revealing that the "circulation itself acts, in turn, as a sign to the government, and as a meta-sign to all involved as a collective act of dissent", a sentiment that can arguably be applied to both democratic and non-democratic contexts.[83] Ultimately, relating this insight back to the question of audience disposition emphasised by the Paris School, we can see how the circulation of reaction memes functions to unify disparate dissident voices; belie the sense that their opposition is isolated; induce them to voice their opinions more openly; engage in discourse with likeminded individuals; and provide a shared sense of conviction.

In many ways, this category of meme also ties in with Shifman's analysis of stock character macros.[84] Shifman illustrates how stock image memes represent an attempt to create a standardised repertoire of emotions in image form, effectively conveying emotive reactions in a way that text cannot.[85] It is notable that these images function by constructing visual stereotypes that are instantly recognisable; the images of Side-Eye Chloe and Awkward Look Monkey Puppet, though not strictly stock images, function through the same mechanism. Yet, as Shifman emphasises, these stereotypes can be pushed further and ultimately serve as a way to challenge assumptions and microaggressions through unified opposition. One example of this is the construction of 'Karen', a stereotype of a middle-aged white woman with a distinct

Figure 5

[80] Lene Hansen. "Images and International Security" in *The Oxford Handbook of International Security*. Ed Gheciu and Wohlforth. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. p.598.

[81] These dynamics have roots in social psychology. A full analysis is beyond the capacity of this discussion, however, the findings of Solomon Asch's Conformity Experiment (1951) are a good place to start.

[82] Shifman. "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres". p.342.

[83] Soh. "Digital Protest in Singapore". p.12.

[84] Shifman. "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres". p.348-352.

[85] Ibid. p.349.

bob haircut, whose manners are "entitled or demanding beyond the scope of what is appropriate or necessary…who uses her privilege to demand her own way at the expense of others".[86] Though undoubtedly a huge generalisation, the stereotype of 'Karen' functions as an implicit criticism of white privilege and the lack of ramifications for behaviour others would be held accountable for, rather than against women named Karen. It is also a comment on the structural and demographic inequalities of the retail and hospitality industries, where workers often work long hours earning minimum wage. These jobs are typically considered 'unskilled' and those in them treated as second class citizens by customers, further entrenched by the mantra of "the customer is always right".[87] In turn, this represents an implicit criticism global capitalism and dissatisfaction at the exploitation of their physical and emotional labour, channelled through the construction of a single stereotype.

Thus, we can see how visual representations of both emotions and stereotypical demographics are used within a humorous context to challenge at a systemic level. Whilst they tend to not call out any specific policy or person, their proliferation and resonance among internet communities is indicative of widespread dissatisfaction and resistance to the system itself.

Critical memes

Critical memes function in a similar way to reaction memes, however they typically 'say' much more than the simple conveyance of judgement or ridicule. Whilst the distinction is somewhat trivial, within the context of this discussion it is indicative of how some memes are more elaborate than others, and therefore have the capacity to convey a more precise political message. In part this has to do with what Soh terms "mimetic chains": a series of "intertextual citations…[that] produce a traceable sequence of innumerable artifacts that are perceived to share certain formal features, features that indexically point to their membership within a 'family' of memes".[88] The term mimetic derives from the study of evolutionary biology: an organism multiplies and spreads, as it replicates it evolves new traits; these organisms are different from the original but share the same ancestry and have distinct commonalities.[89] This analogy has been transposed onto non-biological entities such as ideas, or in the context of this discussion: images and memes.[90] The idea or image is shared via social media, replicating

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[86] Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_(pejorative). Accessed July 12 2020.

[87] I should emphasise that this is reinforced by the four years I've worked in the hospitality industry to fund my studies. These statements are a reflection of my own experience and the testaments of my friends and colleagues who have experienced emotional and physical abuse as a result of demanding customers. Clear evidence of the issues and sentiments raised here can also be found on these pages: The Angry Bartender. Accessed August 5 2020. facebook.com/TheAngryBartender. Retail Karenposting. Facebook. Accessed August 5 2020. https://www.facebook.com/groups/421046281786060. Seize the memes of production. Facebook. Accessed August 5 2020. https://www.facebook.com/seize.the.memes.of.production.gg/. askawelfarecaseworker. Tumblr. July 31 2017. https://askawelfarecaseworker.tumblr.com/post/163647791601/giwatafiya-rickgrimesbabyface-yall-rich.

[88] Soh. "Digital Protest in Singapore". p.7. Mimetic chains are also discussed in Grundlingh. "Memes as speech acts". However, they are termed as semiotic and multimodal images, not mimetic chains.

[89] Richard Dawkins was the first to apply evolutionary theory to cultural change. However, his examples only extended to music motifs, fashions, marketing catchphrases etc: digital culture simply did not exist. Scholars have since applied his insights to memes. For a full discussion see below.

[90] Shifman. *Memes in Digital Culture*. p.8-11, 17-24. Davison. "The Language of Internet Memes". p.120-123. De la Rosa Carrillo. *On The Language of Internet Memes*. p.21. Silvestri. "Memeingful Memories and the Art of Resistance". p.4001. Wells. "You All Made Dank Memes". p.241. Grundlingh "Memes as speech acts". p.147-9.

and spreading; as it replicates new variations emerge. The new image has some resemblance to the original but has gained additional identifiers along the way that function to recontextualise or add new layers to the meme's meaning.

Figure 6

Thus, deciphering the full meaning of any given meme requires knowledge of its memetic chain: the more elaborate the chain, the more the meme can say about a subject, and thus the more the viewer can infer. Mocking SpongeBob (Figures 6 and 7) is perhaps the clearest example of a mimetic chain in action. The specific image is taken from an episode in which SpongeBob reacts to something so strongly that it causes him to physically distort his appearance.[91] Whilst in this case, specialist knowledge of the episode is not essential for interpreting the image, the template assumes its viewers have sufficient knowledge of the character to recognise a distortion. In doing so, viewers infer that the overarching theme of the meme denotes a context of (over)reaction that manifests in a somewhat ridiculous and comedic way. This is further reinforced by the association with childlike behaviour. SpongeBob is a TV show whose primary audience is children: the character of SpongeBob, whilst essentially ageless, consistently reflects and exhibits childlike characteristics. By extension, the use of the image in a political context can suggest that the figure SpongeBob is shown to represent is similarly childlike in their reaction.

To borrow from Barthes, the image is then 'anchored' to a specific context by the accompanying text.[92] The text can therefore be said to streamline the multiplicity of meanings contained in the image.[93] One notable aspect of the text that typically accompanies Mocking SpongeBob is that it uses clear linguistic dialects to convey tone and meaning. As acknowledged previously, these linguistic techniques function as 'hidden transcripts' in much the same way that mimetic chains do, together enabling an image to proliferate that can only be fully understood by those familiar with its layers.[94] In internet linguistics, the use of alternating capital and lower-case letters is a common method of conveying tone in the absence of verbal exchange: viewers 'know' that the text should be read in a sarcastic, mocking, or sardonic tone. Indeed, the alternation is perhaps a visualisation of the way in which

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[91] @Matt. "Mocking SpongeBob". *Know Your Meme.* Accessed July 14 2020. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/mocking-spongebob

[92] Barthes*.* "Rhetoric of the Image". p.156.

[93] Barthes*.* "Rhetoric of the Image". p.156.

[94] Crystal. *Internet Linguistics*. p.119. Baheri. "Your Ability to Can Even". Scott. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

sarcasm is implied in spoken conversation by overemphasising particular syllables or letters e.g. wEll oKAy tHeN. When spoken in such a way, the listener is made aware that the utterance should be interpreted within a context of sarcasm; likewise, when typed in this format, the same social cue is evoked.

The anchoring text also follows a standard call and response format that is incorporated into the meme's design template (Figure 7.1).[95] The first line, which adheres to normal grammar, is then repeated using alternating capitals. Mimicking of a phrase is a common childlike response to (and rejection of) authority. Consequently, whoever is shown to repeat the first line of the meme is thus implied to be childlike in their response to the request (Figure 7.2). Whilst the purpose of this likening is often humorous in nature, it can also function as a tactic of belittlement, ultimately undermining the authority of the speaker depicted 'repeating' the line.[96] Together, the use of alternating capitals, the allusion to childlike mimicry, and

Line 1: Request
Line 2: Response (alternating caps)

"Dont use that weird spongebob mocking meme"
Me: DonT uSe thAt WeIrd SpoNgEboB MoCkinG MEme

Figure 7.1 and 7.2

association of SpongeBob reinforces the view that the speaker repeating the line is disproportionate and immature in their response.

From this standpoint the iteration of the Mocking SpongeBob meme shown in figure 8 becomes more decipherable. The text of the meme "don't give away classified info to the Russians" contextualises and anchors the meme within the political ramifications of Trump's alleged ties to Russia, his mishandling of classified intelligence data in 2017, and more broadly to the enquiry into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.[97] The use of alternating capitals enables the viewer to infer that requests made by the intelligence community to handle classified intelligence with discretion were not only ignored by Trump,

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[95] @Matt. "Mocking SpongeBob".
[96] Hansen. "Theorization of the Image". p.59.
[97] Matthew Yglesias. "There's actually lots of evidence of Trump-Russia collusion". *Vox*. June 11 2018. https://www.vox.com/2018/6/11/17438386/trump-russia-collusion. The Moscow Project. "Timeline: Corruption To Collusion". Center for American Progress. Accessed 3 August 2020. https://themoscowproject.org/collusion-timeline. The Moscow Project. "The Case For Collusion: The Election". Center for American Progress. Accessed 3 August 2020. https://themoscowproject.org/chapters/.

"Don't give away classified info to the Russians"
Trump: dON't GivE aWAy cLassiFled inFo tO tHe RussIANs

Figure 8

but mocked.[98] In conjunction, the caricature of Trump is clearly a mimetic evolution of the original Mocking SpongeBob template (Figure 6): the cartoon-like distortion of his body and facial expression serves to emphasise themes of childlike subversion and ridiculousness - both in terms of his reaction to the request and subsequent actions. The mimetic chain tells us that the image is descended from Mocking SpongeBob, but now contains no direct similarity to the character save the pose. However, this does not mean that the markers that guide our interpretation have changed with it: the themes of mockery, ridicule, and the rejection of authority are all still evoked in the altered meme format. Thus, we are able to view this image as Trump responding to authority in a childlike and immature manner, particularly within a context that relates to the highest levels of national security. Furthermore, in depicting Trump's attempt to mock and subvert the authority of the intelligence community's request, the image succeeds in belittling Trump: the stark contrast of a seemingly reasonable request with childlike mimicry means that we the viewer are actually made even more aware of the ridiculous nature of his reaction.

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[98] @realDonaldTrump. ""The Mueller Report…". *Twitter.* April 19 2019.
https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1119037461190066176. @realDonaldTrump. "When will the Radical Left…".
Twitter. May 4 2019. https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1124653429366906882.

An instance of a more elaborate mimetic chain in action can be observed in the synthesis of meme templates from *Its Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and *Despicable Me* shown in Figure 9.[99]

Figure 9

Visually the format, flipchart, and four tile layout of the meme are part of a mimetic chain linking to a scene from the popular children's movie *Despicable Me* and constitute a widely used meme template (Figure 10).[100] The four panels of the image depict Gru, the protagonist of the movie, as he pitches his latest idea to the President of the Bank of Evil, Mr Perkins. Gru's pitch is derailed by a drawing his daughters have (unbeknownst to Gru) added to his presentation board. He mistakenly reads aloud the slide featuring him sitting on the toilet to the background laughter of his daughters, only realising his mistake after he has uttered the words (Figure 10.1). Perkins ultimately dismisses Gru as unprofessional and withdraws his

Figure 10.1 and 10.2

funding. There are common themes within the scene that overarch all instances of this meme's use: an idea is initially presented to an unseen viewer, then, as the presentation continues, a fallacy of some kind is exposed. The idea is shown to be flawed and thus no longer convincing

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[99] *Despicable Me.* Pierre Coffin and Chris Renaud. 2010: Illumination Entertainment. *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia.* S05E10 "The D.E.N.N.I.S. System". Dir.Randall Einhorn. FX: November 19 2009.

[100] To gauge the nuance of the argument presented here and the themes that the meme evokes I have included excerpts from the specific scenes referenced, it is highly recommended that the reader follow them. YouTube: Gru's Plan.

and the presenter of the idea is shown to be incompetent and loses credibility. This is shown applied within a political context in Figure 10.2.

The second mimetic chain tapped into in Figure 9 is a more direct visual reference to Dennis Reynolds, a lead character in the TV show *Its Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. *Always Sunny* is a long running American sit-com that has gained a cult following and surged in popularity on Netflix. It is incredibly dark and follows the daily lives of five narcissistic individuals who recognise no moral boundaries in the pursuit of their goals. *Always Sunny* pushes the extremes of what society allows individuals to do: indeed, as one observer put it, the characters "exaggerate and surface many of the uncomfortable thoughts and behaviours that every human being engages in, a dark and honest mirror to Western culture".[101] Dennis, the character shown, is a sociopathic womaniser who shows little to no remorse for his actions. In this scene he outlines to the other members of 'The Gang' how he seduces and manipulates women into believing they are in love with him using his carefully formulated, acronymic 'D.E.N.N.I.S System' (Figure 11). When initially approaching his 'target' he "Demonstrates value" by indicating his good nature and capacity for helping others. After "Engaging them
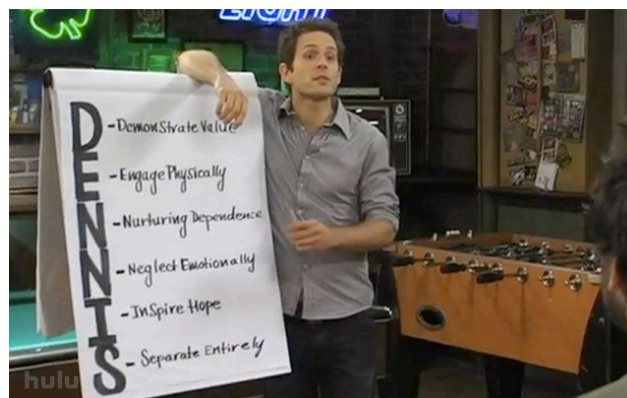

Figure 11

physically", he "Nurtures dependence" by creating situations in which the woman is made to feel vulnerable and thus turn to him for support. He then creates the illusion of distance in order to draw them closer ("Neglect emotionally)", before expressing a false vulnerability to earn back their trust ("Inspire hope"). Finally, when bored of the ruse he breaks all contact ("Separate entirely") and the woman is left feeling bereaved yet still emotionally dependent on him; a situation he is shown to revel in. This scene is a dark and morally reprehensible reflection of pick up artistry in modern dating and is a broader observation on other non-sexual types of manipulation and dishonesty. Yet it is not so far-fetched that viewers do not recognise aspects of their own attitudes or experiences in what Dennis describes.[102] Much like 'Gru's plan', there are common themes within the scene that are then transposed across multiple contexts. The pitch starts relatively innocently before an ulterior and nefarious goal is exposed.

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[101] @CrackerJacked." It's Always Sunny: Philosophy in Comedy". *YouTube*. March 22 2017.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5tOXS-XeMw.
[102] For an alternate illustration of the moral reprehensibility that underpins the comedy in *Its Always Sunny* see here.

That goal is attained through misleading and manipulative behaviour and the moral reprehensibility of the character and his idea is laid bare for all to see.

Returning to the original image shown in figure 9 we have the linguistic message:

> Live scenes from the treasury:
> UK Economy drops by 20.4%
> We cant afford to pay for free school means
> We are spending £900,000 painting a plane

This is a contextually specific reference to the announcement in June 2020 that the private plane used by the UK Government was to be rebranded at a cost of £900,000.[103] The same week, the government rejected calls for free school meals to be extended over the summer due to budgetary concerns. The move was widely criticised for its hypocrisy, particularly at a time of economic uncertainty as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Together, the combination of Gru and Dennis helps direct interpretation of the meme through references to two separate mimetic chains that are synthesised together to create what could be termed as a meta-mimetic chain. The viewer can assume the message of the meme will combine some form of logical fallacy, the individual behind the idea is likely incompetent or morally skewed, and the end goal is questioned as a result. Putting the original image back together we are able to infer that Johnson's allocation of funds is a morally reprehensible prioritisation of a plane over children at a time of economic crisis. From the allusion to *Despicable Me,* the viewer is encouraged to conclude that the decision had no reasonable logic and displays a certain level of incompetence, whilst the simultaneous reference to *Its Always Sunny* encourages the viewer to judge the decision as immoral: ultimately portraying Johnson as a manipulative liar pursuing ulterior and nefarious goals.

Such a damning condemnation from a single image given the limited anchoring capacity of the text is a clear indication of the power that critical memes have to convey political sentiment. What is particularly significant about figure 9 when compared to Mocking SpongeBob is that knowledge required of the mimetic chains that constitute the meme are incredibly complex. The two mimetic chains have evolved separately, each forming their own independent 'family' of memes that can be seen all over the internet.[104] However, to decipher the image, the viewer must be able to comprehend the connoted message in *both* chains. This is a clear demonstration of Scott's 'Hidden Transcripts' applied to mimetic form and shows how implicit meaning and low data insights can be garnered by deciphering the hidden meanings that memes convey.

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[103] "PM's plane to be rebranded at cost of £900,000". *BBC News.* June 17 2020. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-53082294.

[104] @4k60fpsHDR. "Gru's Plan". *Know Your Meme.* Accessed July 14 2020. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/grus-plan. "The DENNIS System". *Know your Meme.* Accessed July 14 2020. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1066133-its-always-sunny-in-philadelphia.

Action Memes

Action memes provide the most tangible insight into the influencing capacity of internet communities but are also the most abstract. They encourage members of the online community to participate in an organised event or action, principally for the purposes of humour and the sense of belonging it instils. Whilst Shifman acknowledges the unifying potential of photo fads and the sense of "belonging not to a small and familiar social unit, but to a larger, more fluid digital community of LOL lovers", it is the explicitly political consequences I seek to demonstrate in the examples below.[105]

 In 2019, the meme page 'Shitposting cause im in shambles' created a public Facebook event: "Storm Area 51, They Can't Stop All of Us".[106] The event went viral and 3.6 million people clicked to confirm their attendance from across the world. From the start, the organisers made clear that the event was a joke: "the only thing people are taking seriously is elevating the joke to new heights".[107] However, the event also sparked responses from military and government officials urging people not to attend, and preparations were made for declaring a state of emergency in two US counties.[108] Crucially for this discussion, there is a clear disparity in terms of understanding between the participants of the event, and the broader public and government officials attempting to police it. As one journalist remarked: "if you aren't fluent in the language of Facebook memes, it's plausible that you could take this event way more seriously than you're intended to".[109] In effect, Storm Area 51 tapped into the same sense of

Figure 12.1, 12.2, and 12.3

community previously discussed within the context of reaction memes: people felt connected to each other by sharing in the joke and creating their own memes referencing their 'attendance' (Figure 12). These memes tap into several hallmarks of 'shitposting': self-identification as millennials/gen-z and prevalent nihilistic themes (12.1); Naruto running and

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[105] Shifman. "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres". p.351.

[106] Allegra Frank. "More than 2 million people have RSVP'd to "storm Area 51," in the name of memes". V*ox Media.* August 29 2019. https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/7/12/20691720/storm-area-51-facebook-event-meme. @Aranaalex41. "Who's down???". *Twitter*. July 3 2019. https://twitter.com/aranaalex41/status/1146320986972626945?s=20.

[107] Frank. "More than 2 million".

[108] Allegra Frank. "The totally wild, true tale of a meme about aliens that almost inspired a real raid on Area 51". *Vox Media.* September 20 2019. https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/9/20/20864550/storm-area-51-matty-roberts-rachel-nevada-aliens-meme. Jacey Fortin. "Storm Area 51? It's a Joke, but the Air Force Is Concerned". *The New York Times*. July 15 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/15/us/area-51-raid.html.

[109] Frank. "More than 2 million".

allusions to the impossible prospect of finding E.T. (12.2); and bad photoshopping, comic sans typeface, and references to 'Kyle' (12.3).[110] To anyone versed in the vernacular(s) at work here, it is clear that the suggestion to storm Area 51 was a joke; yet it was perceived and constructed by both news outlets and the government as a security threat. In essence, the event was a manifestation of what Shifman and Goriunova term as 'idiocy within participatory culture'; "in the digital sphere [it] constitutes a performative mode that is acted out on purpose, as an expression of creativity" and ultimately reveals "the scaffolding of meme-based community building".[111]

Whilst the movement to storm Area 51 was always perceived as a joke by the participants, it is worth emphasising that such movements can also have explicitly political consequences. This is exemplified in the movement via TikTok – a video sharing platform that has surged in popularity over the course of 2020 – to play havoc with a Trump campaign rally in Oklahoma in July. The rally, costing an estimated $2.2million, was lauded on pro-Trump social media platforms for attracting over 1 million ticket requests and used as an indicator of widespread support for the president.[112] However, on the day only 6,200 people attended, much to the embarrassment of the Trump campaign, and images of the empty stadium circulated widely online.[113] The high numbers of tickets were a result of TikTok users and K-Pop fans encouraging
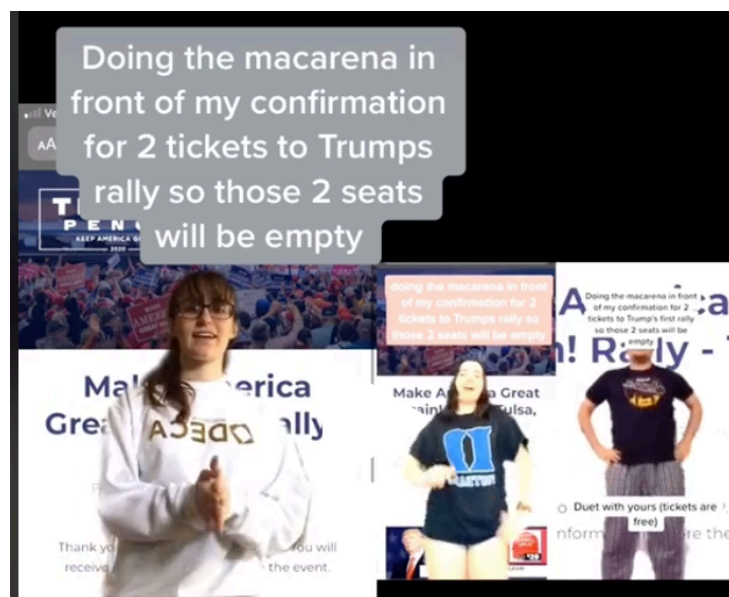

Figure 13

[110] Nihilistic and deadpan humour is prevalent in internet communities and serves as an indicator of disillusionment with the world (discussed previously. Naruto is distinctive a style of running common in anime, which is popular amongst the demographics who share these memes. Comic sans is a widely used font in memes and functions to make the meme look more 'homemade'. 'Kyle' is a stereotypical construct similar to Karen (discussed previously) and is defined as "a young white man of low socio-economic standing with a propensity to drink large quantities of Monster energy drink and do dumb shit like punch holes in walls". @Chodoboy200. "Kyle". *Urban Dictionary*. July 23 2019. https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=A%20Kyle.
[111] Shifman. "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres". p.352.
[112] @Parscale. "Over 1M ticket requests…". *Twitter.* June 15 2020. https://twitter.com/parscale/status/1272543199647666176?s=20.
[113] Shane Goldmacher and Rachel Shorey. "Trump's Tulsa Rally Drew Sparse Crowd, but It Cost $2.2 Million". *The New York Times.* July 21 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/21/us/politics/trump-tulsa-rally-cost.html.

others reserve tickets for the event and not attend.[114] As one user stated "all of those of us who want to see this 19,000 seat auditorium barely filled, or completely empty, go reserve tickets now and leave him standing there alone on the stage".[115] Users such as @eleanorstoa then posted video chains of themselves dancing the macarena with ticket confirmations and other participants of the trend in the background (Figure 13).[116] Not all users joined the dance trend but did uploaded videos featuring their ticket confirmations.[117] The trend is a clear indicator of the political power that seemingly non-sensical internet movements can have: not only did the move directly contradict Trump's statement that "We expect to have – you know, it's like a record-setting crowd. We've never had an empty seat" effectively belittling him on a national level, but the huge numbers of false ticket applications also served to skew any statistical data the campaign hoped to derive from the attendees.[118]

Together these two examples of action memes suggest that dismissal of internet movements within formal academic theory risks overlooking the very real political implications that they can have. Whilst they cannot be related to any particular image family like reaction and critical memes, their success and spread is facilitated through the same online 'shitposting' channels that both the previous typologies utilise. In turn, this reinforces the argument that communities of meme makers act with a cohesion and intent that is seldom acknowledged, yet demonstrable, in its impact upon the legitimacy and perception of the US government; both within the internet communities and the general populace who witness such events.

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[114] Donie O'Sullivan. "TikTok users are trying to troll Trump's campaign by reserving tickets for Tulsa rally they'll never use". *CNN.* June 21 2020. https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/16/politics/tiktok-trump-tulsa-rally-trnd/index.html
[115] @Maryjolaupp." Did you know…". *TikTok.* https://www.tiktok.com/@maryjolaupp/video/6837311838640803078.
[116] @Eleanorstoa. "This is the best chain…". *TikTok.* https://www.tiktok.com/@eleanorstoa/video/6837570724262055174.
[117] @T0run. "it's even worse that…". *TikTok.* https://www.tiktok.com/@t0run/video/6837557545482194181.
[118] O'Sullivan. "TikTok users are trying to troll Trump's campaign".

Toward a more memeingful visual securitisation theory...

The question remains what do these typologies convey about visual securitisation theory? The final section of this discussion will focus on explaining the specific links and consequences that the incorporation of memes has on the perception and construction of visual security theory through four major points. First, that the dynamic of memes represents a challenge to the conceptualisation of securitisation as an act rather than a mutually constitutive process. Second, that building upon this sociological conceptualisation reveals that memes represent a symptom of the altering relationship between speaker and audience. Third, the use of memes in a political context is a manifestation of implicit political dissidence chronically undertheorized within VSS and ISS literature. Finally, that the level of intellectual coherency underpinning such movements reflects a critical engagement of the audience within the actor/speaker relationship of securitisation that threatens to destabilise the legitimacy with which actors assume they can speak.

Act vs Process

Memes are mundane, everyday occurrences that we encounter in their hundreds as we scroll through social media. In isolation, a meme posted by a single user has little chance of reaching the levels of other securitised satirical images such as those included in Hansen's Muhammed Cartoon Crisis analysis. However, when thought of as a part of the process of securitisation rather than constituting its entirety, memes can be perceived to have tangible effects. As Bleiker asks, "How would the media, books, classrooms and other realms be transformed if we were to treat images not just as illustrations or as representations but as political forces themselves?".[119] The answer is perhaps that images, and memes especially, do not simply become securitised: they have agency, potency, and a political force that shapes the process of securitisation itself. When securitisation is conceptualised as an interactive process the temporal element of the theory alters; one immediate, fluid securitisation move can be replaced with multiple, interacting smaller processes that alter and shape each other over time.[120]

From this stance, the concept of mimetic chains holds heightened relevance. The meme undergoes evolution and contestation over time: it is altered by both internal and external contexts and shaped by a community of actors. This is seen in the evolution of both Mocking SpongeBob (Figures 6-8) and 'Live scenes from the treasury' (Figure 9). Both images convey a message intended to satirise political figures, however, the true extent of the mockery is only apparent to those familiar with the mimetic and intervisual references that the memes utilise to convey their message.[121] The mimetic chains evoked thus constitute a visual representation of the mutually constitutive process in which different members of the audience shape the ultimate image used by the meme.

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[119] Bleiker. *Visual Global Politics*. p.1.
[120] Côté. "Agents without Agency. p.543. Balzacq. "The Three Faces of Securitisation". p.6.
[121] Hansen. "Theorizing the Image". Soh. "Digital Protest in Singapore".

The conceptual difference also holds resonance in the context of this discussion's earlier critique of VSS tending to focus exclusively on the visual forms that can be directly linked to security practices, such as the Abu Ghraib archive, Alan Kurdi, or Napalm Girl. The significance of memes is that their influence is *indirect*. Alone, a single meme can be posted, seen, then lost to the thousands of images that circulate social media every hour. However, by utilising formats and themes shared across social media and tapping into the participatory elements of internet culture, a meme can resonate across a multiplicity of contextual settings without disproportionately altering its meaning or form. This ties closely to Balzacq's conceptualisation of securitisation: "heuristic artefacts"(i.e. the memes) are "mobilized…to build a coherent network of implications" relating to the referent object.[122] It is notable that in the case of memes, this "network of implications" often functions to *challenge* the securitising capacity of the actor instead of reinforcing it. Thus, within visual securitisation, memes are not typically securitised, but instead indirectly influence the process of securitisation through mechanisms of contestation and satire that ultimately serve to alter the "feelings, sensations, thoughts and intuitions" the audience holds.[123]

Audience/Speaker Relationship

This last observation links neatly to the second function of memes. The rise of digital media has shown that the previous disparity between speakers and audiences of security practices is dissolving.[124] I suggest that memes represent both a symptom and a facilitating condition of this. As Soh emphasises, the dissident capacity of memes lies in both their ambiguity and anonymity.[125] Both the philosophical and sociological conceptualisations of securitisation emphasise the presence of an actor who has the authority to speak on behalf of the whole, thus giving that actor a certain power.[126] In the context of news and media, it is clear that this power has proliferated significantly in the past century thanks in part to the arrival of instantaneous communication and heightened accessibility to information.[127]

This transformation has arguably given greater agency to a wider range of actors to speak authoritatively on behalf of more diffused groups. Yet memes push this transformation further still. Simply put, this is because the functionality of memes rests upon what the meme *says*, as opposed to *who* says it. What Hansen terms as the "circulability" of the image hinges upon the meme's capacity to 'say' something humorous, and thus strike resonance with the viewer.[128] Whilst it is true that meme sharing pages hold considerable sway over what images are shared, the original authorship of any given meme can be almost impossible to discern. This realisation means that it is often the distributor of the meme, rather than the creator, who holds the agency and thus the power to 'speak'. However, given that the means of distribution have

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[122] Balzacq. *Securitization Theory*. p.3.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Kaempf. "Digital Media". p.99. Andersen and Vuori. *Visual Security Studies*. p.4. Mitchell. *Cloning Terror*. p.2.
[125] Soh. p.4. See Shifman. *Memes in Digital Culture*. p.59 for a more nuanced discussion of memes vs virals.
[126] Buzan et al. *Security*. p.40. Balzacq. Securitization Theory. p.9.
[127] Kaempf. "Digital Media". p.100. Rancière. *The politics of aesthetics*. p.8.
[128] Hansen. "The Theorization of the Image". p.57.

proliferated exponentially, this essentially means that anyone can 'speak'. This realisation fundamentally transforms the actor-speaker hierarchy at the heart of securitisation and empowers ordinary people to move from passive spectators to active participants.[129] Moreover, they are participants in an environment where the risks associated with speaking are mitigated by the lack of definitive authorship or attribution.[130]

Dissidence and protest

The lack of definitive authorship therefore provides a way of voicing discontent and resistance to government policies in both censored and non-censored regimes.[131] Moreover, it is elusive to formal measures of political participation and can thus be thought of as a form of 'low theory'.[132] When recognised as such, and combined with decreasing disparity between speakers and ordinary people, the creation, sharing, and liking of memes indicates participation in wider political discourse, proliferating issues out toward a greater array of audiences. In turn, this broadens the remit of analysis. The distinct language of internet culture and the use of mimetic chains as a means of conveying meaning suggests that younger demographics are engaging in politics in non-traditional, but equally influential ways. Without incorporating these 'deviant' forms of engagement into constructions of politics and security we risk obscuring an entire generation from political analysis.

From this standpoint, the role of reaction, critical, and action memes in uniting, raising awareness, and challenging authority with a coherent, unified voice makes then a force to be reckoned with. Indeed, it is perhaps notable that in 2018, the Chinese government inadvertently acknowledged this when it banned images of Winnie the Pooh after comparisons were made between president Xi Jinping and the honey loving bear (Figure 14). To be clear, Jinping was compared to a children's character: unlike Mocking SpongeBob no connoted

Figure 14.1 and 14.2

message was evoked, and yet figure 14.2 remains 2015's most censored image.[133] The

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[129] Andersen and Vuori. *Visual Security Studies*. p.9-10. Möller. "Leonardo's security". p.144-6.
[130] Soh. p.8.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Haberstram. *The Queer Art of Failure.* p.15-18.
[133] Jeremy Luedi. "Why China banned Winnie the Pooh and why it matters". *Global Risk Insights.* March 29 2016. https://globalriskinsights.com/2016/03/china-blacklists-winnie-pooh/. Benjamin Haas. "China bans Winnie the Pooh film

significance of this move cannot be denied. In banning all images of Winnie the Pooh, the Chinese government positioned 'shitposting' and the communities united by internet culture as a threat to the endurance of the regime.[134] As Shifman acknowledges, "the widespread subversive meme circulation serves as a powerful public display of criticism and distrust. It breaks the facade of optimism and unity presented in official mass media, showing that things are not as "harmonious" as the party would like to present them".[135]

Yet what does this tell us? In short it tells us that traditional securitising actors perceive themselves to be undermined by internet communities. From a more nuanced position it suggests that the techniques utilised by online users represent a direct challenge to the mechanisms of power that sustain elites by undermining their legitimacy. Participatory culture and meme-based humour is not about presenting a flawless face to the wider world. The images used and shared are often crude, roughly photoshopped, and amateur in their design. Their intent is to visualise a comment upon the world and its politics, not to reproduce it in perfect clarity. Arguably in acknowledging and embracing this facet of meme aesthetics, the amateur nature of memes can be construed as an elaborate postmodernist metaphor for the artificial legitimacy of power within our world.[136] As Shifman emphasises "the process of exposing the contructedness of photos turns into a critical comment about politics at large" and as Wells elaborates, also incites critical thinking and the cynical interpretation of visual artefacts in a political setting.[137]

Memes as an intellectual movement

Finally, it is notable that the absurdist performative nature of memes has a clear link to the emergence of Dadaism in the post-WWI environment.[138] Dada was primarily an artistic and literary movement, born out of the disillusionment of the war, and thrived on themes of non-sensical absurdity, nihilism, and subversive, satirical humour.[139] Indeed, it's very purpose was to emulate "anti-art": for the Dadaists, conventional logic and rationality had led to the most destructive war in European history, and thus could not be trusted.[140] As the poet Tristan Tzara wrote, "the beginnings of Dada were not the beginnings of art, but of disgust".[141] Both Dada and meme culture are therefore representations, not simply of a chaotic and humorous art

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after comparisons to President Xi". *The Guardian*. August 7 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/07/china-bans-winnie-the-pooh-film-to-stop-comparisons-to-president-xi.

[134] For a full discussion of the Chinese context see Shifman. *Memes in Digital Culture*. p.144-9.

[135] Shifman. *Memes in Digital Culture*. p.149.

[136] Shifman. *Memes in Digital Culture*. p.90, 97. Shifman. "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres". p.346. Rose. *Visual Methodologies*. p.188-9. Scott. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. p.4.

[137] Shifman. "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres". p.346. Wells. "You All Made Dank Memes". p.243.

[138] Sam Greszes. "Shitposting is an art, if history is any indication". *Polygon*. Dec 17, 2018, 7:53pm EST. https://www.polygon.com/2018/12/17/18142124/shitposting-memes-dada-art-history. @Actuallykylekallgren. "tumblr meme culture is really just a form of neo Dadaism". *Tumblr. February 2 2016*. https://actuallykylekallgren.tumblr.com/post/138536948254/eliciaforever-beyoursledgehammer.

[139] Dafydd W. Jones. *Dada 1916 in Theory: Practices of Critical Resistance*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014.

[140] @Actuallykylekallgren. "tumblr meme culture…".

[141] William Rubin. *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage.* New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968. p.12.

form, but of a deeper, intellectually coherent movement rooted in cultural rage and abject disillusionment. As @inrealityadream says of today's environment:

> "growing up in a constant state of questionably justified war, income inequality, an economic recession caused by the actions of a handful of wealthy fucks who didn't even get properly punished, growing awareness of police brutality, being called lazy and self-absorbed by the generations that gave us these problems in the first place… I can't help but think that these factors (and more) could produce a similar mindset to the one that precipitated the first dada movement. so of COURSE we make nonsense jokes. it's a coping mechanism for a world which doesn't make any sense".[142]

In recognising meme culture as a form of neo-neo-Dadaism (Neo-Dada emerged in the 1960s) instead of just another non-sensical fad of today's youth, it can be argued that the production and circulation of memes is underpinned by a well-articulated and coherent intellectual movement.[143] As Shifman emphasises, "following shared pathways for meme production is vital for creating a sense of community in a fragmented world".[144] Whilst superficially, memes such as Mocking SpongeBob, Gru, or *Its Always Sunny* function through humour, what they say represents not only something tangible, but crucial in its political potential. Moreover, @inrealityadream's statement reflects many of the facets that this discussion has sought to convey: the issues of income inequality are shown in both the "Live scenes from the treasury" case study and the discussion regarding the construction of stereotypes such as 'Karen'. Likewise, themes of police brutality have become incredibly relevant given the global Black Lives Matter protests sparked by the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor earlier this year. Significantly, these protests were largely coordinated on social media; various meme pages and even one-off viral posts committed to linking resources and voicing their support
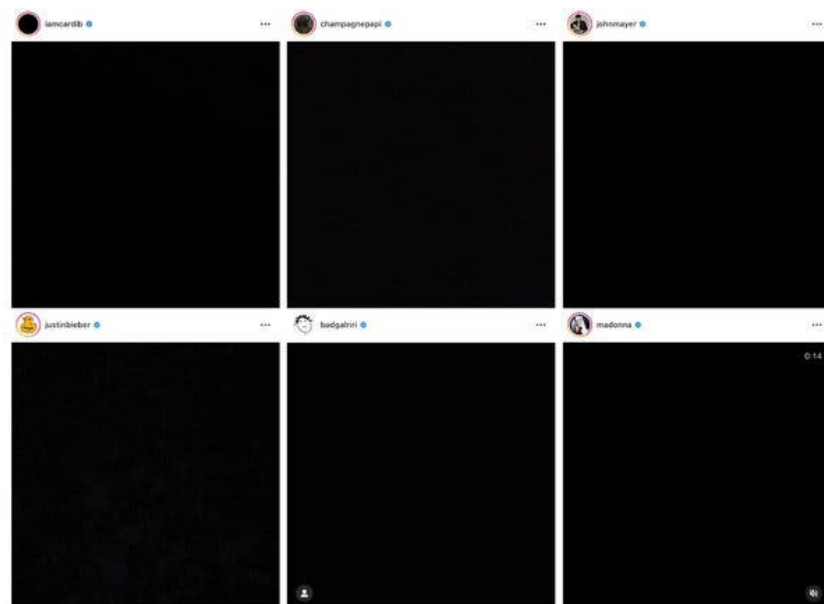

Figure 15

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[142] Grammar unaltered. @Actuallykylekallgren. "tumblr meme culture…".

[143] Neo-Dadaism emerged in the 1960s under similar themes of living anti-art. Indeed, David Bowie's visual aesthetic, lyric form, and costume can be understood as a form of neo-Dadaism. National Galleries Scotland. "What is Dada? Art Movements & Styles". *YouTube.* May 28 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABNwtDyx7T4.

[144] Shifman. "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres". p.342.

for the movement.[145] In addition, millions of Instagram users simultaneously posted a single blacked out image with the hashtag #blackouttuesday (Figure 15) flooding social media streams with a lack of content. For those participating it was a sign of global inclusion and solidarity, whilst for those who were unaware of the movement, the influx of black tiles acted as a beacon, inviting people to join in or educate themselves on the issues of racial injustice.[146]

[145] #blacklivesmatter. *Instagram*. Accessed August 12 2020 23:53BST.
https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/blacklivesmatter/
[146] Emily Stewart and Shirin Ghaffary. It's not just your feed. Political content has taken over Instagram. *Vox: Recode.* Jun 24 2020 11:20EDT. https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/6/24/21300631/instagram-black-lives-matter-politics-blackout-tuesday. Joe Coscarelli. "#BlackoutTuesday: A Music Industry Protest Becomes a Social Media Moment". *The New York Times.* Published June 2 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/arts/music/what-blackout-tuesday.html.

Conclusion

This discussion has endeavoured to illustrate the intellectual coherency and political potential of memes within a context of Visual Security Studies. It has also sought to further the analytic capacity of visual securitisation by incorporating key realisations from the sociological conceptualisation of securitisation. In particular, the discussion emphasises the importance of understanding securitisation as a mutually constitutive process, rather than an act, and in doing so explores impact this has upon audience/speaker hierarchies in an ever-evolving digital world. It has also emphasised that visual securitisation can function at both the macro and micro level, thus allowing the insights of low theory to broaden the scope of analysis.[147] The incorporation of low theory allows for attention to be paid to more mundane forms of political engagement in the realm of digital media. In particular the potential that reaction, critical, and action memes have to alter audience disposition by voicing sentiments of dissidence and protest to a wider community.

To be perfectly candid, this discussion cannot include everything, and if space permitted, attention would be paid to a richer, more nuanced, historically grounded, and less Western centric argument.[148] The development of typologies listed here are neither exhaustive nor fully inclusive. However, it aspires to be a starting point from which scholars can further advance the insights that memes offer to ISS.

Ultimately, the insights gleaned from this discussion point toward internet culture having tangible effects on politics. Not only does the incorporation of memes facilitate acknowledgement of politics of inclusion; it also opens the door to future applications of social movement theory and other insights that address the significance of participatory culture. Reacting to, sharing, questioning, or merely empathising with the sentiment that political memes express constitutes a form of implicit (and sometimes explicit) participation in politics and thus the mutually constitutive process of securitisation. Furthermore, by participating in the sentiments expressed by a community, individuals evoke a sense of belonging. In turn, this functions to embolden both communities and individuals to voice their support for movements outside the repertoire of aesthetically conventional politics. When the demographics of such cultures are analysed, memes arguably become a window into the dispositions of future voters and new speakers of security within an increasingly inclusive and participatory realm.

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[147] Halberstam. "The Queer Art of Failure". p.15-18, 60. *Särmä.* "Collaging Iranian missiles".

[148] One example I have been unable to incorporate is the historical precedent that this argument has in films such as Charles A. Ridley's *The Lambeth Walk*. Released in 1942 the film reportedly made Joseph Goebbels so incensed he "ran out of the screening room kicking chairs and screaming profanities". Similar power can arguably be seen in videos such as Boris Bop which amassed 3.1 million on YouTube and 2.6 million on Facebook.

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I would like to thank Covid-19 for adding extra complexity to this dissertation by depriving me of a physical library for the duration of writing. As a result, my eyes have been opened to the world of clandestine online libraries that my broadband provider declines to list: to them I owe most of the knowledge conveyed here.

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