Embracing LOLitics:

Popular Culture, Online Political Humor, and Play
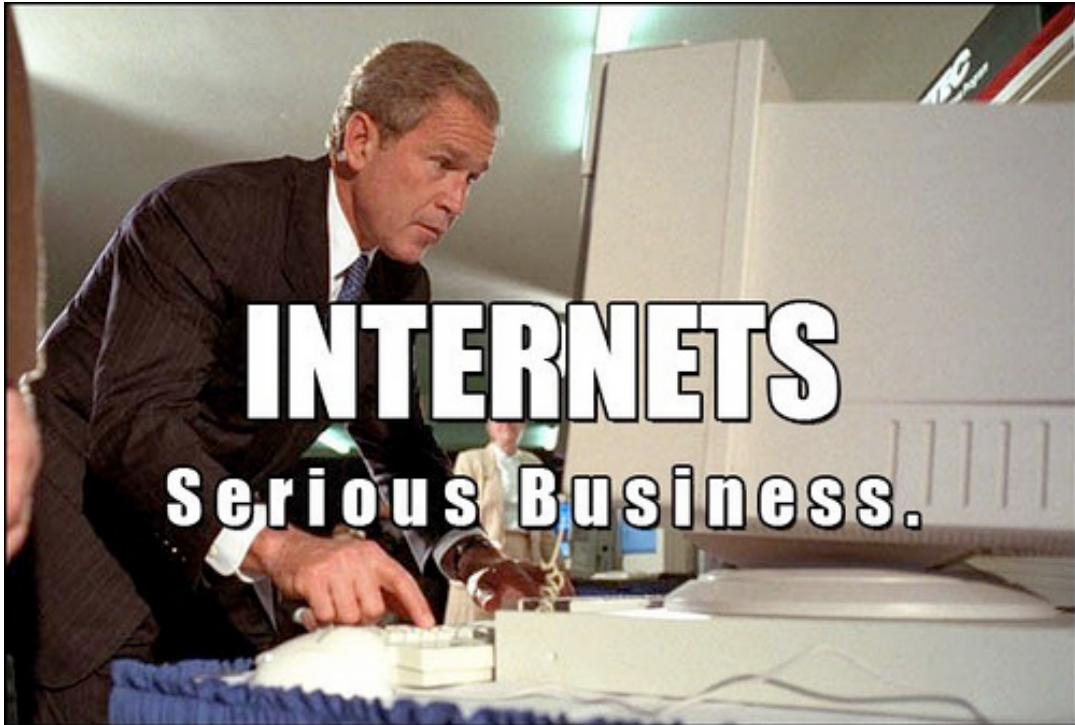
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INTERNETS
Serious Business.

Abstract

The Internet, and Web 2.0 tools can empower audiences to actively participate in media creation. This allows the production of large quantities of content, both amateur and professional. Online memes, which are extensions of usually citizen-created viral content, are a recent and popular example of this. This thesis examines the participation of ordinary individuals in political culture online through humor creation. It focuses on citizen-made political humor memes as an example of engaged citizen discourse. The memes comprise of photographs of political figures altered either by captions or image editing software, and can be compared to more traditional mediums such as political cartoons, and 'green screens' used in filmmaking. Popular culture is often used as a 'common language' to communicate meanings in these texts. This thesis thus examines the relationship between political and popular culture. It also discusses the value of 'affinity spaces', which actively encourage users to participate in creating and sharing the humorous political texts. Some examples of the political humor memes include: the subversion of Vladimir Putin's power by poking fun at his masculine characteristics through acts similar to fanfiction, celebrating Barack Obama's love of *Star Wars*, comparing a candid photograph of John McCain to fictional nonhuman creatures such as zombies using photomanipulation, and the wide variety of immediate responses to Osama bin Laden's death. This thesis argues that much of the idiosyncratic nature of the political humor memes comes from a motivation that lies in non-serious play, though they can potentially offer legitimate political criticism through the myths 'poached' from popular culture.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

A LONG LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR FAR AWAY….

A quintessential piece of science fiction, *Star Wars*, became one of the main texts that defined a generation of media audiences. The films contain prominent themes of good versus evil, are easily understood, related to, and can be reappropriated for various conditions, so that that the power of *Star Wars* extends beyond the texts. As popular culture, *Star Wars* allows ordinary people to participate, create, and communicate particular meanings which can become important in more complicated affairs, such as politics. *Star Wars* provoked active audience responses that resulted in whole culture of creative practices. As Will Brooker (2002) explains,

> For many people, [*Star Wars*] is the single most important cultural text of our lives; it has meshed with memories of our childhoods, with our homemade tributes– from the amateurish childhood comics to the professional product of an adult fan– with our choices of career or education, and with our everyday experiences […] For many people now, it is a culture: a sprawling, detailed mythos they can pick through with their eyes closed; a group of characters who may have been more important role models than friends and family; and a set of codes– quotes, in-jokes, obscure references– that provide instant common ground for fellow fans meeting for the first time and that bind established communities together (xii).

Star Wars represents the possibilities of a shared culture. It acts as a common 'language'– a literary device operationalized by popular culture, and everyday life. It is something individuals share and understand. The films' characters are recognizable even to those who have not watched them. According to Bill Moyers (cited in Campbell and Moyers 1991), who discussed the power of mythic representations in everyday life, *Star Wars* is fascinating beyond aesthetics– it contained "recognizable images [of] the clash of good and evil", reminiscent "of idealism", and "a romance based upon selflessness rather than selfishness" (117). It is perhaps this powerful and prevailing thematic myth offered by *Star Wars* that allows its narrative to be prominently adopted throughout political culture, by politicians, media personalities, and ordinary citizens.

This thesis focuses on the way individuals connect to, and communicate with each other and politics by bringing popular culture into what is often considered as 'serious' discourse. It explores the increasingly blurring boundaries between politics and popular culture, and politically-themed production and participation by ordinary individuals. People often use particular popular culture texts to simplify messages, and to express themselves in ways that appeal to likeminded others. As a popular culture artifact, *Star Wars* is a well-established trope

in political commentary. The following examples reveal the multiple uses of *Star Wars* throughout political culture as a shorthand to communicate meaning.

One of the most consistent narratives is the casting of former Vice President Dick Cheney as Darth Vader. Cheney reportedly called himself "the Darth Vader of the Bush administration" in 2006 while describing his tactics on gathering intelligence (King 2006). This association between the two figures quickly became prominent in both popular and political culture throughout the following years.[1] The Vice President's wife made references to that portrayal[2] during her visit to *The Daily Show* (2007b), when she presented the host, Jon Stewart with a Darth Vader action figure, jokingly calling it "an old family heirloom". In his memoir, former President George W. Bush reveals that along with his regret over the failure regarding the Iraq War, he also contemplated "replacing Vice President Dick Cheney, calling him the 'Darth Vader of the administration'" (*BBC News* 2010). In 2011, Cheney himself stated in that he was "honored to be compared with Darth Vader", and even appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* dressed as the character (Dickinson 2011; *The Huffington Post* 2011a; Figure 1.1). The consistency of this narrative shows the successful use of *Star Wars* to express Cheney's power and position in the administration. Furthermore, by playing along with the trope, the Cheneys attempted to appear 'cool' and in touch with popular culture, and consequently, ordinary citizens.

The use of *Star Wars* to a political candidate's advantage may be more applicable to current US President Barack Obama. Obama, who is an openly enthusiastic *Star Wars* fan, engages with traditional modes of fandom, such as purchasing and playing with merchandise, like ordinary individuals do. This trait, as explored in this thesis,[3] adds to his overall persona and image, and makes him relatable as a political figure. Some memorable moments witnessed throughout his Presidency to date include: Jousting with a toy Lightsaber (see Chapter 4), celebrating Halloween amongst an array of *Star Wars* characters,[4] and being photographed purchasing a *Star Wars* pop-up book (*The Official Star Wars Blog* 2009; 2010). As explored later in this thesis, Obama's connections to *Star Wars* will be exploited in popular culture narratives in a

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[1] *Star Wars* creator George Lucas however, disagrees, and in an interview with *The New York Times*' Maureen Dowd (2009), he more accurately defines Vice President Cheney as Emperor Palpatine, for he is responsible for turning a "promising" young Jedi to "the dark side". According to Lucas (cited in Ibid), "George Bush is Darth Vader".

[2] As explored later in this section, Stewart is responsible for bringing the distinctive similarities between Dick Cheney and Darth Vader to a mainstream audience.

[3] Chapter 4 in particular explores the positive links between Barack Obama's personality and *Star Wars*.

[4] Barack and Michelle Obama were seen in the White House celebrating with Chewbacca, several Storm Troopers, and Press Secretary Robert Gibbs dressed as Darth Vader (*The Official* Star Wars *Blog* 2009).

similar way to Cheney. Obama however, is likely to be casted in the role of the protagonist, as a Jedi.

Star Wars can act as a political mobilization tool for those outside the realms of political power. The Cheney/Vader trope for example, possibly originated in impersonations by Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show* [5] (Jones 2009:60). Stewart used *Star Wars* in a similar way as the politicians in that it was a quick way to interpret Cheney's role in the administration. Additionally, it acts as criticism by emphasizing Vader's villainous placement within the *Star Wars* narrative. This is also explored in the satirical cartoon *Lil' Bush*, in which Cheney lives in the Death Star with his father, Darth Vader (Ibid:54). *Star Wars* thus acts as a language for popular culture to communicate political criticism. In May 2005, on the same week *Star Wars III: Revenge of the Sith* was released in theaters across the US, MoveOn (2005), a progressive, non-profit advocacy group and political action committee, launched a campaign named 'Save the Republic!'. In a 30-second advertisement, they drew the parallel between the real-life "partisan battle", and the film [6] (Horn and Lee 2005). Ben Brandzel (cited in Ibid), MoveOn's advocacy director, claims *Star Wars* as a useful metaphor to help them "illuminate what's going on". In the advertisement, real life facts were successfully integrated with the film's theme of good against evil, resulting in a citizen-created piece that functions as political critique. The use of *Star Wars* to express citizen criticism is also visible in a response to a campaign advertisement for Republican Presidential nominee Rick Perry, in which he reveals his promise to "end Obama's war on religion" (RPerry2012). Perry's advertisement alludes to "polarizing issues like gays in the military and prayer in schools", and garnered a phenomenal number of 'dislikes' on YouTube (Terdiman 2011). As the video spread virally online throughout the next day, several memes

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[5] The first instance of this was in Stewart response to Cheney's refusal to answer to a question from *CNN*'s Wolf Blitzer regarding his daughter's sexuality (*The Daily Show* 2007a). In order to gain the Vice President's trust, Stewart pretended to be speak (while utilizing various props) as people "Dick Cheney would listen to" (Ibid) After his portrayal of gun-toting citizen, and a doctor 'failed', Stewart turned into a character Cheney "respects", which turned out to be a "kindred spirit", Darth Vader (Ibid). Stewart then issued his criticism, underscored with a *Star Wars* reference– "They say the Force is with you, but you don't have to use it every time! Sometimes you could use... the diplomacy!"

[6] Bill Frist, casted as Supreme Chancellor Palpatine in MoveOn's video, was a Senate majority leader bidding for a change in Senate regulations to "prohibit Democratic filibusters against judicial nominees" (Caplan 2005). MoveOn's (2005) advertisement, filled with *Star Wars* imagery, including the trademark opening text crawl and animated Lightsaber battles, was accompanied with the following voice-over: "For 200 years, the Senators and the fair judges, were keepers of the peace and justice in the Republic, until...one Senator, seduced by a dark vision of absolute power, seeks to destroy this fabled order, replacing fair judges with far right clones".

emerged on Tumblr,[7] including 'Rick Perry's Unpopular Opinions' (2011). One of the earliest and most popular response texts assumed that Rick Perry's favorite *Star Wars* character is Jar Jar Binks[8] (Ibid). The use of *Star Wars* here thus paints Perry as an unlikeable figure, with stereotypically 'wrong' opinions.

Star Wars acts as a viral idea in the examples above. It is a metaphor, and myth, used in political culture to quickly and easily convey meanings– to simplify more complex discussions, and to expose power relations in understandable, relatable language. Pratt (1990) argues that popular culture has the ability to shape our memories and organize our sense of time (29). Individuals use popular culture to construct particular images and identities, and through participation, they can achieve "a significant sense of 'communion with others'" (Ibid:28). This is appropriately reflected in the way people engage with *Star Wars*. *Star Wars* is a particularly resonant popular culture text, and its close connection to personal, everyday life, makes politics feel closer to ordinary individuals. Public life is digested in personalized ways, and defined using personalities derived from the texts that people already know and are familiar with.

Most importantly, popular culture is fun. Connecting to popular culture and becoming a fan of a text is often motivated by pleasure, as opposed to obligation. Through popular culture, politics can become more approachable and engaging, especially if individuals are allowed the opportunity to participate in political discourse in their own unique ways. Popular culture is especially significant because it is essentially is a part of everyday life, and as discussed in Chapter 2, belongs to ordinary individuals. It is also entertaining and frivolous, often viewed as far from political culture. This thesis asks what happens when the two cultures are brought together. Because of its prevalence and popularity, online humor is explored in this thesis as a significant mode of citizen engagement in politics.

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[7] Similar to the image macro format to be discussed in Chapter 3, the meme, also known as 'unpopular opinion Rick Perry', features an image of Rick Perry, cropped directly from his campaign advertisement, next to a quote jokingly attributed to the Presidential nominee. The quotes were initially written by 'kyle', the meme creator. Several minutes later (as it gained popularity) users submitted their own quotes, which often reflect opinions that are widely considered as 'wrong' or at least, highly disputable. All of the quotes are related to popular culture. Television programs in particular, were widely referenced. Some 'unpopular opinions' include Rick Perry believing that cult favorites *Community*, *Arrested Development*, and *Firefly* deserve[d] be canceled, thinking "The Beatles are a horrible band", and other more detailed references to plots and characters from particular films and television programs.

[8] Jar Jar Binks first appeared in the first of three prequels, *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999), and was greeted with overwhelmingly negative reviews. Some critics accused creators of including the character solely to appeal to children, and found Jar Jar's eccentric persona and manner of speech, masked as comic relief, to be undermining. Accusations of racism were also prominent, as Jar Jar is seen by some critics as a negative representation of Black/ Afro-Caribbean men. Many *Star Wars* fans consider the character as a culmination of everything they dislike about the prequels.

FROM LIGHTSABERS TO LOLCATS

The material analyzed in this thesis has been circulated online, where a culture of sharing and creating similar to that evident in *Star Wars* fan culture takes place. The Internet enables countless creative spaces where ideas are extended, transformed, and circulated. This is particularly apparent in new forms of comedy, with LOLcats[9] being a widely-known example of online user-generated humor. *Wired* (2011) magazine declared "cute cats in absurd situations" as "the universal symbol for hilarity in the digital age" (28). The premise of the LOLcats phenomenon is simple: users submit a digital photograph of a cat, accompanied by a humorous caption, which is often framed by the writer as being from the cat's perspective (Figure 1.2, for example). These captions are commonly written in an idiosyncratic grammatical form, which have developed into a form of language that is sometimes referred to as 'LOLspeak'. The user-generated combination of photograph and the added text is now often referred to as an 'image macro' (Brubaker 2008:118). These image macros are just a subsection of widely re-created and disseminated texts, images, and videos on the Internet, often referred to as 'online memes'.

The LOLcats meme is simple, it is funny, and more importantly, like the elements of *Star Wars*, it is endlessly transferable and adaptable. The variations in the meme make its examples easily relatable for a wide audience. LOLcats is inherently 'silly', and it does not require a remarkable amount of cultural knowledge to decipher, which may suggest a 'dumbing down' in the audience. This thesis however, argues that the practice of participating in the creation of meanings is an important and legitimate way of engaging with culture, and in particular, politics. The LOLcats' simplicity and openness to interpretation also allows it to be approached by a wide range of audiences. It is also an instance of citizens exercising their freedom to express their opinions within formats and narratives that are approachable and familiar to them.

The LOLcats meme is most consistently published on *I Can Has Cheezburger*,[10] a popular "image posting board that allow[s] users to contribute photos and comment on others" (Brubaker 2008:117). *I Can Has Cheezburger* functions solely on user contributions,

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[9] 'LOL' is a commonly used acronym used online or while texting on mobile phones. It stands for 'Laugh Out Loud', and is widely utilized to quickly define something as funny.

[10] Before 2007, the LOLcats meme most likely originated on image forum *4Chan*, as part of a tradition known as 'Caturday' (Grossman 2007). 'Caturday', which occurs on Saturdays, originated around mid-2005, and is devoted solely to posting pictures of cats, "as a protest against \Furry Friday\ threads", where users "post [sexually suggestive images of] anthropomorphic Disney characters" (Ibid). In 2007, while surfing the Internet, Eric Nagakawa discovered an image of "a high-strung cat with an open maw making a garbled request for a cheeseburger" (Rutkoff 2007; Figure 1.2). It amused him so much that him and a friend created an instantly-popular website, called *I Can Has Cheezburger* (Ibid). While LOLcats are still the most popular series of images on the site, they are also disseminated across countless other websites, forums, social networking sites, and blogs.

was an instant hit, and is still extremely popular. It has since expanded into a 'network' that includes several other thematic categories, including: celebrities, sports, news, and *FAIL blog* (Ibid:117). This thesis will include a study of the 'news' section of *I Can Has Cheezburger*, also known as *Pundit Kitchen,* or 'LOL news', a space for contributions that adhere to the LOLcats format, although with a focus on authority figures involved in politics, and news media itself.

Pundit Kitchen is a user-contributed space where people humorously comment on politics, drawing frequently on popular culture texts, such as *Star Wars,* to quickly establish meanings, such as character personalities (Figure 1.3 is an example). Image macros such as the ones in *Pundit Kitchen* are just a single section of a larger sphere of user-generated political humor online. The Internet, because of its accessibility, highly enables the creation and dissemination of political humor. A countless number of websites feature political humor, and while most people may not "visit these sites with any great frequency", Cornfield (2004, cited in Baumgartner 2007) argues that the nature of digital networks allows even "casual Internet users" to potentially stumble across significant pieces, especially during Presidential campaigns (320). Political humor is often disseminated through social media platforms, hyperlinks on various websites, and featured in news stories. Humor can be intriguing, universal, and easy to consume, allowing it be spread virally online (Darr and Barko 2004, cited in Ibid).

There is a current lack of academic research in the area of memes, including those of a humorous and politically-themed nature. This however, is an area that deserves more attention, due to the popularity of these texts, and for the possible revelations they may present about the relationships citizens today have with politics and culture. Memes are truly unpredictable, and yet, important. They are creative forms solely determined by their audiences. Humorous memes are a prevalent part of online culture, and have also become a stable part of entertainment in mass media. This is evidenced by increasing news coverage on the prevalence of online humor,[11] and television programs that focus entirely on showing popular items from the Internet.[12] This relationship between the mass media and online culture, which is often more niche and amateur

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[11] News media are increasingly becoming more inclined to pay attention to humorous memes, most likely due to the prominence of some texts in online culture. As a result, characters in some memes can become Internet 'celebrities'. Examples include *Obama Girl*, the star of a series of parody videos of Barack Obama fans during 2008 US Presidential election, and Ghyslain Razaa, also known as 'Star Wars Kid', the star of a viral video of a Canadian teenager clumsily and enthusiastically wielding a Lightsaber (further elaborated in Chapter 4). Chapter 5 in particular reflects the news media's tendency to focus on online responses in the form of humorous memes.

[12] While online humor is now often used as conversation pieces in entertainment programming such as late-night talk shows, some television programs, such as *Comedy Central*'s *Tosh.0*, heavily feature content directly from the Internet. Comedic YouTube videos are particularly popular. This is not a completely new phenomenon, and may be viewed as a newer version of television programming sustained by viewer submissions, such as *America's Funniest Home Videos* (Raftery 2011:154). The main difference here is that programs such as *Tosh.0* focus on material that is already popular online, thus allowing the audience to have agency over what may or may not be compelling.

reveals a significant change in power relations in the media industry. Content created by ordinary citizens is becoming more important, and more central to the cultural discourses in society. Popular culture itself can be created and determined by citizens, rather than just traditional mass media producers.

This thesis will therefore analyze a selection of prominent political humor memes, with a particular focus on those based on still images. Most of the target subjects in these memes focus strongly on US media and political figures, due to the sheer volume of participants, and where these websites are often based. The analysis will however be conducted from the perspective of an experienced participant, a fan and a media analyst. Still images are chosen for various reasons. Firstly, it can be argued that less technical skill is required for the creation of still image texts, compared with video-making, for example. This therefore allows a wider audience to be involved in creating new texts. Still images also have the benefit of being consumable in a short period of time, which is important especially when there are so many other distractions available on the Internet. Effective still images can communicate meanings and ideas easily and quickly, all within just a single frame. This thesis will also examine the spaces where the memes emerge and spread. This will allow an exploration of how the texts are created, an insight into what makes them compelling, and most importantly, an analysis of the value of engagement and what this means to the participants.

This thesis examines the relationships between culture and politics found in the digital creation and circulation of political humor by ordinary individuals. The still image memes reveal that individuals are able to experience a variety of distinctive relationships between politics and popular culture in the age of digital media. The texts explored throughout seek to demonstrate the practice of a new literacy, and media consumption– a media participation pattern that is non-linear, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. They question the levels of engagement ordinary individuals can and do have with politics, and the way power relations are actively manipulated through humor. This thesis explores a reaction to news media that comes from the perspectives of ordinary individuals– one that though unconventional, is far from meaningless.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of the current state of news media, compared with the ideal roles of the media as informational sources as reccomended by liberal media theorists. The rest of this thesis essentially acts as a response to this. Chapter 2 then further explores the literature

that establishes the analytical context for the case studies within this thesis in the following sections: popular culture, humor, digitality, and play theory. It also establishes a framework for analyzing the texts covered by the rest of the thesis. These aspects will demonstrate the importance of the work explored in this thesis, as well as provide a solid analytical background to the arguments throughout the following chapters.

Chapter 3 focuses on the creation of political humor memes within specific cultural spaces. The case studies here illustrate the functions of particular affinity spaces that aid and encourage the creation of political humor memes, and the significance they may have in maintaining specific discourses within the texts. This chapter also demonstrates the links between the practice of political humor creation and other practices close to popular culture, such as fanfiction creation. The focus here is on a particular format of meme, the image macro.

Still image memes take more forms than image macros, and the case studies in Chapter 4 explore some of the variety. Spaces of circulation are still an important aspect here, but the memes in this chapter lack the element of original authorship shared by the memes in Chapter 3, and are found throughout multiple spaces. Chapter 4 thus explores the spread of memes, and the placement of political humor memes in other spaces, which further provokes discussions surrounding the genre itself. The narrowing boundaries between politics and popular culture are further explored here. The case studies in this chapter are prominent examples of photomanipulated memes, which are a variation of older media practices such as the green screen in filmmaking, and collages.

Chapter 5 brings together the themes in Chapter 3 and 4 to discuss the online responses to the death of Osama bin Laden. It extends the discussions already presented into an examination of the wide array of immediate citizen responses to a specific event closes a chapter to an entire decade already filled with mythical media representations, from both the realm of news and popular culture. Chapter 5 reveals a prominent example of citizens bringing their voices and eagerly participating in a noteworthy historical occasion through humorous memes, an act that is increasingly witnessed in today's digital world.

The conclusion summarizes the discussions from the previous chapters, and answers questions about the importance of participating in online humor creation. It reaffirms the importance of popular culture in citizen discourse about politics, and questions its implication for political culture. It also considers the limitations of the research, as well as reiterate its importance and value for future study.

Chapter 1: Images

Figure 1.1 (Left): Dick Cheney dressed as Darth Vader, on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*

Figure 1.2 (Left): An example of the LOLcats meme, and also the original LOLcat image that prompted Eric Nagakawa to start *I Can Has Cheezburger*.
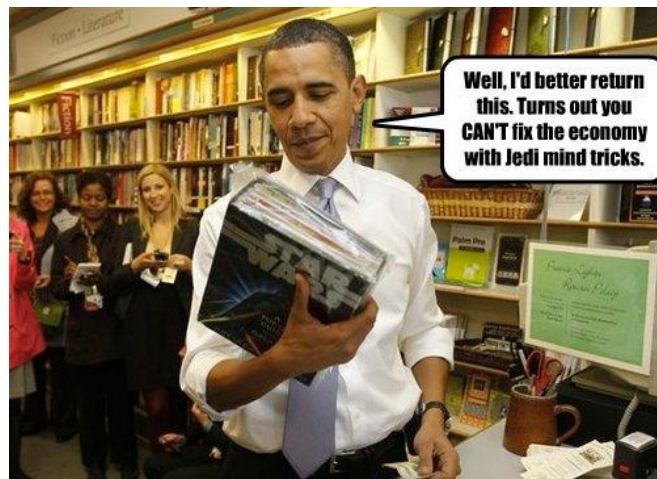
Figure 1.3 (Right): An example of a *Star Wars* reference incorporated into a LOLcats-

Chapter 2
Literature Review

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will explore in depth the main aspects of this thesis. It begins with an overall look at the current state of news, arguing alongside liberal democratic theorists that the media has failed to fulfill its purpose to fully inform citizens. This resulted in a decline in voting numbers, and an increase in cynicism, leaving democracy in a dangerous position. The rest of the chapter presents arguments as a response to this. While news media tend towards sensationalism to fulfill their economic needs, citizens are by no means passive. Instead, they engage with news media content in various ways. The rest of the chapter, which focuses on popular culture, humor, digitality, and play theory, seeks to express this. This literature review concludes with a methodological statement to explain the analysis conducted in the subsequent case studies.

2.1.2 FROM POLITICS TO POP

Liberal democratic theory suggests that the news media serve two primary functions in society– to "provide a rigorous accounting of people in power", and to "provide reliable information and a wide range of informed opinions on the important social and political issues of the day" (McChesney 2000a:2). Curran (2005) adds that the media's third role is to represent "a voice of the people" (129). To fulfill these roles, the media are anchored to the free market system. The market's self-regulatory nature should ideally exclude them from vested interests, allowing news journalism to report events truthfully, to be loyal to citizens, unbiased, objective, function as an independent monitor of power, and to provide a space for public criticism (McChesney 2000b:7; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001:12). Central to the free market is competition– unrestricted barriers means that new entrants will consistently emerge. With healthy competition, media organizations will be more compelled to reveal the exploits of those in power to the public, who will be ready to provide oppositional viewpoints. This will arguably result in "good government" (Curran 2005:128).

McChesney (2000b) however, argues that the free market is largely a "myth"– the claims of unhindered access and competition for entrepreneurs are in reality beneficial only to the rich and powerful (8). The age of media deregulation allowed large corporations to gain more power

in the market, leaving only limited access to largely invisible individuals or smaller companies (Croteau and Hoynes 2003:35). Information has turned into a commodity, and the accumulation of wealth has become the driving force behind media production– quality is therefore, sacrificed. Stoker (2006) agrees, stating that "the media has 'dumbed down' the coverage of news and political issues because of the fierce battle for audience" (128). Van Belle and Mash (2010) assert that the audience's attention is being sold to advertisers to sustain the free circulation of news (282-283). As a result, news has increasingly become more entertaining, dramatic, and 'people-focused'– "serious issues get reduced to sound bites" (Stoker 2006:128). It is also more formulaic, with recognizable narrative structures and characters. Much like soap operas, stories involving conflict, sex, unusualness, tragedy, drama, and well-known individuals are considered to be newsworthy (Van Belle and Mash 2010:284-289). The mainstream press are tabloidized, characterized by Bek (2004) as having "fewer international news stories, more pictures, less text, […] and less political or parliamentary news" (371). Gossip and personal scandals are prioritized over issues regarding civic life. The amount of time and coverage spent on the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, for example, reveals the media's obsession with the former US President's personal affairs and enjoyment of "thrill-seeking", and their ignorance of deeper political issues (Gitlin 1998).

There is also a rise in public relations, as opposed to costly investigative journalism. While informational institutions do not necessarily "lie", the act of "accentuat[ing] the positive", and "not telling the whole truth" is common (Stoker 2006:126, 127). This common practice resulted in society developing a lack of trust in media and political organizations. Compared to institutions and professions such as doctors, the military, academics and judges, "government officials and journalists rank lowest on the trust scale" in the US, the UK, and Australia (Bakir and Barlow 2007: 3-4). People are "cynical about politics[,] because most issues are just too difficult to understand, and politics and politicians become, as a result, the equivalent of hapless participants in a reality TV show" (Stoker 2006:128). Unlike reality television, which garners record numbers of voters, voter turnouts in elections, with few exceptions,[13] are declining[14]

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[13] The 2008 US Presidential election was an example of an exceptionally high turnout– at 61.6 percent of eligible voters participating, it was reported to be at its highest rate in 40 years (*Associated Press* 2008). Additional statistics also claim an increase in younger voters, with a 49 percent turnout in the 18-24 age bracket (Edwards 2008). Ironically, the Presidential campaign has perhaps presented itself as one of the most prevalent cases of personality and image-based politics. More of this will be explored throughout the rest of this chapter.

[14] Tony Blair's slick campaign in the 2001 British election reportedly "turned off many voters" (Williams 2001). The turnout at that particular election was a low point, and the beginning of a steady decline, with only 59 percent of the eligible population voting (Lewis et al. 2005:2). The rest, disenchanted with politics, did "not bother voting" (Williams 2001). While a high voter turnout was reported for the 2010 election, it is still a very significant decline from the 1960s (Weaver 2010). More recently, New Zealand witnessed at 68 percent registered voters participating, its "lowest voter turnout in 120 years" in November 2011 (Vance 2011).

(Lewis and Wahl-Jorgenson 2005:2). The issues of image-saturated politics, and a media failing to fulfill its purpose, both resulting in voter cynicism, are therefore considered as factors contributing to a decline in democracy.

These arguments for cynicism and lack of political participation however, conform to a single assumption that allows little room for consideration of how audiences actually engage with media. Gray (2006) argues that cynicism is not inherently negative, but "implies some form of political analysis and therefore some level of interest" (153). Cynicism can encourage political action just as much as it inspires apathy (Ibid). It can also reflect an audience response, one that "needs to be respected on its own terms, as a genuine and sincere assessment […] of the political system" (Buckingham 2000, cited in Ibid). As the mass media fail to satisfy in providing information, popular culture and entertainment media, particularly those in digital forms, as explored throughout this thesis, may fulfill this function. Helfin (2006) considers that there are no easy solutions to fix traditional media that fail to fulfill their informative purposes, but there may be "hilarious" ones (30). Programs such as *The Daily Show*, for example, by 'sneaking' facts into its jokes, "provides insights into how our social institution work and teaches viewers to think, question and discover for themselves", which "is a step beyond traditional journalism" (Ibid:29).

This thesis explores ways individuals engage with media in this manner– audiences are in fact, active, and able to interpret, engage and respond to politics in forms that cater to their personal needs and interests. Jones (2005) argues that "the most meaningful participation in politics now occurs in intimate relationships, the places where people make sense of and actually take part in politics through their conversations" (24). The following sections in this chapter will explore the variety of arenas that allow individuals to participate in politics, and aspects that will reemerge in Chapters 3-5. They will include theoretical aspects that reflect an alternative form of engagement with politics and news, one that is entertaining, creative, personal, and driven by passion, rather than obligations.

2.2 POP CULTURE

The decline in the quality of mainstream news, as argued above, is partially due to the increasing focus on sensationalism and entertainment. This section begins with a background explanation on why entertainment and popular culture is often viewed by critics as negative influence on society. It then presents the various arguments that suggest otherwise, with a particular focus on the audience's ability to interpret texts to suit their individual needs. These link to the practices in the introduction in regards to *Star Wars*, and are reflected throughout the rest of the thesis. This section also reviews theories surrounding popular culture in relation to politics, which preludes the arguments regarding the texts analyzed in this thesis– rather than being 'dumbed down' and passive, citizens actively engage with, and respond critically to the image-driven view of politics.

2.2.3 THE ARGUMENT AGAINST POP

For centuries, there has been a fear of a 'dumbing down' of culture. It started with a preoccupation with what is considered to be 'high culture' by cultural critics and academics. This view was allegedly shaped when Matthew Arnold (2006), in a late 1860s publication of *Culture and Anarchy* wrote, culture is produced by "the best that has been thought and said in the world"– the rest is anarchy (5). Inglis (2005) notes that there are various definitions of 'high culture', ranging from activities confined to the elite and upper-class, to works that embody "the best of human achievements" (77). One of the most prominently known attacks on 'low culture' or 'popular culture' was raised by Theodor Adorno (1938), who noted that culture has turned into a commodity, and its value has declined in the era of capitalism, resulting in the creation of a 'culture industry'. Writing about music in particular, Adorno (1938) criticized "totalitarian radio" for providing nothing but "entertainment and diversion" (37). Popular music is considered objectively detrimental to the creation of a wholesome society for it is "illogical", "infantile", and "retarded",[15] and the enjoyment of mass-produced culture is "fetishic" (Ibid: 51-52). These views on popular music encapsulate the way in which intellectuals often view 'low' or 'popular'/'mass' culture. Mosley (2000) argues, "so much cleverness [has been] used to such

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[15] Adorno (1938) defines "regressive listening" as a form of mindless, shallow, "contemporary listening" that shows the loss of "freedom of choice and responsibility", and "the capacity for conscious perception of music" (46). This is considered to be non-intellectual, and therefore, childish. He also believes that audiences to enjoy "individual instrumental colors" rather than whole musical pieces, which is comparable to a child's fascination with "bright colors" (Ibid:49). 'Serious' music on the other hand, commands a stronger sense of concentrated listening, and is therefore more enriching for an individual's intellectual capacity.

stupid ends"– commercial interests have caused everything from our government, to science, education, and culture to be 'dumbed down' (1-10).

2.2.2 THE PEOPLE'S CULTURE

Van Zoonen et al. (1998) states, pop culture is too often "synonymous with political disinterest and wanton consumerism [...] seen as mere entertainment and irrelevant to society's concerns" (1). Instead, popular culture is more appropriately 'judged' as catering towards "the people" (Bennett 1986:19-20). Graber (2001) states that "elites have forever tried to impose their cultural tastes on mass publics, and mass publics have forever resisted" (116). Negus (2006) notes that Adorno's reaction was a "suspicious" response to the emergence of "new cultural forms such as radio, television and cinema [that] were being viewed as potentially liberating" (198). While high culture problematically singles out a large number of people, popular culture on the other hand, is more democratic. Mukerji and Schudson (1991) see the study of popular culture as "legitimate", for its "social impact", and because it is "central to understanding Western societies and thought" (53). Entertainment television, for example, according to Roderick Hart (1994, cited in Graber 2001), "is a people's medium, after all, and it celebrates that fact each day. It celebrates people's joys in game shows, their strivings in its sports programs, their lusts via the Playboy Channel" (115-116).

Furthermore, as Hartley (2010) notes, 'low culture' has done just as much to shape some of what is considered to be 'serious' texts– "Modern political journalism was founded as much in scandal, gossip and sensationalism as it was in reason and truth" (14). The lines between "the personal (popular culture)" and "the political", which is, journalism and the 'higher arts', were given equal and unopposed treatment by "the most celebrated writers of the Enlightenment", who all wrote "bawdy and pornographic works as well as political journalism and philosophy" (Ibid). This is similar to news covering political campaigns: "while policy reporting is regarded as 'boring, abstract, complex and static', a contest is 'tangible, personal, fluid and simple'" (Mills 1999, cited in Craig 2003:168). To be able to relate to ordinary people should not be considered as a disadvantage. This is evident in more contemporary texts, such as *The Daily Show*, as explored in the next section, and the case studies in the following chapters.

Hall (1981) too, believes popular culture should not be undermined, adding that there is a flaw in seeing "the people as purely passive" (186). Fiske (1987) argues, "popularity is seductively easy to understand if we persist in the fallacious belief that we live in a homogenous society and

that people are fundamentally all the same" (309). He argues that the audience is made of varieties of "social groups" either "accommodating" with, or "opposing […] dominant value systems in a variety of ways" (Ibid:310). What matters here is the audience, and what they do with culture should therefore be considered as truly important. Pratt (1990) argues, in regards to rock music, that within criticism regarding financial and cultural economics, "the most important dimension" of the product is always left out– that is, "what the audience *does* with the music, how they use it, and the larger implications of the patterns of their use" (Ibid:180). As with other forms of popular culture, its significance should encompass beyond the product itself– texts do not possess meanings on their own; they are reader-imposed.

Individuals engage with popular culture in myriad ways, including discussing and actively "seeking out more information" about the texts they consume (Williams 2008:26). Television programs can function as casual discussion topics, similar to the weather in the way they provide a context that "everyone could have both some knowledge and opinion" of (Meyrowitz 1985 cited in Ibid:27). Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) also argues that electronic culture has merged with real life, creating powerful mediated relationships between individuals and characters on television (119). The screen gives an illusion of "face-to-face" interactions (Ibid). As a result, viewers begin to "'know' the people they 'meet' on television in the same way they know their friends and associates" (Ibid). Popular culture is therefore a space where private and public spheres merge, and due to the tabloidization of news, this is also increasingly seen in political culture.

Popular culture has the ability to produce feelings, and provoke familiar emotions, which "can become the basis of an identity" (Street 1997:10). Williams (2008) argues that part of popular culture's "allure" is the way audiences identify with each other through similarities in consumption patterns (27). Individuals can identify themselves as part of communities through actions such as wearing specific clothing, or social activities, like viewing and discussing televisions programs with friends (Ibid). Fans are the best example of this. Henry Jenkins (2005) writes, "fans passionately embrace favored texts and attempt to integrate media representations within their own social experience" (250). They "learn how to live and collaborate within a knowledge community" (Jenkins 2006b:134). To perform fandom is to actively respond to pre-existing texts in a pleasurable way. Jenkins (2005) further borrows Michel de Certeau's notion of "reading as 'poaching'", an impertinent 'raid' on the literary 'preserve' that takes away only the things that seem useful or pleasurable to the reader" (250). De Certeau (cited in Ibid) also extends the description of active reading as "cultural bricolage, through which readers fragment texts and reassemble the broken shards according to their own

blueprint, [to create and redefine] their own social experience" (250-251). This is an important aspect that will later be used to define the importance of humor creation by ordinary citizens.

Bronwyn Williams' (2007) study of young people who utilize characters from the television program *South Park* as a way to 'perform' their identities on social networking site MySpace reveals the way popular culture acts as a form of communication. Here, "popular culture content mediates the relationship between writer and reader", and one will not be able to decipher the writer's identity "without making connections to outside popular culture content" (Ibid:32). MySpace pages are often viewable not just to an individual's personal circle of friends, but also the general public. The use of popular culture can therefore function as away to "create an identity or proclaim an affinity", revealing particular personality traits of an individual based on popular culture, "a set of communal texts with which we [may be] familiar" with (Ibid:34). Similarly, popular culture is utilized as a quick and effective means of communication in real life conversations. Savan (2005) argues that phrases from popular culture, such as "duh", "slam dunk", and "LOL" regularly gets adopted into everyday vernacular, because what it "really communicates is that millions of others speak it". 'Popspeak' does not symbolize the deterioration of the English language, but is relatable, persuasive, and understood regardless of age, race, class or lifestyle (Ibid). Conners (2007) explains that political cartoonists utilize pop culture references because they are instantaneously relatable to and understandable for readers (262). Steve Benson (cited in Ibid), a political cartoonist, elaborates,

> because we use icons, because our language is visual short-hand, images from popular culture are signposts or pegs a reader can relate to or identify. Pop culture helps convey the message to a reader's reality, and tries to communicate to readers on their level (263).

This however, does rely on the reader's level of knowledge of a specific text, an element that is also important in the following chapters of this thesis.

2.2.3 POP AND POLITICS

Van Zoonen (2005) argues that politics should not be separate from the rest of culture, for this disrupts the notion of citizenship– "not only will it not survive the competition for spare time, but more importantly it will also be separated, different, and distant from everyday life" (3). To blend politics and popular culture is perhaps natural. Both strive to capture the attention of audiences (Ibid:59). Jeffrey Jones (2010) suggests that "political views are often discovered and developed through discursive engagements" (212). Popular entertainment television, for instance, offers insights into politics that are easily digestible, especially for young people, who are consistently sought-after by political campaigns. Ahrenhoerster (2008) cites *The Simpsons*

as an example of entertainment programming that can help young people explore fundamental social discourses such as voting and religion, since pop culture is after all, their "native text" (12). Jones (2010) adds that talk shows do the same, simplifying complicated political affairs into formats that are "accessible and 'real' for average citizens" (213).

John Street (1997) argues that an audience's "passionate involvement" in popular culture can take on political significance (11). Popular culture has an "ability to articulate the feelings and passions that drive politics", and by offering "forms of identity", individuals can be "engaged with politics, in particular with the politics of citizenship, the right to belong and to be recognized" (Ibid:191; 12). Jones (2010) considers citizenship as an increasingly self-defined enterprise, rather than a "social contract between state and subject" (211). Politics, formerly distant from everyday life, is merging with popular culture, treating politicians and politics as characters and narratives (Ibid:212). Traditional citizenship, which is public, and the private act of consumption, are unified. To engage with politics through entertainment is appropriate, if the texts are able to fulfill the citizens' cognitive needs for political narrative. This is where the association between celebrities and 'real' politics become significant.

In a study of audience engagement with the politically-driven entertainment talk show, *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*, Jones (2010) reveals that even within political contexts, people are fascinated by celebrities (218). They enjoy seeing figures they recognize from popular culture reveal their political views and knowledge (Ibid). Furthermore, they see celebrities as equivalent to ordinary citizens within the social structure of knowledge, and thus act as 'representatives' for them (Ibid:219). Associating politics with celebrity can also disrupt the aura of high culture, allowing politics to be open to all, rather than just the bourgeois (Pels, cited in Gray 2009:151). To be endorsed by a celebrity is therefore beneficial to politicians.[16] Additionally, the connections celebrities have to the personal lives of ordinary people allow a higher level of trust to be developed, which is an asset to the public realm of politics (Drake and Higgins 2006:99). Politicians that are associated with celebrities therefore appear "in touch" with ordinary citizens (Ibid).

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[16] Drake and Higgins (2006) cite U2 frontman, Bono, as a main example. Other examples include John F. Kennedy, who was linked to Hollywood performers such as Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe, Barack Obama being openly endorsed by Oprah Winfrey, Bruce Springsteen backing John Kerry in the 2004 Presidential election, rock band The Oasis courted by New Labour in Britain, and so on. This also extends to the ultimate blending of celebrity and politics, where individuals assume both roles– Hollywood film star Ronald Reagan was elected President in the 1980s, action hero Arnold Schwarzenegger successfully became the governor of California in 2003, and *Saturday Night Live* writer and performer Al Franken was successfully elected as a Senator in Minnesota in 2009.

2.2.4 BRANDING THE POLITICIAN

John Corner (2003) argues that studies concerning the "figure of the politician" are central in political culture (80). Marshall (1998) considers popular culture and politics as similar in the way the way the citizen is seen as an important player (205). In contemporary politics, citizens are viewed as consumers, for they "must make purchase choices among several different commodities" (Ibid). Street (2003) states that a politician's personality is essentially a brand, and voters, "like consumers in a market", may act "irrationally" and be "manipulated" emotionally (89-90). Gray (2009) agrees, adding that politicians are inclined to adopt "political marketing" in campaigning, functioning much like "Hollywood's publicists and Madison Avenue's branding gurus" (149). Craig (2003) adds that there is a rise in "media coaching" for politicians to "present a polished public image" (122). Image-driven politics arguably began when television became considered as the medium responsible for Kennedy's victory over Nixon in 1960 (Pfau et al. 2007:21). Here, Kennedy's tanned appearance, as well as confident demeanor allowed him to be viewed as a more attractive, and accordingly, capable candidate, compared to Nixon, who looked sickly and poorly-dressed.[17] The Kennedy-Nixon debate still remains as evidence that image is important, and politicians are essentially products.

John Street (1997) and Liesbet Van Zoonen (2005) describe politics as a "performance" (51;72). Street (1997) states, "it is about giving life and relevance to ideas, about evoking trust and claiming representiveness" (51). Van Zoonen (2005) argues that politicians do not rely on policies alone, but project "a persona"– the ideal politician should be able to manipulate their image in both public and more intimate, private spheres (74, 78-79). The latter is important, as it reveals a politician's personality. Street (2003) uses the phrase "political style" to describe politicians who strive to be "cool" (96). In order to achieve this, they need to give the impression of being "in charge *and* in touch" with ordinary citizens and their everyday preoccupations (Ibid). Politicians who display personality traits such as "narcissism [and] ironic detachment" are considered to be 'cool' (Gray 2009:150). 'Coolness' may also be gained by appearing rebellious towards authority, which is especially difficult ground to be on for politicians, for they are powerful by nature (Ibid:97). A politician who is able to successfully appear[18] 'cool' in the eyes of ordinary citizens is therefore a rare success.

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[17] Polls revealed a discrepancy between those who viewed the debate on television, and individuals who listened to it on the radio– the former believed Kennedy was the winner, while the latter thought otherwise (Pfau et al. 2007:21).

[18] Politicians can 'appear', rather than 'be cool', considering that the circumstances will never allow a them to truly inhabit those traits (Gray 2009:151). What ultimately matters is ability to 'perform' a particular persona.

With the constant focus on image rather than ethics, a political candidate can therefore be viewed as a celebrity (Marshall 1998; Street 2003). Like popular musicians, sportspeople or movie stars, politicians "have their own [merchandise]" (Street 2003:92). Politicians seek to provoke emotions, and to create identities for their audience (Ibid:92). In a similar manner to fans of popular culture texts, individuals may seek to define their political identity by affiliating with particular parties and ideologies, based on the political performance of their figureheads. Marshall (1998), for example, suggests that political "convention supporters" may be "translated into fans" (221). Popular culture is thus relevant to politics, because of its ability to maintain "affective bonds between voters, candidates, and parties" (Van Zoonen 2005:66). The celebritification of a politician allows them to be welcomed into the private lives of citizens.

With the above points considered, current US President Barack Obama perhaps exemplifies the perfect political candidate. As a Presidential hopeful, his progressive views, charisma, and even racial makeup allowed him to stand out from the crowd during the 2008 Presidential election as the 'cool underdog'. Young and pop culture-savvy voters found him to be relatable to; as Greenberg (2009) observes, Obama "spoke to younger people in their language and brought presidential politics to them directly" (77). David Axelrod, Obama's "chief strategist" [rather than "campaign manager"] was accused by Corsi (2008) for focusing "100 percent of Obama's campaign on a cult of personality"[19] (221). Aesthetically, Obama can dominate political discourse– photographs of him "shirtless in Hawaii" were well-circulated across the web and became news headlines, citizen-created parody videos such as 'Obama Girl'[20] allude to his 'sexiness', his connection to celebrity culture extends to a proclamation of their approval in various texts, including the viral music video, *Yes We Can*[21], and on his 100th day in office, *CNN* devoted a panel consisting of four unidentified African-American men to "assess the President's "swagga" (Griffin 2008; Leo 2009). Obama is therefore a political celebrity, with an image and persona arguably more recognizable than his policies. His supporters may be described as 'fans', which like popular culture, demands an active mode of consumption. The following chapters will

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[19] Additionally, Naomi Klein (2010) dubbed the Obama as "the first US President who is also a superbrand", and his image, which "follows the logic of marketing", sits a comfortably between being able to share his deepest ideals and visions, while staying "vague enough not to lose anyone but committed wing nuts" (xix,xxvii).

[20] *I Got A Crush on Obama* is the first video of the *Obama Girl* series developed by *Barely Political*, an entertainment website focused on political satire. It was featured in over 2,000 blog posts and viewed over 15,700,700 times (*Viral Video Chart* 2009). It features *Obama Girl,* a scantly-clad young woman proclaiming her love for the then-Presidential candidate through a popular song.

[21] *Yes We Can* was a "youth minded music video" produced by the Black Eyed Peas' will.i.am, and features himself and several other celebrities singing and mouthing the words to a musical version of Barack Obama's campaign speech (Stelter 2008). The video, released online, has received more than 17 million views (Ibid).

explore the audience's way of engaging and responding to this treatment of politicians and political culture.

2.3 HUMOR

Humor is one of the central focuses of this thesis, and this section begins with an assertion of its importance in everyday life. It later presents humor as a powerful communication and mobilization tool. Like popular culture above, humor is seen as relatable and interesting to ordinary individuals, encouraging them to participate in political culture. This section also justifies humor as an especially powerful way to approach politics, for its potential to criticize the system. Many of the arguments presented here serve as a theoretical background to illustrate the importance of political humor memes analyzed in this thesis.

2.3.1 THE PLACE OF HUMOR

The legitimization of humor as academic study began in 1914, when a Cambridge scholar of Ancient Greece, Francis Macdonald Cornford, associated comedic practices, such as "simple work-chants" to "Dionysial and Phallic ritual", thus arguing it as a culturally significant 'entertaining ritual' (Stott 2005: 25-26). Comedy is thus a creative natural form, "driven by the need to be alive"– it is "an essential element of being human" (Langer 1953, cited in Ibid: 26-27). This is further extended by Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's (1968) theory of the carnival. The carnival is "characterized by laughter", "excessiveness (particularly of the body and bodily functions), by bad taste and offensiveness, and by degradation" (Bakhtin, cited in Fiske 1987:241). The carnival is the result of the "collision" that occurs as "the power of the 'low' […] insist[s] upon its rights to take a place in the culture", it "constructs a second world and a second life outside officialdom" (Bakhtin, cited in Ibid). The carnival involves the inversion of the conventional rules of everyday life. John Fiske (1987) state that cartoons, for example, invert normal realities– "the adult [is seen as] incompetent, […] and the children as superior in insight and ability" (242). Carnival is not just "a spectacle seen by the people: they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people" (Bakhtin 1968, cited in Ibid: 245). Bakhtin's theory therefore identifies space in which low culture can assert itself, and to rebel, in its playful ways,[22] against higher culture to fulfill its function "to liberate, to allow a creative playful freedom" (Ibid:242).

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[22] Carnival "is an exaggeration of play" (Fiske 1987:242). It should however, be noted that carnival differs from play in the way it inverts rules rather than subscribe to them. Play theory will be discussed in more depth in the next section.

2.3.2 HUMOR AND HUMANITY

Rod Martin (2007) suggests that humor is "a universal aspect of the human experience", and laughter is a form of vocalization that is often indistinguishable among different cultures (2). Laughter is a vital part of human development, beginning from infanthood, and even those who are hearing or visually impaired are found to be able to respond by laughing, despite never perceiving the action itself in others (Ibid:3). Martin (2007) therefore argues that the ability to react to humor is "an essential part of what it means to be human" (3). Similar traits have also been noted in primates, suggesting humor and laughter as products of natural selection, and these aspects are believed to have originated in play activities (Gamble and Wilson 2005, cited in Ibid:3). While primates derive laughter from more physical forms of play, "human adults, by means of humor, continue to engage in frequent social play" (Ibid). Humor can develop into more complex forms appropriated by various contexts, further fueled by the advancement of technology and introduction of "new storytelling traditions" (Ibid 4). Still, humor often originates "in a basic play structure"– this is where a "nonsensical attitude" is approached, and activities are engaged "for the fun of it", as opposed to having 'important' goals (Ibid 4, 6).[23] The constantly evolving, versatile, and adaptable qualities of humor therefore allow it to become "a universal mode of communication", which can offer various functions in influencing society (Ibid 5).

Humor can bring people together. The role of comedy is to bond "both the audience and performer" (Freeman 2006, cited in Branagan 2007:44). Kuipers (2006) suggests laughter as a signal of acceptance of an invitation generated by a humorous occasion, and can become a sign of "social solidarity and togetherness" (8). At the same time, humor has the ability to "shock, insult, hurt, and consecutively be used as an excuse ('it was just a joke'), but nevertheless a sense of humor counts as a positive feature" (Ibid 9). Humor often reveals layered meanings, which allows it to be separated from ordinary forms of more serious communication (Ibid 9). Its framing, centered in its playfulness, allows "taboos and 'painful subjects'" to be dealt with, and "social boundaries" to be marked (Ibid 10). As Shifman and Blondheim (2010) state,

> since people often say humorously what they would never dare say blankly, a close reading of humorous texts can provide insight into what is lurking in the social mind, behind the façade of platitudes, conventions, and social expectations (1349).

Andy Borowitz, a political comedian and author (cited in Provenza and Dion 2010), argues that comedy has the capacity to "observe a fantastic phenomenon– in this case, the truth– from a safe perspective" (273). Bakhtin (cited in Gray et al. 2009) states that laughter allows the

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[23] Play theory will be explored in the next section.

humorist to "approach any object from a healthy distance", and to freely "experiment with it" (9). These are in line with Mary Douglas' (1975) argument regarding the joker's role as "a privileged person" who is allowed to say specific things without being "exposed to danger" (305). Behind the safety net of comedy, its practitioners are able to act as critics of authority, without being subject to the responsibilities associated with those of a higher position. For example, Heflin (2006) argues that entertainment program *The Daily Show* provides "scathing analyses about our democracy that would sound preachy without humor" (29). This allows its host, Jon Stewart (cited in Gross 2010), to consistently refute critics' claims that his position is close to one of a journalist– instead, he functions just as a comedian, or much like an "op-ed cartoonist", claiming that all he does is "express [*The Daily Show*'s] point of view comedically", and their view of "the political process". Comedian Tommy Smothers (cited in Provenza and Dion 2010) adds that humorists function well as critics of society because of their ability to 'get heard'– "to have a message, you can't be deadly serious"– to be the latter makes one "just an advocate of a point of view" (50).

Moran (2007) describes humor as a form of therapy, as laughter is a positive activity that can contribute to relief from stress or anxiety (30-33). She argues that by focusing on humor, one is able to "filter out negative aspects of the environment", or at least, cope with it in a stable manner (Ibid:37-38). A *Pew Internet* study revealed that sending and receiving email jokes are one of the "online citizen's" favorite activities, and humor is seen as "an effective rhetorical tactic for online campaigning" during the 2002 US election, despite it being "a more somber time" (Horrigan et al. 2003). This is because humor

> assuages the fuzziness, contentiousness, and anxiety of politics. It suits the activity of breaking from work, which many Net users are engaged in when they turn to look at political news and information (Ibid).

Humor is also useful in education to capture attention, "relieve anxiety, establish rapport with students, and make learning fun" (Ulloth 2002, cited in Branagan 2007:42). Branagan's (2007) study of humor in activism reveals that humor is highly inclusive, and can be used to convince people to support specific arguments, to simply communicate, and to "reach large audiences" (45-49). It can "empower, energize, and inspire actions, through lifting spirits and creating solidarity"– it bonds affinity groups, and is an effective means of non-violent protest (Ibid:51). Douglas (1975) argues, the joker is able to lighten "for everyone[,] the oppressiveness of social reality" (305). The role of the joker can be linked to one of a "ritual purifier", for

> laughter itself is cathartic at the level of emotions; the joke consists in challenging a dominant structure and belittling it; the joker who provokes the laughter is chosen to challenge the relevance of the dominant structure and to perform with immunity the act which wipes out the venial offense (Ibid:306).

2.3.3 HUMOR AND POLITICS

2.3.3.1 Discovery

Like popular culture, humor can be an approachable vehicle to explore politics. Furthermore, it can be argued that most of contemporary humor and comedy, particularly on television and the Internet, are essentially popular culture. As Heflin (2006) states, "entertainment doesn't have to be devoid of analysis and critical thought can be amusing" (30). Wagg (2011) adds that an appreciation of comedy "is increasingly seen as an index of cultural enlightenment in Western discourse" (182). To be able to laugh at jokes about one's own culture shows an acceptance and understanding of it, for comedy can reveal deep insights into identity politics– it "will continue to be an important way in which people tell themselves who and what they are, and who and what they've been" (Ibid:190).

Cooper and Bailey (2008) believe that while people used to learn about politics via "hard" news channels, 'soft news', as led by fake news programs *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, are increasingly preferred as news sources (138). They see the formula as similar to educational programs for children, such as *Sesame Street*, which provokes their young audience "to pay attention because of entertainment, but sneaking in educational information" (Ibid:139). This is perhaps the reason behind the popularity of *The Daily Show*– its first broadcast in 2004 boasted an audience of 1.2 million viewers, with an extra 8,000 watching reruns (Albani 2005, cited in Baym 2005:260). Moreover, *The Daily Show*'s audience is largely young, with 74 percent belonging to the 18-49 demographic, which shows the potential influence comedy has on the future generation (Easley 2010).

Utilizing the data from a 2000 *Pew Research Center* survey, Cooper and Bailey (2008) conclude that entertainment media, especially late night comedy,[24] can at the very least encourage the politically disinterested to learn about politics (146). In addition, a poll utilized by Young and Tisinger (2006, cited in Bennett 2007) reveals that viewers of late night comedy, particularly *The Daily Show*, are more informed about, and are more inclined to pay attention to politics (281-282). They also have a better knowledge on civic information than non-viewers (Ibid). While these entertainment programs do not aim to act as legitimate news sources, the basis of their humor depends on them. Jones (2005) sees knowledge as achieved by "not segregating politics from other things that matter in people's culture", for audiences are driven to learn more

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[24] This includes: *The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, Politically Incorrect, The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, and *Saturday Night Live*, among others.

about issues they are motivated to care about (193). Political humor achieves this purpose– they connect audiences to important issues by making links between politics and everyday life.

The inclusive quality of humor also allows space for participation, which is vital to political culture. For example, Carter and Stelter (2010), reporting on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*'s 'Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear'[25] notes that while Stewart and his producers refute any claims for influence over the political process, the attendees have different intentions. Feldman (cited in Ibid), an assistant professor of communication at American University however, believes that people attended the rally "because of their enthusiasm for the message [...] that is, discontent with extremist rhetoric and divisive politics– that is a political statement, and that makes participation political". The rally itself, held at Washington, DC's National Mall on October 30, 2010, was attended by around 215,000 people (Montopoll 2010). This reveals the power of political comedy to influence, especially when compared to a 'rival' rally held by conservative *FOX News* pundit, Glenn Beck, whose numbers were at 87,000, significantly lower.[26]

2.3.3.2 Critique

Mary Douglas (1975) states, "all jokes have [a] subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas" (295). She adds,

> the essence of the joke is that something formal is attacked by something informal, something organized and controlled, by something vital, energetic, an upsurge of life for Bergson, of libido for Freud.[27] The common denominator underlying both approaches is the joke seen as an attack on control (295).

The use of humor to attack and ridicule higher authority is thus logical, especially considering its 'safety'. Gray et al. (2009) consider comedy as "social critique", for it is "a form that is always already analytical, critical, and rational" (8). Heflin (2006), writing about *The Daily Show*, illustrates that laughter can be "dangerous to the status quo" (31). To laugh at somebody, argues

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[25] More commonly referred to as the 'Rally to Restore Sanity'. While Jon Stewart acts as the main figurehead for this rally, "fear" was added as a message from faux conservative pundit, Stephen Colbert, who combined his rally with Stewart's to inspire fear (directly parodying the rhetoric displayed in most right-wing media).

[26] Stewart's status as a (perhaps minor) 'celebrity' should also be considered as a contributing factor here. Also, The Rally to Restore Sanity, unlike Glenn Beck's 'Restoring Honor' rally in August 2010, may have attracted a larger crowd due to its arguably lesser partisan (or politically-fueled) message. Several news reports have considered Stewart's rally as essentially a parody, and an antithesis to Beck's.

[27] Douglas (1975) refers to both Bergson and Freud when defining the function of jokes (295). For Bergson, "the essence of man is spontaneity and freedom: laughter asserts this by erupting whenever a man behaves in a rigid way"; it is a disruption of routine (Ibid:294). Freud on the other hand, sees the joke as "a release from control" (Ibid). Both are similar, though Bergson believes the humor lies in the loss of control, while Freud sees it in the release of "new form of life that has [previously] been hidden" (Ibid).

Purdie (cited in Gray et al. 2009), is essentially a 'put down', to alter levels of power. Boler and Turpin (2008) believe that programs such as *The Daily Show* effectively function as a response to the "widely-shared frustration" that the mainstream news media is failing to fulfill its democratic functions (388). Instead of leaving viewers as passive consumers, comedy can encourage a playful engagement within its audience. This reveals that commentary, and more importantly, critique on news media and political culture can be delivered through humor.

Gray et al. (2009) consider satire as the most "overtly political genre" of humor (11). This is justified in the way satire

> not only offers meaningful political critiques, but also encourages viewers to play with politics, to examine it, test it, and question it rather than simply consume it as information or "truth" from authoritative sources (Ibid).

Satire is unique as a genre, for it possesses the following features: "aggression and judgment, play and laughter" [28]– it is "provocative, not dismissive", and seeks to belittle the target subject (Ibid:13). It demands a "heightened state of awareness and mental participation", as well as knowledge, from its audience (Ibid:15). It historically began as a literary mode, with early practitioners including the Romans, Horace[29] and Juvenal, that later influenced many generations of writers, including early American satirists Jonathan Swift and Mark Twain, and *MAD* magazine in the early 50s[30] (Ibid:15; 20). Throughout the more difficult points in history, including the Depression era and the Nixon administration, satirists have consistently provided harsh criticism of authoritative figures. President Nixon in particular, was a prominent target (Ibid:18-19). The tradition of satirizing Presidents continued post-Nixon through to the present era, beginning with Chevy Chase's impersonation of Gerald Ford[31] on *Saturday Night Live* (Ibid:19).

Another common mode of political comedy is parody. Parody is not synonymous with satire, though occasionally possesses its characteristics. Neale and Krutnik (cited in Gray et al. 2009)

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[28] Though comedy in general does not always produce laughter, Gray et al. (2009) argue that it is the sentiment produced by the artistic expression itself that matters.

[29] Gray et al. (2009) also noted that Horace "favored satire", for within this genre, there are possibilities of dealing with significant issues "in a simple, approachable manner" (11).

[30] Kanfer (2008) argues that the early satirists in turn, have influenced many modern-day counterparts, including George Orwell, Joseph Heller, *The Simpsons*, *The Daily Show*, and *South Park*.

[31] Chase, the first *Saturday Night Live* cast member to satirize a President, never made an attempt to look like or speak like Ford, but somehow convincingly portrayed him, according to Lorne Michaels (cited in Jones 2009), because he played "an attitude" (41). Chase's portrayal depended on "the cheapest laugh"– *Saturday Night Live*'s version of Gerald Ford, like the real-life President, often bumped into inanimate objects, except in a more exaggerated manner (Ibid:40). Chase (cited in Ibid) states that his portrayal rose from criticism and disapproval of the President– "I took his career, and put it in the dumper, because I did not want him to be President of this country". While the political implications are often unclear, this tradition of satirizing Presidents (or Presidential candidates) by exaggerating their incompetencies still remains strong on *Saturday Night Live*, and other similar programming.

affirm, "while satire draws on social conventions, parody draws on aesthetic ones" (17). Parody can satirize particular texts or genres by making fun of the way they function. Geoffrey Baym (2010) sees parody as

> a polemical imitation of a particular cultural practice, an aping that both reinvokes and challenges the styles and standards of a particular genre. Parody is a moment of criticism, one that employs exaggeration, often to the point of ludicrousness, to invite its audience to examine, evaluate, and resituate the genre and its practices (113).

Gray et al. (2009) further notes that Bakhtin's interest in parody stems from his fascination with "carnival and dialogism" (18). Bakhtin sees texts as constantly evolving, and continuously interpreted by readers in relation to other texts "socially, or intertextually" (Ibid). In relation to this, parody functions to "recontextualize how [audiences] make sense of another text or genre", which allows a different, way to interpret or understand existing texts (Ibid). Bakhtin (cited in Ibid) further adds that parody forces its audience to embrace sides of texts that are otherwise not laid bare, thus acting as a "media literacy educator". The parody of *The Daily Show* for example, is as an attack on the "conventions and pretensions of contemporary television news", from its opening sequence which mimics the introduction in conventional use, to its use if 'fake' correspondents to report on issues beyond the anchor's desk (Ibid).

Bill Moyers (cited in Hamm 2008) suggests that *The Daily Show* can be seen as either "an old form of parody and satire", or "a new form of journalism", and that one simply cannot "understand American politics in the new millennium without" it (160). Geoffrey Baym (2005) agrees, suggesting that *The Daily Show* brings more than laughs. It represents an "experiment in journalism" for its ability to reveal possibilities of satire to provoke commentary and debate (Baym 2005:261). Furthermore, Baym (cited in Jones and Baym 2010) also argues that such programming is "a *necessary* reaction to the decline of democratically useful news and public affairs programming" (280). Instead of inviting their audience to believe in the 'truth' as conveyed by much standard political programming, comedy, in the way it "deconstruct[s] public fakery" allows its viewers the freedom to make their own meanings, and to make sense of the situation in a playful manner (Ibid:286-288).

Bennett (2007) argues that comedy "can offer the freedom" to commentate and criticize the absurdity of political events in a "fun" venue "that fall[s] outside the bounds of ideologies and other preordained truths" (279). He further contests that most political comedy is hardly cynical for its own sake, but offers insightful commentary in "a playful way", rather than forcing the audience to "ignore and endure" the unfortunate realities and facts (Ibid). While news media conforms to economic pressures, comedy offers cleverly-executed cynicism that "can redress the corruption of political order" (281). Stephen Colbert's reinterpretation of "truth" claimed by

news reality as "truthiness",[32] for example, while cynical, is a playful, sharply-formed critique. Instead of recoiling behind cynicism, Bennett (2007) considers comedy as "employ[ing] cynicism as perspective-building tool to engage with politics and civic life" (283). The importance of satire and parody to the audience lies in the way it "demands" an "active process of engagement" from them—it forces them to "*figure it out*" (Jones and Baym 2010:290).

2.3.3.3 Coping

Gray's (2006) study on audiences of *The Simpsons* reveals that some people describe the program as successfully helping them "to face the realms of media and politics again with renewed vigor, optimism, and engagement" (155). A former White House intern he interviewed for example, states "Thank god there's *The Simpsons* to give perspective to all the crap you have to deal with daily!" adding that she appreciates the constant laughter it provides (Ibid). In other words, the ability to laugh at the end of the day is a coping mechanism. While comedy can be used to subvert authority, it can at the same time function as a way to escape from it, even temporarily. *The Daily Show*'s Rally to Restore Sanity may be a prime example of this: comedy is used to cut through the clutter of noisy, partisan politics, to reveal the need of a more levelheaded culture.

Humor also functions as a 'rational' way of responding to particular events, and this is particularly applicable to political culture. Luippold (2010) states,

> As humans we learn to normalize our surroundings, and when something is able to transcend that normalization in a particularly absurd or aggressive way, it creates a visceral response. That response is often laughter, or recognition as humor -- a recognition that is more immediately intellectual satisfying than almost anything else.

Jeffrey Jones (2005) claims that comedians essentially, in contrast to news pundits, act as rational respondents— they remind the audience of "common values", and oppose "the ideological fanaticism of contemporary politics" (120). They speak for the common man, rather than from the point of view of experts, and perhaps, that is what citizens really need. Jon Stewart (cited in Ibid 2005) believes that rather than a political advocate, he represents "the distracted center" generated from being "not in charge" and "feeling displaced from society", and *The Daily Show* is therefore able to speak as "the group of fairness, common sense, and

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[32] The word "truthiness" was coined by Colbert on the pilot episode of *The Colbert Report* on October 17, 2005. 'Truthiness' is defined by Colberrt as the 'truth' from one's gut, rather than books, or other factual sources– to 'feel' the truth in one's heart, rather than brains (*The Colbert Report* 2005). To further explain 'truthiness', Colbert promises to "to *feel the news at*" his viewers, rather just read the news at them, like ordinary news presenters (Ibid). Baym (2009) states that a recognition of "the multilayered world of Colbert" is needed to interpret this as "a challenge to those who would disregard fact to preserve belief" (135).

moderation" (114-115). Stewart is seen as credible as a commentator, because he is able to articulate what viewers feel and observe (Boler and Turpin 2008:389). In return, the audience trusts his views, because he speaks for them.

2.4 DIGITALITY

The texts analyzed in this thesis are based online, thus a basic understanding of the structure of the digital landscape is required. This section discusses the aspects of digitality that are central to this thesis– the ability for texts to be manipulated, online spaces, and memes. The latter is important, for the case studies in the subsequent sections are memes. The literature therefore provides the theoretical basis needed to understand this textual form. This section also explores issues such as user contribution, allowing an argument for audience productivity that will reappear throughout this thesis. It concludes with an assessment of the comedic landscape online, by considering the power citizens using digital tools have to create political critique via the video-sharing website, YouTube.

2.4.1 DIGITAL MEDIA

Papacharissi (2010) states that what is 'new' about 'new media', is the emergence of "new civic habits [that come from] the ways in which they challenge expectations we hold of democracy and the ways in which democratic conventions adjust to respond to these habits" (9). On online politics, Lessig (cited in *Mother Jones* 2007) states,

> In the analog world, it wasn't really that anyone was stopping ordinary people from becoming political actors, it was that the costs of doing so were so much larger. The technology is unleashing a capacity for speaking that before was suppressed by economic constraint. Now people can speak in lots of ways they never before could have, because the economic opportunity was denied to them.

Flew (2004) characterizes new, or digital media as being: manipulable, networkable, dense, compressible, and impartial– this media content is therefore easily altered, stored and spread "in large numbers across enormous distances" (Ibid). With citizens taking advantage of these qualities, digital media can reshape power structures, and enable the creation of "new worlds", with the Internet in particular hosting various forms of virtual communities (Papacharissi 2010:9).

The power of online culture is quantifiable in its ever-increasing popularity. While television is still crucial, the Internet is becoming an increasingly popular space for engaging with politics. The 2008 US election was a defining moment in online politics– a reported "record-breaking 46% of Americans" utilized the Internet and mobile devices to acquire information on various campaigns, express their opinions, and "mobilize others" into political action (Rainie and Smith 2008). US citizens are also more inclined to participate in online activism via social networks, and this has risen since the introduction of social networking sites in 2006 (Ibid). Social

networking sites are also perceived to be particularly important to young people – Kohut (2008) notes that 27% of Americans aged below 30, and 37% of those between the ages of 18 to 24 received campaign information from social networking sites such as MySpace and YouTube.

The prevalence of social networks allows people to seek political information beyond official sources, such as Press Releases and news media. Johnson et al. (2007, cited in Haynes and Pitts 2009) adds that "politically interested Internet users" are more likely to trust blogs than any other news source (53). Blogs, along with social networking, reveal that citizens have the capacity to rely not just on official sources, but on the opinions of their peers, or 'ordinary citizens' such as themselves. Social media is also an important development in providing citizens with the opportunity to "create their own content, distribute it online, and comment" on others' creations (Hanson et al. 2011:32). While the argument may appear technologically deterministic, digitality has undeniably influenced the way individuals choose to consume and disseminate information, or at least widened the possibilities. Digitality, because of its characteristics of immediacy and interconnection, allows not just official sources, but also ordinary citizens the opportunity to easily create and publish their own media. As a result, information can be discovered and consumed in a large variety of formats.

2.4.2 CROWDSOURCING AND SHARING

'Crowdsourcing', a term coined by *Wired* magazine's contributing editor Jeff Howe (2006), combines the terms "crowd" and "outsourcing", and is used to describe how companies are able to "take advantage of the networked world", the 'crowd'. Instead of relying solely on experts, ordinary individuals, as long as they are connected to specific networks, are able to contribute to projects, discussions, texts, and so on. An increasing number of media content providers acknowledge importance of audience participation, and have encouraged citizen-contribution in various ways,[33] a feature made possible with the introduction of digital tools that allow the simple and immediate transmission of information. In addition, this culture of crowdsourcing arguably gives ordinary individuals more power– "open source software, Wikipedia, peer-to-

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[33] News outlets for example, now directly ask their audience to submit stories online, or to created citizen-contributed platforms such as *CNN*'s *iReport*. *iReport* is a platform organized by *CNN* to encourage everyday citizens to share pictures and videos "happening where [they] are", and to "discuss the issues that are important to [them]". In addition to this, *iReport* also suggests "assignments" to their participants, offering a wide array of topics that they may be able to cover. While the content on *iReport* are "not edited, fact-checked or screened before they post", *CNN* does utilize "some of the most compelling, important and urgent iReports [...] and make them part of [their] news coverage". Here, the news organization claims that "together, *CNN* and *iReport* can paint a more complete picture of the news", showing their acceptance of a news environment where professionals and ordinary individuals can co-habitate.

peer filesharing" and so on, are the recent "most significant challenges [...] to the capitalist model of private property" (Johnson 2005: 206).

Johnson (2005) also adds that because of their "immersion in network culture",

> the 'kids today' are more likely to embrace collective projects that operate outside the traditional channels of commercial ownership. They're also much more likely to think of themselves as producers of media, sharing things for the love of it (206).

Raine (2009) agrees, arguing that young people today are considered to be "net-natives" who are accustomed to gathering information from a wide range of sources, and expect media to be interactive, vibrant, "immersive", and "compelling places to hang out and interact". "Media-making" is said to be meaningful, and " part of social networking" (Ibid). Smith (2009) concurs, stating that "the social web is built on people posting content about things that interest them", and that 30% of US Internet users in a *Pew Research* study about online media participation mentioned that they have shared something online that they created themselves, including "artwork, photos, stories or videos". Social networking too, is important. Recent changes to Facebook's algorithm has altered the priority items on each individual's 'news feed' to show newer, and consistently up-to-date content (Manjoo 2011). As a result, it favors items that are shared and 'liked' more frequently, rather than personal content– popular items thus become more noticeable, and disseminated on a larger scale. As Manjoo (2011) puts it: social networking, Facebook in particular, is "not just for baby photos anymore"– it has successfully manipulated itself to merge items from public and private spheres.

Although larger digital platforms such as Facebook dominate political culture especially during campaigns, the relationships between ordinary people and mass media have evolved from the traditional format of 'one way' broadcasting. Mark Poster (2006) argues that digital media has fundamentally altered the role of the audience– because of the continuous replicability of digital content, and the audience's act of reproducing and distributing them, they become not "consumers", but "producers", or "users" (244). Online platforms often encourage and enable a culture of creating and sharing. Furthermore, Jenkins (2008b) states, "collaboration no longer calls for expensive equipment and specialized expertise. The newest tools for collaborative work are small, flexible, and free, and require no installation". The rise of Web 2.0, characterized by "social software, social networking sites, open source software" was certainly influential to this culture (Miah 2011:144). Individuals engaging with websites containing primarily user-generated content, such as YouTube and eBay, are involved in "leisure work", where "work and leisure is 'mashed up' online"– users enjoy participating and interacting with content and each other productively, and do so to fill their spare time (Ibid). Shirky (2010) argues that these users "are motivated by something other than the desire for money" (46). He compares this logic to

the model of a local bar, where value is "created by customers for one another" (Ibid:47). While drinks are more expensive at a bar than one's home, they are frequented, for they draw "in people who are seeking a little conversation or just want to be around other people", because "humans intrinsically value a sense of connectedness" (Ibid:47; 48).

2.4.3 ONLINE SPACES

Electronic media, according to Meyrowitz (1985), can bring to individuals with similar interests a sense of belonging to a community. At the same time, he argues, "the evolution of media has decreased the significance of physical presence in the experience of people and events" (Ibid:vii). Moores (2004) sees this as the primary way electronic media has affected society– rather than in content, the "situational geography of social life" has been altered (22). Virtual spaces are emerging at a rapid scale, as users adopt them as 'their' own places (or spaces). The Internet, according to Johnson (2005), "has challenged our minds in three fundamental and related ways: by virtue of being participatory, by forcing users to learn new interfaces, and by creating new channels for social interaction" (117-118).

Rheingold (1999) notes that in virtual communities, identities can "commingle and interact electronically, independent of local time or location" (414). Jenkins (2006b) adopts Pierre Levy's vision of the "knowledge space" created by citizens who participate in the "new media environment" (136). The Web allows information to be quickly and easily exchanged, between large numbers of participants at once. With citizens in control, knowledge communities can potentially transform the way power is imagined (Ibid:137). Jenkins (2006b) considers online fan spaces as a prominent example of a knowledge community (137). Defined by "affinities rather than localities", fandom communities attract people who seek to identify themselves as audiences of a particular text, and seek to affirm that by participating, by submitting creative artwork or writing, or sharing their knowledge of a text's history (Ibid). As Kuiper (cited in Meikle 2005) suggests, "If you provide a space where people can be intelligent, imaginative, and creative, they will be" (79). Knobel and Lankshear (2007) borrow Gee's concept of "affinity spaces" to reflect this (206). Affinity spaces are "specially design spaces (physical and virtual) constructed to resource people [who are] tied together [...] by a shared interest or endeavor" (Gee, cited in Ibid:207). They encourage "participation, collaboration", and "distribution", traits that are often found throughout the sites where the case studies in this thesis emerge (Ibid).

Spaces too, become markers of a group's identity. Nancy Baym (2010) suggests that within a shared space, users ascribe to "rituals of shared practices" that are at times, recognizable only to 'insiders', the regular participants of particular communities (86). Examples can be seen in the shared languages, or a common sense of humor. Fandom communities for example, give nicknames to particular characters (Ibid:77). In describing *4Chan*, an image-based social forum, Dibbell (2010) writes, "though its message threads, [users] present a wall of endlessly-recycled inside references, catchphrases, and fragmentary punch lines, the briefest sampling of which will baffle: 'herp derp' […] 'So I herd u liek Mudkips', 'serious business'..." (85). Similarly, *I Can Has Cheezburger* CEO Ben Huh (2010a) believes that the network of LOL-based websites deals in "micro humor"– "the idea of an inside joke". Inside jokes are shared, intimate ways of laughing with particular people. It "has the ability to define 'insiders' and 'outsiders' within a community" (Jenkins et al. 2008:85). Inside jokes make sense only to "a small group of people understanding something that is contextually related to them" (Huh 2010a). On the Internet however, one can "laugh immediately about something with a person a thousand miles away", allowing humor to create shared connections, and on a much larger scale (Ibid). The idiosyncratic captioning of cat photographs for example, is an arguably widely-understood online inside joke. In addition, Huh (2010a) considers Internet memes to be "spawns of micro-humor", adding that they are particularly "geeky" by nature, formed by communities of people who feel "that that was a form of humor in which they could use to express themselves". They are often silly, idiosyncratic, and almost juvenile.[34]

2.4.4 MEMES

Harrison and Hirst (2006) define a meme as

> a thought or idea that spreads throughout society in an almost unconscious way. [It is a] small, transmittable lump of ideology– the ideas in our head that help us make sense of the world– that carries a particular set of social attitudes and directions about how we might think about an object, event, or social custom (22).

Originating from Richard Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene*, memes were initially defined in biological terms associated with terms such as "replication" and "imitation" (Knobel and Lankshear 2007:200). Dawkins identifies the "three key characteristics of successful memes" as: "fidelity", a quality that allows memes to be "readily copied and passed from mind to mind relatively intact"; "fecundity", which relates to the rate of the meme's spread and links to timing

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[34] The 'RickRoll' for example, is essentially a practical joke that leaves the victim no more than "dumbfounded" (Huh 2010a). It is harmless, though so unpredictable and pervasive that the meme was utilized by YouTube on April Fool's Day in 2008 to 'RickRoll' every viewer of their top videos (Ibid). This shows YouTube's understanding of a joke, and reveals the multiplicity of affinity spaces in which online jokes, due to their spreadability, can take place.

and location; and "longevity" (Ibid:201-202). Memes can also be comparable to viruses, which perhaps define the logic behind the term "viral media". Viral media, much like memes, are commonly used to describe well-acknowledged, and well-disseminated popular texts in online culture. In understanding the concept of how online content can 'go viral', one may borrow from Douglas Rushkoff's (1996) description of 'the media virus':

> Media viruses spread through the datasphere the same way biological ones spread through the body or a community. But instead of traveling along an organic circulatory system, a media virus travels through the networks of the mediascape. The "protein shell" of a media virus might be an event, invention, technology, system of thought, musical riff, visual image, scientific theory, sex scandal, clothing style, or even a pop hero– as long as it can catch our attention [...] Once attached, the virus injects its more hidden agendas into the datastream in the form of *ideological code*– not genes, but a conceptual equivalent we now call "memes". Like real genetic material, these memes infiltrate the way we do business, educate ourselves, interact with one another– even the way we perceive 'reality' (9-10).

Rushkoff (1996) illustrates how 'viruses' work to pervade culture, and eventually become part of it. Memes and viral ideas depend on recognition to survive, and the characteristics and atmosphere of the Internet allows this process. While there are differences between memes online and offline, most notably in the mediums in which they are spread, some distinctions, such as replicability and fecundity remain. The characteristic of longevity however, is not always applicable to online memes, mostly due to the unpredictable nature of how content is consumed online– whether or not a text becomes a meme is highly dependent on whether or not a large enough pool of users choose to respond to it. Memes are unpredictable, for one can never truly determine what will appeal to a mass audience (Curry, cited in Danung and Attaway 2008:17). This therefore also links to another feature of online memes– they cannot be "planned", but are "created by chance" (Ibid). Memes therefore, are arguably content that 'belongs' to the people that participate in their creation– rather than the one-to-many model of media communication that privileges those with power, memes depend on the participation and involvement of a large, passionate collective. Furthermore, ideas are not imposed by higher authorities, but 'chosen' by consumers– they are instrumental in a meme's longevity, and therefore become vital in ensuring the survival of an idea, and perhaps, a culture.

It is important to make the distinction between memes and viral content. Figure 2.1 is an appropriate visual illustration of this theory– while a viral text represent a single idea that is disseminated throughout various spaces, memes are expansions of this viral text, and evolve into various forms (Menning 2011). To talk about memes, according to Jenkins (2009), "places an emphasis on the replication of the original idea". The use of digital technology can accelerate and further encourage the process of replication, for "digital objects are *inherently* open to transformation" (Poster 2006: 245). LOLcats for example, like most memes, "is built heavily

upon remixing and appropriation" (Jenkins 2009). Over time, users have adopted its format–photographs of other animals, or its language, also known as LOLspeak, to create other texts. The LOLcats meme remains particularly pervasive because it contains multiple ideas that can be replicated to suit various contexts, including as explored in Chapter 3, politics. Jenkins (2009) argues that a meme's "viability" and longevity "is dependent on [its] ability to be adapted in a variety of different ways" by users to "explain the world around them". Memes are an act of reinterpretation, and essentially bricolage, a construction of "meanings that ring true with [one's] experiences" (Jones 2005:26). Shifman (2011) adds that memes are texts that lure "*extensive creative user engagement* in the form of parody, pastiche, mash-ups or other derivative work" (4). They are inherently open to transformation, and are creatively-constructed products that belong to what Lessig (2008) dubs as "remix culture".

To participate in remixing is to essentially blend elements from several texts together to create a new product. Memes are often remixes– they possess "a rich kind of intertextuality, such as wry cross-references" to other cultural products (Knobel and Lankshear 2007:209). Lessig (2008) elaborates that remix culture is important in sustaining communities, and in education (77). Affinity spaces such as *I Can Has Cheezburger*, essentially encourage its participants to learn new skills, such as joke-making, or the use of digital technologies. To take part in the creation of new texts by drawing on existing ones fosters "interest-based learning"– to do "something with […] culture, remixing it, is one way to learn" (Ibid:80). Knobel and Lankshear (2007) see meme creation as "a new literacy practice" (203). This is constituted in the way practitioners are able to create texts that represent the tone of particular affinity spaces, or in the audience's ability to "read or interpret" a text, "and the 'spin' they will give it as they pass it along to others" (Ibid: 221).

2.4.5 COMEDY AND DIGITALITY

Zizi Papacharissi (2010) argues that digital media reveal the way citizens engage in direct democracy in selective ways (150). While they do utilize online sources to seek information on political policies and issues, this is not enough to "sustain and encourage civil engagement" (Marcella et. al, cited in Ibid). Citizens are instead, reportedly more attracted to "the informality of online polls and political jokes and cartoons" (Ibid). Utilizing video-sharing website YouTube as an example, Papacharissi (2010) assesses its prevalence of "remixed content", some promoting "political satire and dialogue" (151). As "the contemporary take on the editorial cartoon and satire", its main attraction lies in its ability to challenge a culture

desensitized with sound and image bites (150;151). Corsi (2008) states that the Internet has "an extensive ability to archive past records", allowing users to acquire even the most obscure information (9). Users who post political content on spaces such as YouTube are thus able to draw from a wide variety of available sources to create and easily publish texts that can result in public embarrassment (for the victims, and sometimes producers). Papacharissi (2010) adds that the space "facilitates expression, reassures citizens of their autonomy, and offers individuals some form of control of the public agenda" (151). YouTube also "completes the media and news sphere" that is consumed by citizens, "by adding various and diverse takes on political reality" (Ibid).

Stefan Kanfer (2008) notes that the primary difference between "gags of the 19th century and the 21st" lies not in their content, but of the media in which they are disseminated (17). Geoffrey Baym (2010) considers political satire material on YouTube as similar to the 'fake news' programs he studies in the way they "hopelessly [blend] the popular and the political, the trivial and the serious, the inane and the significant", in order to provide "a much-needed corrective to the kind of political discourse on which the mainstream media usually insist" (146). While the mass media is instrumental in producing, circulating, and enabling the consumption of political humor, ordinary citizens too, have a part to play, especially with the preoccupation of digital mediums in every life. Burgess (2011) observes that the 2008 US Presidential election was especially crucial– "no one can seriously doubt that there is a significant relationship between humor, politics, and YouTube" (120). This pattern of citizen-driven production and participation is expected to constantly increase and more importantly, evolve, as more individuals acquaint themselves with digital tools. Technical proficiency however, matters less than cultural competence in the affinity spaces studied throughout this thesis. This therefore leads to the use of play as a theoretical concept to approach the act of creating memes.

2.5 PLAY THEORY

Jeffrey Jones (2005) claims that the popularity of "new political programming"[35] lies in the fact that it is reflective of a generation of young people who demand politics to be "pleasurable", connected "with their interests and concerns", and "meaningful and engaging" (9). Online political humor, as explored in the following chapters, arguably possesses these characteristics. Audiences are attracted to it, perhaps purely because it is fun, "pleasurable", and appeals to their interests. Play theory is methodologically valuable in legitimizing the frivolous and idiosyncratic humor contained in the examples in this thesis. Furthermore, the permissive quality of the online spaces encourage audiences to willingly participate, regardless of their political knowledge or skill levels. As a result, the texts created may be incongruous, and even 'silly'. These all reveal features that can be strongly linked to play theory, which will be clearly defined here. This section will conclude with several applications of play theory that will foreground the arguments made in Chapters 3-5.

2.5.2 DEFINING PLAY THEORY

One of the earliest conceptualizations of play theory was developed in 1938 by Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga. In *Homo Ludens,* Huizinga (1949) expresses play as essential to the generation of culture– "culture itself bears the character of play" (ix). This is based on his view that play existed before culture, for animals have played before humans (1). Play is therefore more than "purely physical or purely biological activity"– it is "instinctive", and its function is "*significant*" (Ibid). The ability and purpose of enjoying an activity cannot be answered logically with biological reasoning, and thus contains a "primordial quality" that "resists [...] all logical interpretation" (3). Furthermore, much of culture, including law, politics, military, marriage, art, and more, is based on play. William Stephenson's (1967) writing, stemmed from Huizinga's viewpoint, focuses on the adaptation of play theory into the field of mass communication, and argues that at its best, "people become absorbed in *subjective play*" (1). He centers his argument in the belief that the audience is not passive, and instead, knowingly enjoys consuming media "in a distinctive way" (Ibid:2). The mass media may be losing reliability as an informational source, but their function as "entertainment and enjoyment" should not be undermined (Ibid:3). The properties of play, within the context of this thesis, is best categorized by Jenkins (2011), who considers the following as "the core principles of play": passion, permission, participation, process, productivity, and pleasure.

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[35] Political programming with an 'entertaining', usually humorous approach, such as *The Daily Show* and *Real Time with Bill Maher*.

2.5.2.1 'Requirements' For Play

To possess the *passion* to play is one of the most important aspects of this theory. This is derived from Bettleheim's (cited in Jenkins 2011) belief that play is "open-ended, free-flowing, self-determined", and therefore "experienced as a site of freedom and passion". According to Huizinga (1949), play lies in the fact that it "is free", and "is in fact, freedom"– Play "is a voluntary activity", driven by "instinct", and executed purely because one "enjoy[s] playing" (7-8). He further notes that play is "never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty" (Ibid:8). Play does not have to be logical– "We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational" (6). Play is "largely purposeless and gratuitous" (Griffin 1994:84). Play thus requires *permission*; that is, to see it as "an acceptable mode of engaging with activities" (Jenkins 2011).

Permission also involves lowering "the consequences of risks", and allowing oneself to engage with others "with good humor" (Ibid). Brown (2008), speaking about his design company, believes in disregarding any real boundaries for how far people can stretch their ideas– "a permissive environment" allows for play to happen. Stephenson (1967) stresses that his central argument is not to encourage entertainment media to push to its extremities– "I am not asking that comics be made funnier, or movies more spectacular", but to encourage "conditions under which people can have communication-pleasure"[36] (205). It is this 'permissive environment' that consequently encourages users to *participate*; to "enter into the fun". While individuals witness others playing, they do so "with the anticipation of future participation" (Ibid). Glasser (2000) agrees, stating that for Gadamer (1988), "play illustrates how individuals *participate* in the meaning of what they encounter" (26). Participation and play may thus be considered as symbiotic– individuals both participate to play, and to play, they must participate. While studying Norwegian television, Enil and Syvertsen (2007) note that the media are increasingly trending towards more individualization, personalization and user-involvement, and three key concepts in media theory/sociology essential to the discussion of audience motivation: "participation, play and socializing" (158). They conclude that young people are more likely to participate in media if they are easily accessible, and if they feel amused and have a good time (Ibid:155). Play is therefore a factor in encouraging individuals to stay engaged with a media product.

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[36] This refers to the notion that play "has little gain for the player except in self-enhancement" (Stephenson 1967:3). It is "enjoyment, contentment, serenity, delight", characterized in "entertainment, art, drama, conversation, sociability, and the like" (Ibid:194). The use of play for self-satisfaction is perhaps one of the most important aspects of this theory.

2.5.2.2 The Results Of Play

Process refers to the notion of being able to derive satisfaction from the experience of a specific activity, rather than the quality of its end result. As Jenkins (2011) affirms, "Play values process as much or more than product". This allows players to develop "basic skills", without having concerns for their level of competency (Ibid). Play, according to Stephenson (1969), "is enjoyed, no matter who wins" (46). By playing, there is an "ease and freedom in which moral standards" do not always dominate, allowing ideas to be limitless (Griffin 1994:85). Play however, like games, does contain "some set of rules", and when followed correctly, can "attract admiration" (Ibid:84). These rules are often connected to the genres or spaces or play. In "a typical wit battle", for example, one "must pay attention to [one's] opponent's words and match them, or overmatch them" (Ibid:89).

This focus on process can also lead to *productivity*– individuals can freely "transform" products, from "social relations" to "trying out new structures" and roles, allowing play to be linked to creativity (Jenkins 2011). Jenkins (2011) further elaborates that play allows "old rules and structures" to be "suspended", letting individuals "transform and transcend [their] environments". Huizinga's (1949) belief that individuals play merely out of instinct, rather than for any explainable need related to biological survival relates to this– the spontaneity, rather than confinement of play allowed the constant creation and re-creation of culture. Berlyne (1969, cited in Martin 2007), a humor studies researcher, defines play as any "enjoyable, spontaneous activity that is carried out for its own sake with no obvious immediate biological purpose" (234). This unforced spontaneity may explain the creativity in individuals who participate in political memes online, either as creators or audiences. Martin (2007) also sees a significant similarity between humor and creativity, suggesting that humor itself is a form of creativity, and both possess the necessary elements of "incongruity, surprise, and novelty" (101). Therefore, it may be argued that play, provides the ground for participating in meme-making activity that is directly linked to the act of creative collaboration in generating humor online. Comedian Ricky Gervais (2011) states, "creativity is the ability to play. And, to be able to turn the facility [37] on and off when necessary".

Most significantly, play often results in, and is encouraged by *pleasure*. William Stephenson (1967) notes that while psychologists have attempted to define play, "all that seems certain is

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[37] He also notes that according to scientific studies, the "facility" here is creativity– the terminology is appropriated because it is not a "learned skill". Creativity is not something that can be taught (Gervais 2011).

that it is 'fun'" (46). Satire, which Griffin (1994) argues is essentially a rhetorical form of play, was originally associated "with food and festivity", and ultimately revels "in an inverted world of delightful absurdity" (84). Stephenson (1967) agrees, stating that "play is enjoyed, no matter who wins" (46). Huizinga (1949) notes that those engaged in play can experience "joy", and "the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'" (28). While "work" deals with "reality", play "provides self-satisfaction" (Stephenson 1967:45). John Fiske (1987) considers play to be empowering– citing Palmer's (1986) study on children playing with television, he concludes that "children [enjoy] the control" allocated by the remote control to play "with channel switches or tuning buttons to distort the image" (231). He also adds that children's re-enacting, or "re-making" an episode of a television show, simply out of their own interests, can bring "pleasure and power" (Ibid). Fiske (1987) notes the similarity between this childhood activity, and female soap opera viewers[38] (232). Here, the soap opera viewers derive pleasure from actively engaging with what is being presented by a specific text, as well as questioning its control over their personal, selective methods of viewing (Ibid). Their ability to choose which characters they may relate to, without being dictated by the text itself, reveals according to Fiske (1987), a way of "exerting control through play" (232). In this way, pleasure can be derived from consuming a text, but differs between every reader, depending on their level of agreement with meanings presented. As Fiske (1987) summarizes, "Play is active pleasure: it pushes rules to the limits and explores the consequences of breaking them" (236). This reveals another important feature: the audience, rather than the text, wields power.

2.5.3 APPLICATIONS

Although it is confined to the realms of formal actions, due to the organizational structure and institutions of society, politics, according to Stephenson (1967), is a culture deeply rooted in play. This is most apparent when politics is witnessed "from the public viewpoint"– "the diplomats and politicians do the work; the public merely has something given to talk about, to give them communication-pleasure" (60). The culture of politics is also inherently playful, for "few really know what they are doing; yet all speak knowingly" (Ibid:109). This takes place "on a stage, outside reality– it is a play, so as to make political conversation possible" (Ibid:110). Furthermore, "political mongering" is no different than any other funny act performed "to humor an audience" (Ibid). This argument presents an unstable dichotomy between politics and frivolity, which is also visible in the texts throughout this thesis. The following examples apply

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[38] As studied by Ang (1985) and Hobson (1982)

play theory to news and politics, and are articles that can easily be related to the analyses in the next three chapters.

Theodor Glasser (2000), extends Stephenson's (1967) discussion, noting that people constantly return to reading the news each day "even in the absence of anything vitally important [...] or informative" (23). He notes that researchers should question beyond motives that are "rational" in consumer choices (Ibid). Alter (cited in Ibid) believes that communication can be 'fun', and news stories are "a distinct and distinctively valuable opportunity for individuals to engage a very public world in a very private and personally satisfying way" (24). To play with the news is to treat it as an open text, and to reinterpret in one's own language, the meanings already presented. Instead of conforming to "entire narratives", individuals utilize journalism as "a reference tool", "collecting" only specific pieces of information (Ibid:27). Similar to this is Jeffrey Jones' (2010) analysis of *The Colbert Report* as "play with a serious intent" (185). Jones (2010) argues that Colbert "destabilizes" the rationality of right-wing pundits through his exaggerated parody and narrative filled with contextual jokes (199). He portrays those he criticizes, and as part of the game, the audience is called to recognize the "elaborate parodic construct", and they do, by playing along, and becoming his "worshipful followers" (Ibid:189). Colbert thus provides an alternative understanding of an original text via play– he 'becomes' part of right-wing political culture "through playful means", and as a result, is able to "[come] to terms with it"[39] (229). With Colbert, political critique is therefore deployed through 'serious play'.

Geoffrey Baym (2007) applies Play Theory in analyzing *Better Know a District*, a regular segment on *The Colbert Report*. Here, Baym (2007) argues that the segment "represents politics as a form of postmodern play, manipulating elements of the real to create a spectacle that calls into question the very logic of representation" (359). While Colbert is actively providing a forum for issues and politicians, in this case, house representatives, that are commonly less 'important' to 'real news', Baym's (2007) close analysis reveals that there is often more 'sillyness' involved. The segment initially appears to be educational, and introduces a lesser-known local politician to Colbert's audience, which in some ways, it is. Colbert interviews said politician, but instead of delving deeper into real issues, he often resorts to ridiculing the political figure he is interviewing by making references to their personal lives – an exaggeration of what is already often portrayed in news media. Baym (2007) suggests that there is an active preoccupation with ridicule - sometimes, the politician needs to be 'provoked' into playing, by Colbert suggesting

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[39] This relates to the argument earlier in this chapter, which sees humor as a coping mechanism.

various non-politically relevant activities, such as arm-wrestling. Baym (2007) considers *Better Know a District* as a piece that "treats politics as play", but also exists as a multilayered reading that may offer a critique of the techniques of "postmodern spectacle" itself (373,374). This can thus be applied to political humor memes– users arguably are prompted to participate because they are entertaining, but at the same time, can expose a multilayered critique of the political system.

As explored earlier in this chapter, the news media are increasingly less reliable as informational sources. There are few realistic possibilities allowing people's voices to be heard in traditional media. The many participatory modes of mediation allowed by digital media and Web 2.0 however, allows the creation of alternative spaces and communities where individuals can gather and engage in media creation of their own. The act of playing with 'open texts', which can be applied to meme creation, is therefore worthy of academic study, particularly if the blurring boundaries between the popular and serious, and the personal and public are considered. Through the rejection of these particular dichotomies, one may begin to make sense of the culture of creative collaboration and sharing.

2.6 METHODOLOGY

This thesis examines the ordinary citizen's use of digital tools to create responses to news and politics in ways that make sense to them. The main focus will therefore be on the humorous texts, and the process of their creation, for they represent citizen responses. To begin, a 'timeline' for each meme, from its original event to its conceptualization, and then dissemination, will be formed where applicable. This will reveal the way these texts evolve from viral ideas into memes. It will also illustrate the various forms which they can take, and where their inspirations are drawn from, as users actively reinterpret factual events.

A selection of still image memes and online spaces will be used as case studies to illustrate the arguments in this thesis. Chapter 3 focuses on *Pundit Kitchen* and *FARK* to represent the creative processes within particular affinity spaces. These spaces are chosen because they particularly represent the culture of sharing and creating political humor, which is relevant to the thesis. They also exist as examples of pre-eminent online spaces where users would frequent for the purposes of creating or discovering political humor. *Pundit Kitchen* and *FARK* are distinctive to the wider sphere of online political media, for they act as a spaces that strongly encourage play, while still remaining politically engaged. The memes in Chapter 4 and images in Chapter 5 are chosen for their popularity and high circulation across various different spaces. The online spaces in Chapter 3 are similar to the ones that encourage meme creation in Chapter 4 in the way they focus on the humorous aspects of politics. While these spaces and memes tend to attract individuals with liberal politics, it can also be argued that the humor is created for its own sake, rather than ideologically biased, as later exemplified in *Pundit Kitchen*'s criticism of Democrats in Chapter 3.

Because this thesis focuses strongly on the production of meaning, a qualitative analysis is a fitting approach. McKee (2003) states that a qualitative analysis can inform researchers on "how other human beings make sense of the world" (1). Discourse analysis in particular, will be utilized, for it allows the texts to be interpreted in relation to the existing social contexts within the reader's knowledge. As Schirato and Yell (2000) state, discourses can "produce power relations; they specify what are possible and valued in specific institutional contexts" (59). In addition, Johnson (2005) suggests that a narrative study is appropriate for analyzing the meanings presented in texts (118). Wright (1995) sees the myth, which can take place within narratives, as particularly significant especially when applied to appropriate social contexts

(448). Myths are "easily understood", and "immediately recognizable" pieces of information [40] (Ibid:451). He therefore sees narratives as "maximumly meaningful" in the way they reproduce "the order and experiences of life […] in terms of motivations and communication" (Ibid:450).

The discourses of mythic masculinity and power will be prominent within the case studies in the next three chapters. Chapter 2.2 established that politics is essentially a performance. Barker and Galasinski (2001) suggest that gender identities too, are performed (87). Instead of relying purely on biological definitions, gender can be seen as a social construct, performed and consistently repeated by the "law", "which obliges gendering under the heterosexual imperative" (Ibid). Performances of gender can be 'read' in "the conversations of 'everyday' life" (Ibid:88). Snapshots of identity constructs therefore, are constitutions of the reader's reality, "forming powerful ways of thinking about the world" (Ibid:119). Utilizing narrative and discourse analysis, the texts in this thesis will be revealed as ultimately, adhering to hegemonic visions of masculinity– a privilege of "men over women", and masculine traits as form of "domination", and essentially, power (Connell 2005:261).

In order to analyze the process of humor creation, an analytical framework will be adopted from Medhurst and DeSousa's (1981) "basic taxonomy [of] identification and classification" of political cartoons (199). This was developed so that one may be able to recognize, and therefore, analyze "the elements of graphic persuasion embodied in the political cartoons" (Ibid: 199). Medhurst and DeSousa's (1981) study, a combination of content and discourse analysis, constructs political cartooning as persuasive texts. This thesis however, is more interested in the way inspiration and sources from various influences are remixed to create texts that are compelling, meaningful, and entertaining. This study values the emergence of a more recently available mode of communicating, and how audiences seek to exploit it.

Medhurst and DeSousa's (1981) analytical framework is useful, for there are various similarities between user-generated memes and political editorial cartoons. Firstly, like editorial cartoonists, ordinary citizens function as respondents to news, rather than being obliged to present factual information. In this way, they both function from a point of view that contains little political power. Buell and Maus (1988) assert that "editorial cartoonists are not reporters or editors", but "their material flows from the news", which is an observation that can also be applied to the user-created examples in this thesis (848). Both editorial cartoons and political humor memes, like most forms of political satire, engage in the active reconstruction of

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[40] The mythic representation of good versus evil in *Star Wars*, as defined in Chapter 1, is an example. Most media that contains a story format essentially contains narratives, including television programming, films, and news.

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meanings. Because this thesis focuses on still images, like editorial cartoons, the memes are forced to communicate meanings within a single frame–

> Unlike the speaker or writer who develops ideas sequentially in time or space, the editorial cartoonist (as opposed to the strip cartoonist) must convey the message at a single glance. Cartoonists usually present their ideas within the confines of a given frame. (Medhurst and DeSousa 1981:205).

They also note that cultural symbols that are widely understood by the text's audience are utilized by cartoonists. This too, is applicable to the creation of online memes. The importance of popular culture as a 'common language', as will be explored throughout this thesis, proves this.

Various topics are referred to in the construction of texts by both political cartoonists, and ordinary citizens in the creation of humorous texts. These topics will be appropriated wherever relevant as a framework for textual analysis throughout this thesis. While the framework is developed to examine political cartoons during campaigning and election periods, it is easily adaptable to suit everyday political situations. According to Medhurst and DeSousa (1981), the range of topics include:

1. **Political Commonplaces:** Campaign occurrences, or in the case of this thesis, news events that according to Conners (2005), are tied to other current events "the political process itself" (481). They may include any mentions of policy, including "the economy", "foreign relations", and "campaigning" (Medhurst and DeSousa 1981:200).
2. **Literary/Cultural Allusions:** "Any narrative or form, whether drawn from legend, folklore, literature, or the electronic media" (Ibid:201). According to Conners (2005), this includes any references to culturally-specific texts in mediums such as television, films, books, and more (481).
3. **Character Traits (of a political figure):** These may be subject to "physical or psychological exaggeration" (Ibid). Either way, they draw "upon popular perception of the politician's personal character" (Medhurst and DeSousa 1981:202). This will be further emphasized in Edwards' framework below.
4. **Situational Themes:** These are "idiosyncratic and transient situations which appear unexpectedly" throughout a political timeline (Ibid). These are "short-term situations", and are arguably of little political importance (Conners 2005:481).

As the memes analyzed throughout this thesis will focus on specific political figures, the third point Medhurst and DeSousa's (1981) framework will be expanded where applicable, and incorporated with discourse and narrative analysis to uncover meanings that underlie the texts. Edwards (2001) studied previous research on "presidential leadership requirements", and

consequently recognizes "five leadership-relevant elements that were referenced repeatedly" in editorial cartoons surrounding the 2000 Presidential campaign (2142). She argues that cartoonists utilize the aforementioned elements as "metaphorical representations" that may influence or inform a reader to react either positively or negatively to the presented Presidential candidates, which in this case, were Al Gore and George W. Bush (Ibid). The representations work on a level that is recognizable to readers, and are categorized in the following criteria:

1. **Character:** The display of ideals of a good leader in a specific candidate, including traits as "honesty, integrity, and consistency" (Ibid).
2. **Viability:** Presidential campaign cartoons that make judgments on a candidate's "potential for victory" (Ibid).
3. **Competency:** Inclusions of traits such as "intelligence, capability and political effectiveness" in a leader (Ibid).
4. **Charisma:** Portrayals that allude to the "glamour or appeal", and "personality and likeability" of a Presidential candidate (Ibid).
5. **Independence:** This was considered to be an issue of particular significance to the 2000 Presidential campaign– Bush's connection to his father, and Gore's party affiliation with former President Clinton are considered to be possible "outside influences" to their ability to govern. A candidate that is able to be divorced from these factors allows them to be expressed as independent, and therefore, capable leader (Ibid: 2143).

A researcher's analytical ability these memes is determined by their knowledge of US politics, Internet culture, and mainstream popular culture. It is thus important to clarify my place as an analyst in the study of the spaces and texts in this thesis. My understandings of particular knowledge spaces analyzed here comes from my position as an active participant who votes on, shares, and occasionally creates texts. The case studies are also studied critically with reference to academic theory. The analysis of humorous political memes will therefore be a reflection my position as both an insider and an outsider.

As with most qualitative analysis, it is important to note that the interpretations made will vary between individuals, as media texts are polysemic. Furthermore, Volosinov (cited in Schirato and Yell 2000), writing about language, theorizes that there is no real "perfect", or "stable" system of meanings attached to signs (25). Instead, meanings behind words are entirely dependent on their reader, who will constantly adapt them for oneself, and fill them with interpretations "drawn from behavior and ideology" (Volosinov 1986, cited in Ibid:26). Therefore, it is context that brings meanings to specific signs. This is especially applicable to the

texts in this thesis, which are constantly altered and reconstructed by individuals. Although they may possess political capabilities, users often frequent the online spaces[41] to engage purely in the playful creation of humor. This in return, may alter the meanings of any unintentional deeper political messages that might be read by anyone aside from the creator of a specific image, leaving qualitative analysis to be entirely subjective. Lester (2006) however, considers a qualitative analysis of texts as highly valuable, especially when tiny details are gathered via one's "personal, professional, or cultural" perceptions to create successful judgment of meanings (117). This may in the end, lead to the uncovering of "universal truths" (Ibid). As Medhurst and DeSousa (1981) affirm, not every reader "will recognize and react" similarly, though ultimately, the elements that are present within these texts show the variety of sources that creators draw from to communicate specific information (217).

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[41] This is especially true in Chapters 4 and 5, which explore spaces that are not particularly dedicated to political humor.

Chapter 2: Images

Figure 2.1: How viral content can be classified as memes.

Chapter 3
Playtime with Putin
Image Macros and Online Creative Spaces

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In an issue of *Wired* magazine, comedian Chris Hardwick (2011) writes that the Internet has "completely changed the landscape of comedy" (148). While comedians previously struggled to get attention in the real world, the Internet enables the broad distribution of comedic material, including political humor in the form of writing, videos, and still images. Political satire videos, for example, are easily discoverable, and readily available on specific YouTube channels such as *JibJab* and *Barely Political*. Still images can be found in countless Web communities, including Tumblr pages such as *Obamarama,*[42] *Comedy Central*'s *Indecision*[43] blog, which features 'caption challenges', and LiveJournal's *ONTD_politic*s.[44] All three publish jokes based on US politicians. The chapter will focus on *Pundit Kitche*n, the significance of which was established in chapter 1, to explore an online affinity space used by a community dedicated to the humorous creation of, and responses to political humor memes. It will also discuss the blurring distinctions between politics and popular culture through 'Vladurdays', a regular section of image macros about Vladimir Putin on *Pundit Kitchen*, and its use of character-based humor creation as similar to the practice of writing fanfiction. Finally, the Biden vs. Palin meme, which originated in *FARK* will function as a case study to question the influences of editorial control within affinity spaces, and the spread of a meme across multiple knowledge communities.

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[42] *Obamarama* is a Tumblr blog dedicated to captioning photographs of members of the Obama administration.

[43] The term 'Indecision' originated from *Comedy Central*'s series of special programming hosted by Al Franken. It focused on the 1992 Presidential campaign. It was subsequently revived in 2000, and every Presidential campaign/ election period ever since as a regular segment on *The Daily Show*. As of mid-2007, a blog titled 'indecision2008' was launched. While it did showcase video clips and segments from *Comedy Central*'s politically-themed programming, it also features news stories from a humorous perspective, allowing viewers to post comments on them. There is also a regular 'Caption Challenge' section, which allows users to submit and vote on captions for photographs posted by the blog's editors. It has been renamed as 'Indecision Forever' after the 2008 Presidential election (Finley 2007).

[44] 'ONTD' stands for "Oh no they didn't", one of the largest and well-known communities on blog service LiveJournal. The community is dedicated to celebrity and entertainment news, and is entirely sourced from a collective of users that post material that interests them. It is a successful entertainment blog, known for being the first to break some news. Examples include being the first to reveal the firing of a cast member on sci-fi series Fringe, and leaking the information on teen actress Jamie Lynn-Spears' pregnancy. It has since then developed multiple spin-off sites dedicated to books, movies, sports, specific celebrities, and politics, among others. 'ontd_politics', not to be confused with 'ontd_political', is a now-purged community dedicated to the creation of political humor, inspired by fandom communities. Their now-unavailable Facebook group described ontd_politics as "a group for everyone who stayed up until 2am posting on a live thread. For everyone who has used the word "fierce" to describe Michelle Obama more than once. For everyone who's read [or written] Bush/Cheney slash". Among the creative and collaborative humor that received a large number of submissions at the time was an entire post dedicated to Joe Biden image macros on the Vice President's birthday.

The texts explored in this chapter are image macros. A macro refers to a process within applications, such as word processors, that will run automatically in response to specific user commands. The term 'image macro' is now used widely in Internet culture to describe an image with a superimposed caption, usually for humorous effect (Rutkoff 2007). In this sense the 'macro' may refer only to automated processes that allow users to easily add captions to images in the accepted style. The term may have emerged on the USENET forum that became comedy website *Something Awful*, where captioned photographs were allegedly exchanged frequently by users humorously insulting each other (Brubaker 2008:118). 'Image macro' is now normalized in online vernacular.[45]

Image macros may be considered as a digital derivative of editorial cartoons. In both forms, images and words are combined to create a humorous effect, resulting in a joke presented within a single frame. The difference between them is that cartoonists craft their own jokes, while image macro creators submit captions to pre-existing photographs. User-submitted captions however, are also common within traditional media. *The New Yorker* for example, has been running a 'Cartoon Caption Contest' on the final editorial page of each issue since 2005 (Adams 2011). Similarly, 'The Adventures of Naked Man', a long-running[46] caption contest in Melbourne newspaper *The Melbourne Age*, features "Naked Man", "an all-action chap" who is found in various everyday settings "untroubled by the fact that a hat and a pair of shoes are his only nod to modesty"[47] (*The Evening Post* 1999, cited in Lloyd 2007:7). Lloyd and Jewell (2009) consider that one of the appeals of the contest is its ability to encourage reader engagement in its lack of "a pre-existing answer– the entrant's own caption 'solves' the puzzle", 'completing' the joke (66). Similarly, *Pundit Kitchen* encourages users to create and submit their own image macros from candid photographs of politicians provided by either the website or the user by using applications such as the 'LOL Builder". This high level of user participation is the reason behind *Pundit Kitchen*'s popularity, and more importantly, its existence.

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[45] The academic analysis of image macros, as with other rapidly developing digital terminology, is lagging behind their online use. This is also the case for specific memes themselves, which is why this thesis will utilize user-contributed websites such as *Know Your Meme* as a resource.

[46] 'The Adventures of Naked Man' appeared in *The Melbourne Age* for over a decade, and in Wellington's *The Evening Post* from 1999 to 2000 (Lloyd and Jewell 2009; Lloyd 2007).

[47] The drawings of Naked Man feature the character as nude, but with his genitals often covered by an inanimate object, such as a tie, or a similar prop. The joke sometimes plays on double entendres– in one example, Naked Man is dressed as a crew member of a pirate ship, and standing directly in front of a cannon. Overall, Lloyd and Jewell (2009) argue that it is "the obvious nakedness" of the character that "provides the main focus for the humor" (57). The visuals are therefore funny enough on their own, which further prompts individuals to submit captions, often in the genre of "dick jokes" (Ibid:61).

This chapter will analyze *Pundit Kitchen*, and later, *FARK*, as affinity spaces, in which users are drawn to "interact and relate to each other around a common passion, proclivity, or endeavor" (Knobel and Lankshear 2007:117). Within these affinity spaces, users work together to contribute creatively to already solidified inside jokes, such as politically-themed image macros. They also understand each others' sense of humor, share 'common languages', and interact in political discussions in particular ways. Furthermore, as in the case of *Pundit Kitchen*, these spaces also function as knowledge communities, where users actively share political knowledge and opinions, particularly within the comment sections. Chapter 3 also demonstrates that these affinity spaces encourage individuals to participate, regardless of their level of competency in joke creation. Image macros are easy to create, and as reflected in the 'LOL Builder', requires little technical skill, allowing *Pundit Kitchen* to be seen as an open space that invites user participation. Furthermore, its simplicity allows users to discover and practice a "new literacy" in an encouraging environment (Knobel and Lankshear 2007:2003).

While play theory emphasizes the joy of participation for its own sake, political criticism can be produced within image macros as a result of the passionate engagement with a particular text. Image macros are considered in general as forms of critical humor generated by Internet users, rather than professional comedians. *Pundit Kitchen* and *FARK*'s function as affinity spaces enable these texts to develop and circulate. Like many online spaces, both contain particular codes of interaction and inside jokes that defines themselves as unique knowledge communities.

3.2 *PUNDIT KITCHEN* AS AFFINITY SPACE

Pundit Kitchen is a sub-section of *The Cheezburger Network,* a very active site for sharing user-submitted images. According to Ben Huh (2010a), the current CEO of 'The Cheezburger Family', the network receives over 10,000 daily submissions in the form of funny images, regardless of genre. *Pundit Kitchen*, or 'LOLnews', as it is labeled on the navigation bar situated at the top of every *Cheezburger* page, is the network's site dedicated to political humor. It was launched immediately after the original LOLcat-themed page,[48] *I Can Has Cheezburger*, in response to

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[48] *Pundit Kitchen* was one of five websites launched at this time. The other four are: *I Has a Hotdog!* (LOLdogs), *GraphJam* (User-generated graphs and charts, usually about music or popular culture), *FailBlog* (Along with the LOLcats, one of their most popular websites, which displays pictures and videos of stupid things, or the disastrous mistakes in life), and *ROFLRazzi*, an image macro blog dedicated to celebrities.

the audience's demand[49] for a space for political images (Huh 2010a). This allows *Pundit Kitchen* to be closely tied to the rest of *The Cheezburger Network*, and allows its large audience to understand it as an affinity space dedicated to politics.

While the political focus of *Pundit Kitchen* differentiates it from the other sites of *The Cheezburger Network*, its overall format is similar. Its main content is image macros—photographs of political figures or situations, with a superimposed caption in a font[50] similar to the LOLcats, one that is bold, 'loud', and not intended to be 'serious'. *Pundit Kitchen* contains an area for user submissions, where people can upload their own images and add captions if they wish, and a 'LOL Builder', where people can select an image from a variety of pre-uploaded options (Figure 3.1), and easily add their own caption to it (Figure 3.2). The submission is then sent to the network's moderators, "to make sure there is no 'R' rated funnies involved" (*Cheezburger Company Blog* 2011). Moderators then place the submission in the 'vote' area, where it will be rated by audiences on a five-point scale (Ibid). If it receives a sufficient number of votes and 'favorites', the submission will be featured on the home page (Ibid). This level of editorialization distinguishes *Pundit Kitchen* from the other online spaces explored in this thesis. While moderators are common in discussion forums and comment threads,[51] *Pundit Kitchen* is more directly subject to the influence of its editors than other sites, while still demanding a high level of participation by users.

Pundit Kitchen's editors ultimately decide which submissions make it to the front page, but the site's longevity and popularity depend on its ability to sustain an audience. The user activity on the site, both within comment threads and voting numbers reveal the editors' successful efforts in generating and maintaining an affinity space that caters to their audience. The editors have shaped their initial vision of *Pundit Kitchen* from its conception. The first entry, posted on March 18, 2008, was a photograph of Arizona Senator, John McCain, looking particularly awkward, with the caption, "I love scotch. Scotchy, scotch, scotch", superimposed on it, a quote from the popular comedy film, *Anchorman* (2008) (Figure 3.3). About half of the month's total

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[49] New websites, dedicated to specific genres of humor, are constantly added to *The Cheezburger Network*. Huh (2010a) emphasizes the importance of listening to their audience. The creation of *ROFLRazzi* for example, was bolstered when the network began to receive a large number of celebrity-related photographs (Ibid). *Failbook*, a site chronicling the various frustrating user-submitted entries related to the social networking site, Facebook, was started when users sent the website screenshots of silly comments from Facebook pages. Editors felt like the images did not belong anywhere else, and therefore built an entirely new space just for this specific brand of humor (Ibid).

[50] The font, 'Impact', is standard in image macros. The humor here is arguably reflected in the juxtaposition between text that looks demanding, and photographs of cats that are often nonchalant.

[51] Utilized usually to keep out 'spam' (unsolicited messages), and on some occasions troublesome users, usually known as 'trolls'.

submissions were posted on that day (31 out of 77), and the activity that day gives a sense of the type of content that will be regularly seen on *Pundit Kitchen*. Texts posted then include captions attached to photographs of conservative commentators Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter, then-Democratic Presidential nominees Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton, then-President George Bush, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, political commentators such as Bill O'Reilly, and other US politicians, including Karl Rove and Dennis Kucinich. Voting was not particularly popular at that stage, with most entries struggling to get beyond 10 votes, and few comments were received. However, older entries still get revisited, with many of the texts posted in the first few months being frequented by users who post on their comment threads. It took some time for *Pundit Kitchen* to solidify its place within *The Cheezburger Network*, but by around September 2008, at least one entry was being posted each day, and generating at least 150 comments each. By the end of that month, *Pundit Kitchen* (2008b) was causing browsers to fail because of the number of comments being posted, prompting moderators to cap them at 300 comments. At this point however, the number of votes on the texts were still low, and remained so until September 2009, when some popular posts began receiving over 2,000 votes each.

Some texts garner a particularly large amount of responses, especially when they prompt political discussion. This reveals *Pundit Kitchen* as a space where users can be mobilized into thinking politically. Comment threads especially display evidence of it functioning as a knowledge community, where users discuss and explain their particular political views. An entry on September 27, 2010 features close-up of Sarah Palin speaking to an unidentified individual, with the caption, "…And just what makes you so sure the ANTI-CHRIST is a HIM?" (Figure 3.4). The text suggests that Palin may be "the anti-Christ". It received over 1,200 positive votes, with over 120 comments, ranging from thoughts on the text itself– the first states, "This. Is. A. Very. Scary. Picture.", a thread on female politicians– "Come on show me one Hotty female "liberal" Politician/Pundit?", and religion– "You are assuming there is such a thing as anti-Christ" ('AfriCat'; 'I like Peanut Butter the Anti-Rando'; 'pissedoffmusician', all cited in *Pundit Kitchen* 2010a). The popularity of the text is based on the audience's ability to engage with the relatively universal topics presented, evident in the way the comments expanded into individuals' thoughts on religion, and the sexuality of "crazy" female politicians and commentators. Another example is an entry posted on February 11, 2011, which received 244 comments, and over 580 positive votes. It contains a photograph of current Speaker of the House John Boehner wiping his eyes, perhaps after crying,[52] as implied in the caption, "Somewhere in America, a muti-millionaire is [sniff]… PAYING TAXES!!! THIS MUST NOT

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[52] Boehner has been known for crying in public during emotionally significant situations, allowing plenty of jokes relating to this personality trait to be repeated across *Pundit Kitchen*.

BE!" (Figure 3.5; *Pundit Kitchen* 2011c). As with the previous example, the earliest comments focus on the photograph itself– "You think with this guy's [bronzer] budget, that he could afford some wrinkle cream" (Lotisque, cited in Ibid). Other comments question Boehner's capability as a leader– "Is this the best the cons can offer to lead our country, an emotionally disturbed man who cannot control his emotions?" (Sara, cited in Ibid). The majority of comments however, focus on genuine political discourse, with users arguing about the tax policies of Republicans and Democrats, and some lengthy statements on the economic state of the US. With discussions on political policy, religion, and economics flourishing in some popular entries, it is possible to see *Pundit Kitchen* acts as a space for genuine political discourse, prompted by the humorous presentation of politics.

Pundit Kitchen is now more than just a space for user-submitted texts. In July 2010, *Pundit Kitchen*'s editors started introducing real news stories as part of the site's main content, for users to respond to. The earliest is a video of then-Democratic New York Representative Anthony Weiner delivering an angry speech at Republicans opposing the 9/11 Responders Health Bill. The Democrat spent nearly two minutes loudly, and dramatically calling Republicans "cowardly". The post on *Pundit Kitchen* noted that Weiner behaved "LIKE A BOSS", a popular catchphrase positively applauding him for being skillfully authoritative.[53] It received over 470 positive votes, and 115 comments, ranging from individuals being supportive towards Weiner– "More politicians like this please!", to those agreeing, and justifying their position by revealing their stances on health care (Doctor What, cited in *Pundit Kitchen* 2010b). Since then, editors have included more news videos, and some polls were placed underneath several image macros, to ask the audience questions about how they would classify the site's content,[54] their own political views,[55] and their thoughts on specific political figures and articles. On July 29, 2010, Ben Huh (2010b) announced on the site that they would incorporate more outside content, noting that they "want this additional content to serve as context for your lolz, inspiration and topics of conversation. We want to do better and lulz you moar".[56] It also emphasizes the user-driven nature of the site, adding that individuals are free to submit news

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[53] The phrase is derived from a popular single by the comedy band, The Lonely Island, well known for their digital skits on *Saturday Night Live*. *Like a Boss*, which was featured on an episode of *Saturday Night Live* in April 2009, instantly became a viral hit online.

[54] Over 41% considered the site to be "liberal leaning", while 31.41% considered it to remain in the "middle" (*Pundit Kitchen* 2010c).

[55] Over 10,000 viewers voted, and over half of this audience considered themselves to be either liberal, or liberal-leaning (*Pundit Kitchen* 2010d).

[56] Loosely translated: "We want this additional content to serve as context for your humor creation, inspiration, and topics of your conversation. We want to do better and make you laugh more."

items to be added to the front page, along with the usual humorous items. Huh (2010b) also emphasizes that they want *Pundit Kitchen* "to be a place for all your political and news humor". The user responses were positive, and news items, along with humorous news and political pieces from various websites, such as editorial cartoons and stories and images from sites such as *Reddit* have since became a staple part of *Pundit Kitchen*, along with the image macros. Also in 2010, the site acquired licensing from "various wire news agencies" so that users will be allowed to legally utilize more content in creating image macros (Pizzaburger 2010).

While the quantity of content on *Pundit Kitchen* has increased, with users actively commenting on both editor and user-submitted news and humor pieces, the image macros are still a dominant feature of the website. The overall quality of content remains similar to the beginning– while their cast of political figures may have expanded and evolved, the purposes of the space remain the same. The poll, which reveals the liberal bent of *Pundit Kitchen*'s audience, may indicate some of the editorial decisions behind the texts that do make it to the front page. As expected, image macros with a critical tone are often directed at Republican politicians, or the right-wing media. This is evidenced in texts such as Figures 3.4 and 3.5. Another example depicts a photograph of former President George Bush and former Vice President Dick Cheney checking their watches as they move past a framed portrait of Abraham Lincoln (Figure 3.6). The caption suggests that the only "real leader" in the picture is Lincoln, meaning that both the living Republican leaders are incapable (Figure 3.6). It received 2846 positive votes, and comments that overall agreed with what was presented, reinforcing the sense of agreement between editors and audience within this knowledge community. The right wing media too, are subject to scrutiny. One of the most popular texts shows a screenshot of then-*Fox News* pundit Glenn Beck, with his hands miming the well-recognized action for 'air quotes' (Figure 3.7). The simple caption, "NEWS", mirrors both Beck's action, and also communicates the ironic notion that Beck does not in fact, report on 'actual' news. Over 940 people voted agreeably, an opinion that was mirrored in the comments. This reveals *Pundit Kitchen* not just as a space for political humor, but also criticism of both politicians and those who inform the public on them.

The consistent criticism of US Republicans in *Pundit Kitchen* is supported by the political ideology of its liberal-leaning audience. Democrats however, do not always receive positive comments, thus shaping the site as a space that responds critically to those in power, regardless of political affiliation. A text posted on June 21, 2008 for example, shows the words "finally, a bad ass president" on a photograph of Barack Obama getting out of a car (Figure 3.8). This implies a 'cool', yet authoritative style that frames Obama as a capable leader. The comments however, do not reflect the agreement with the text. 'Freep' (cited in *Pundit Kitchen* 2008a) for

example, notes, "someone who went to Ivy League schools [...] doesn't really strike me as bad ass". Accusations of "liberal bias" were present. Some asked whether being "a bad ass" makes Obama a better President, revealing that healthy debate on Obama's political personality is presented within the users' active rejection of the text submitted. Criticism of Democrats can be also be found in the image macros– a photograph of Michelle Obama, with her hand on former President Bill Clinton's knee, with a speech bubble on top of him stating, "Get your hand off me... I'm a married man! LOL jks[57] I'm Bill Clinton!", paints the latter in a negative light, alluding to his infidelity (Figure 3.9). It received 435 positive votes, and the comments, like the text itself, were negative towards the Democrat, accusing him of being a "horndog" (Frank, cited in *Pundit Kitchen* 2011a).

Most of the photographs used on *Pundit Kitchen* are candid, or feature political figures with particularly odd expressions, distinct from the well-presented photo-ops often seen in press releases. Similar to cartoonist Robert Gott's (cited in Lloyd 2007) description of the pre-captioned drawings of Naked Man, the photographs "just looked funny" (7). This is an important feature shared by most of the texts throughout this thesis, particularly the ones in Chapter 4. As discussed in Chapter 2, the notion of an image-driven politics has dominated the discourse. Politicians are increasingly aware of their branding, and seek to intentionally take control of the way they are presented in the media. Candid photographs can potentially undermine these presentations, because the subjects have little or no control over them. The further alteration and remix of candid photography puts power into the hands of ordinary individuals to create narratives of politicians that can actively defy the polished images seen in the mainstream media.

Political discourse and criticism do take place quite prominently on Pundit Kitchen's comment threads, but overall, the space remains dedicated to comedy. At times, the captions lean towards playful jokes, rather than direct criticism. A close-up photograph of Vice President Joe Biden gobbling an ice cream inspired a caption that is a parody of nature programming (Figure 3.10). The post received over 460 positive votes, though the comments, unlike most of the other texts, made no mention of any specific political policy, or attacks on Biden's character. While the caption does arguably undermine the authority of Biden by likening him to an observed animal, the responses also reveal that *Pundit Kitchen*'s readers appreciate a good joke. Texts such as Figure 3.11, with an original photograph depicting George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin in China, wearing the host country's traditional outfits, look awkward, and are funny enough on their

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[57] A common slang on Internet forums which stands for "jokes". 'Jks' is sometimes treated as an acronym for "just kidding, sucker!"

own. These candid moments of photography often become utilized on *Pundit Kitchen*. The caption does not refer to any political material but instead ridicules the two political leaders by insinuating that they are being "punk'd"[58] (Figure 3.11). These jokes derive from the humorous appeal of the original photographs themselves.

Cultural allusions are commonly used within the image macros in *Pundit Kitchen*. They function as a 'common language' used by its users to communicate ideas and information. Figure 3.12, for example, os a photograph of Barack Obama standing in front of a statue of Superman, with a caption describing the then-Democratic nominee as "Cor[r]uption's kryptonite".[59] The cultural allusions often do not relate to any specific political commonplace or situational theme, but instead function as jokes that rely purely on a reader's knowledge of the cultural allusion, and perhaps some recognition of the political figures present. A photograph of then-White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel with the caption, "See this? This is the world's smallest violin. It's playing just for you, Republicans" may refer to the Democrat's often brash, 'take no prisoners' personality [60] (Figure 3.13). The quote, most commonly linked to the television series *MASH*, and the film, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) to sarcastically respond to a self-pitying remark, perhaps enhances the view of Emanuel as an almost ruthless character, or may have just suited the photograph of his hand gesture (Figure 3.13).

Cultural allusions can also appear more nonsensical. Figure 3.14, a photograph of Barack Obama painting a wall, with a speech bubble with rapper Chamillionaire's lyrics, "They see me rollin'. They hatin'." received over 2,600 positive votes, and 254 comments. The lyrics were from the hit song, *Ridin'*, which eventually became subject to various parodies, the most popular released by Weird Al Yankovic.[61] Online however, the phrase became popular because of its reappropriation, which is similar to that of the 'RickRoll'.[62] The text, while possibly connoting deeper meanings regarding Obama's racial makeup and the rap lyrics, is perhaps more

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[58] A hidden camera prank television program screened on *MTV* from the early 2000s. To get 'Punk'd' is to become the victim to a hidden camera prank.

[59] Kryptonite is well-understood as Superman's only weakness.

[60] Sometimes nicknamed 'Rahmbo', Emanuel is widely-recognized in US politics as "a street fighter with a killer instinct– as explosive, profane, wired and ruthless–sometimes as a compliment, sometimes not" (Smalley 2008). This is due to his actions and decisions, often approached "in a combative, not diplomatic, manner", allowing him to develop a cult-like personality of a politician that is acceptably tough, authoritative, and while often 'good', is not afraid to 'play dirty' (Ibid).

[61] While the original song thematically revolves around driving around in an illegal vehicle, and possibly drugs, parody musician Weird Al Yankovic altered the lyrics, as he does with popular music, to create his own version, titled *White and Nerdy*.

[62] The 'RickRoll' is explained and listed in a footnote at the end of Chapter 2.4.3 as an example of an inside joke shared by the Internet community.

significant as an online prank. It may also be read as an extension of a viral idea; a reinterpretation of Chamillionare's original lyrics, which can now be classified in this respect as a meme. As one user, 'arimareji' states, "This was the best just-plain-silly LOL I've had in a long time". Cultural allusions that act in a "just plain silly" way exist just as often as political discussions on *Pundit Kitchen*. Texts such as *Monty Python* are commonly referred to on the site, especially when British politicians are present. Figure 3.15, which includes a photograph of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, is an example of this.[63] These examples show that the jokes do not have to be reduced to politics alone. Instead, the community is able to appreciate texts that belong to 'personal', popular culture.

The use of recognizable cultural allusions to create comedy about British politicians reveal the community's acceptance of inside jokes. Green (2007) argues that "the invocation of […] or the continuation of particular themes" can strengthen "participation within such a community". The language of popular culture within the cultural allusions, acts as part of a communication device for the frequent visitors of *Pundit Kitchen*, which as a particular affinity space, "requires certain modes of linguistic performance in order to gain entry" (Ibid). The ability to understand a community's inside jokes reveals a sense of belonging, and a collective's purpose. Regardless of what the editor's real intentions are for the comedy website, the actions of *Pundit Kitchen*'s audiences reveal an overall purposeful utilization of the space. Its readers actively undermine political authority by both adding captions that reflect the community's sense of humor or political affiliations. This however, is all executed under particular editorial constraints. However, the analysis shows that *Pundit Kitchen*'s users are still able to engage in discussions meaningful to them by responding to the published texts. This is possible because it is an activity established throughout this community, evident by the way the space itself is continuously utilized. Furthermore, the site itself, due to its user-generated nature, constantly encourages participation, regardless of skill level. It is also arguable that just by participating, either by creating macros, sharing them, or posting comments, users are continuously developing new skills and new literacies, as well as possibly gaining meaningful knowledge. Overall, *Pundit Kitchen* functions as a space for play, a multi-layered way of responding to politics via predominantly, humor.

3.3 VLADURDAYS

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[63] The user-captioned speech bubbles in the photograph connotes the fact that the two politicians were discussing the infamous 'Dead Parrot' sketch.

While US news and political figures tend to dominate much of the discourse on *Pundit Kitchen,* some more recognizable figures in world politics are included. Russia's former President and current Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, possesses an image and persona that is intriguing to both the political world and popular culture. His authoritative stance often garners mixed opinions. While he successfully returned Russia "to its integral role in international politics and the global economy", he has suppressed the people's "freedoms and democracy", for the apparent "illusion stability and order" (Zarakhovich 2007). He is widely considered to be "the most influential figure in Russian politics", and Putin's leadership style and achievements, particularly his tenure as a KGB[64] agent, have prompted the rest of the world to view him as an enigmatic, though dangerous figure.

Putin may be considered as a politician who is perfectly tailored for the cult of personality. His photo-opportunities often contribute to his image as a masculine icon. In 2009, for example, he "released to the public 20 pictures of him being super-manly, riding horses shirtless and walking along a river on a camping trip" (Pareene 2009). The photographs have been claimed by some to be "comically extreme demonstrations of archaic tropes of virile masculinity" (Ibid). Putin's authoritative style is further enhanced by his real life credentials. He "has piloted firefighting planes, darted whales, driven race cars, and even taken a submersible 1,400 meters (4,600 ft) below the surface of Lake Baikal" (Taylor 2011). His physical capabilities, adhering to stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity, allows Putin to be easily exploited as a popular culture product. His cult status in Russia is so prominent that a songwriter, Alexander Yelin, "with his all-girl heavy metal band", wrote a techno-pop song called *A Man Like Putin* in 2002 (*Sound Tracks* 2010). The lyrical approach emphasizes Putin's "manly" characteristics[65], and turned into a karaoke hit that is "still played at [Putin's] rallies" (Ibid). This playful view of Putin is also evident in texts such as a webcomic, *Super Putin, Man Like Any Other* being released and translated into English in 2011 [66](Melrose 2011). These characteristics of Putin contrast with the reality of his actions as a leader: his refusal to relinquish power, political killings and his opposition to media freedom, which resulted in "contract-style murders" of Russian journalists (*Democracy Now!* 2006). These popular culture constructs, which exaggerate masculine stereotypes in a playful manner, actively undermine the danger and power of Putin. By

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[64] The Russian Committee for State Security

[65] The translated lyrics apparently are, "*I want a man like Putin, who's full of strength. I want a man like Putin, who doesn't drink. I want a man like Putin, who won't make me sad*" (*Sound Tracks* 2010). Yelin (cited in Ibid) states that as a songwriter, he attempted to write a hit song from a girl's perspective, noting, "She can't sing that Putin is great. That would be stupid and it wouldn't be funny. But she can sing that everything around her sucks, and she needs a man like Putin."

[66] . In the comic, Putin, a "gi-wearing action hero" and "bear suit-wearing sidekick President Dmitry Medvedev" are placed in a typical action film storyline, set "one year before the world ends" (Ibid)

associating him with frivolous, mass-consumed products, Putin is turned into an entertainment brand to be taken less seriously.

Image macros of Vladimir Putin have existed on *Pundit Kitchen* since the website was started. Texts featuring Putin have always been popular, though they did not appear on a regular basis until the first actual mention of the term 'Vladurday' on July 11, 2009 (Figure 3.16). This term is derived from 'Caturday', a meme that originated on internet forum *4Chan* in early 2005 "as a protest against *Furry Friday*\[67] threads (Grossman 2007). Therefore, the only content posted on *4Chan* on Saturdays at the time were LOLcats. This tradition is then parodied by *Pundit Kitchen*, which now dedicates Saturdays to Vladimir Putin. While Vladurday images were posted once every week, there was no real acknowledgement of it as an editorial decision until July 24, 2010, where the audience was asked for their opinion of it in a poll (*Pundit Kitchen* 2010e). Over 60% of readers responded positively, noting that they would like to see more Vladurday posts (Ibid). The continuous popularity of Vladurdays is fueled by its audience's embracing of the citizen-imagined vision of Putin within this creative space– one that is similar to the practice of fanfiction. On *Pundit Kitchen*, like in popular culture, Putin's personality and qualifications are exaggerated, and parodied. His often-stoic expression in photo-ops is undermined when users create hyperbolized personalities, in line with discourses of hegemonic masculinity, that depict him as among others, a dangerous assassin, and a ruthless leader. At the same time, users have resisted the power embodied in the character of Putin, and recreated an image of the leader into one that is goofy, personable, and at times, effeminate.

The format of Figure 3.16 is a parody of a motivational poster,[68] an extension of a standard image macro in the way that it involves adding a caption to a photograph. As with other texts on *Pundit Kitchen*, users are able to simply achieve this effect using the website's built-in editor. The caption, which suggests Putin's dislike of the viewer, is juxtaposed against the figure himself, who as the primary focus of the photograph, and with a solemn appearance, stands out from the crowd. When analyzed according to Edwards' (2001) list of leadership requirements, the masculine, individualistic 'lone wolf' persona shows Putin's ability to be independent as a leader, though his dislike of others may be a negative impact on his value of character. It is the

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[67] At the time, Fridays were thematically dedicated to posting images of "anthropomorphic Disney characters" in sexual situations (Grossman 2007).

[68] A popular form of 'office art', the designs in motivational posters are often unified. An 'inspirational' stock image is often used, set against a black background along with an affirming phrase as a caption in bold, white font. Occasionally, a tagline is included. Various parodies of motivational posters have since appeared on the Internet, with 'Demotivators' (motivational posters, but with sarcastic taglines) being the most common. The multiple ways of interpretation allowed by motivational posters also allow them to be classified as their own as memes.

'people hating' Putin that dominates the discourse in *Pundit Kitchen*. Putin is classified as stoic and unpersonable, and through this, the supervillain character is developed within the site.

Cultural allusions are commonly used to connote Putin's character as a supervillain. The original photograph in Figure 3.17 is of Putin in the center of a cheerful crowd, placing a pan strategically over his chest. This allows the caption creator to draw from the images of the popular comic book superhero, Iron Man, to create the joke– "repulsor technology" and "Tony Stark" are both direct references to the comic books. Putin's motivation to defeat Tony Stark (Iron Man), a generally indestructible superhero arguably makes him a villain here. Similarly, in Figure 3.18, Putin is ready to attack Chuck Norris, and "to see him cry". Chuck Norris is a largely Internet-specific cultural allusion. Within online pop culture, Norris is best known as the subject of an online meme called 'Chuck Norris Facts',[69] which are user-generated satirical facts about how invincible the actor is. Because of Norris' status as a hero and the toughest man to the Internet, to compare Putin with him reveals the Russian leader as a villainous figure with an infinite amount of power, and the capacity for destruction. These texts strongly support a powerful, masculine portrayal of Putin found in the mainstream media. However, the subversion lies in their framing of Putin as a villain– while there is evidence of a celebration of his masculine persona, Putin is reduced to an exaggerated caricature of a villain, ready to battle equally fictional representations of heroic figures.

Putin's tendency to demonstrate his physical strengths in public is parodied in photographs of him with children and harmless animals. Figure 3.19 for example, depicts Putin as ready to fight a child. In Figure 3.20, Putin refers to a lady's child as her "taco". While this also refers to the pattern of the baby's blanket, it more likely tends towards the stereotype of Putin as an inhumane figure. Figure 3.21 connotes that Putin's authoritarian quality extends even to small animals, even threatening it with being sent to a "gulag".[70] Within the fictional world of *Pundit*

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[69] 'Vin Diesel's film, *The Pacifier* (2005) inspired people to write facts-based jokes about the action film star. The joke however, died after a few months, which prompted its creator to urge viewers to "vote on 12 candidates for the next fact generator or they could write in their own" (Smith 2010). The winner, overwhelmingly, was Chuck Norris, who was not even on the list in the first place. The prominence of Norris was possibly inspired by a series of *Walker Texas Ranger* jokes that were a repeated segment on *Late Night with Conan O' Brien*. After *NBC*'s merger with Vivendi Universal Entertainment, O'Brien notes that he is able to play the cheesiest clips from the action drama series, starring Norris, whenever he wants to by pulling a giant lever, without paying royalties to the original network (Altman 2010). The user-created Chuck Norris Facts are humorous, and often note how "studly", powerful, masculine and amazing Norris is, with examples such as "Ghosts sit around the campfire to tell Chuck Norris stories", and "Chuck Norris knows the last digit of pi" (Ibid). As *Cheezburger* CEO Ben Huh (2010a) puts it, it is "a whole bunch of people devot[ing] their lives into creating jokes about how awesome Chuck Norris is", all because they are happy to be involved in a collective inside joke. The martial artist and actor eventually sued Penguin Books because some of the "mythical facts" portrayed him in a book portrayed him in manners that were "racist, lewd" or "engaged in illegal activities" (Kearney 2007).

[70] References to Gulags are common within the Putin memes in *Pundit Kitchen*– the word is sometimes used humorously to reaffirm Putin's place as a foreign political figure.

Kitchen, Putin is also not afraid to use his power, even in ridiculous ways. In Figures 3.22 and 3.23 Putin fails at dominating respectively, a butterfly and a rock. Putin's solution is then imagined to be "correctional labor" or banishment to Siberia. While this reveals a comical interpretation of the stock photographs– Putin is actually playing Badminton in Figure 3.22, and looking as if he were concentrating on a rock in Figure 3.23. This further shows the participants' ability to reinterpret the original connotations of the photographs by creating a fictionalized vision of Putin as ruthless reader that adheres to the 'story' and discourse of the space.

While Putin's power and masculinity are dominant to his characterization, alternative reinterpretations do occasionally appear on *Pundit Kitchen*. These examples challenge the dominant discourses of Putin as character to be feared, and instead, cast him as effeminate, and sometimes, goofy. Putin's love for his pet Labrador is factual, though the relationship is often reported in a tone as stoic as the Prime Minister's other exploits, in which he "consults [his] dog during political crises", and uses it "to intimidate" German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Fenton 2007; Hounshell 2007). Texts on *Pundit Kitchen* however, reveal the extremity of the dog-loving side of Putin. Figure 3.24 for example, showcases Putin's weakness for puppies. While the caption bares a resemblance to Darth Vader's offer, "Together we will rule the galaxy", [71] the possible 'evil dictator' in Putin is juxtaposed against his almost peaceful expression as he cuddles a puppy. The reaction in comments tended towards questioning the different personality exhibited in Putin– "Never have [I] seen so much evil be so happy. Squeeeeeeeee" [72]; and "Is Putin a friggin' shape shifter? In the last LOL, he was a buff BAMF. [73] In this one, he looks like a pudgy, middle-aged, gay guy who is so lonely that his only happiness is hoarding animals". [74] Putin's real life image is thus subverted here, and rather than fearing him, *Pundit Kitchen*'s users openly poke fun at the political leader.

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[71] "Join me, and together we will rule the galaxy as father and son" from *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) is a plea from Darth Vader to his son and then-rival, Luke Skywalker to follow him on "the Dark Side of the Force". This may be seen as done either out of love for he still cares about his son (and believes they may both overturn the evil Emperor Palpatine together), or because it makes perfect sense because he was losing that particular Lightsaber battle. If Figure 3.24 were to be read with *Star Wars* as a cultural allusion in mind, it can be argued that for Putin, his offer to the puppy to "rule the world" together with him may indicate a submission towards the animal, therefore allowing it to join him rather than letting himself inadvertently surrender. The balance of power here is therefore tipped towards Skywalker, and in Figure 3.24, the puppy, rather than Darth Vader/Putin.

[72] By 'Agigafluggi' (*Pundit Kitchen* 2011b).On the Internet, "squeeeee" is a positive, joyful exclamation (it perhaps also function as an onomatopoeia offline).

[73] A widely-used online acronym, usually in a positive, admiring tone, for 'Bad As Mother Fucker', which is generally reserved for tough, masculine, or 'cool' characters.

[74] Comment by 'Topo' (*Pundit Kitchen* 2011b).

Putin's relationship with Medvedev, as presented in Figure 3.25, is another regular theme throughout Vladurday. Similar to the way fanfiction writers create alternative narratives by assigning roles to already available characters, *Pundit Kitchen*'s contributors 'paired' Putin with other recognizable political figures. Medvedev is often cast as sidekick to Putin, sometimes verging into "bromance"[75] territory, insinuated by captions such as the "priceless[76] [...] romantic dinner with Vlad" in Figure 3.25, and the teasing childhood rhyme[77] in Figure 3.26. This presentation of the two political figures is perhaps an exaggeration of their real life relationship; described as "polar opposites", Putin, "the macho fixer" and Medvedev, "the dorkish lawyer", are self-proclaimed "admiring friends" (Parfitt 2011). Other political characters that are assigned 'roles' in the Vladurday timeline are Sarah Palin and Angela Merkel. Palin, though she has never publicly appeared with Putin, and is never visible in the image macros, plays the role of his enemy (Figure 3.27, for example). This is most likely inspired by her statement in an *ABC* interview regarding the proximity between Russia and Alaska. Merkel on the other hand, is often portrayed as Putin's love interest. This is in contrast to the real-life Merkel, who reportedly exhibits a "strained" relationship with Putin (Yurin 2011). Figure 3.28 for example, shows Merkel's being physically attracted to Putin, and the latter successfully getting her "phone number" in Figure 3.29– complete with a cheesy wink. By creating their own storylines, especially when they are directly opposed to reality, *Pundit Kitchen*'s contributors are therefore rejecting and undermining powerful discourses, substituting them with their own that are more playful and lighthearted.

Throughout popular culture and the Vladurday texts on *Pundit Kitchen*, Putin himself has, due to his personality, turned into a meme. The mainstream media portrayals of Putin, often riddled with discourses of hegemonic masculinity, are both exaggerated and subverted in *Pundit Kitchen*. While acknowledging Pundit as a powerful villain, users are free to creatively construct an image of Putin for themselves, by negotiating with his symbolic visions of masculinity, as well as applying fictional storylines, turning Putin into a celebrity figure more appropriately associated with popular media, such as film, rather than politics. Vladurday becomes a space for a regular inside joke recognizable to *Pundit Kitchen*'s participants.

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[75] A 'bromance' is a popular fictional trope that refers to an intimate, though non-sexual relationship between two (or more) men. However, Sterling (2011) argues that the conception of a bromance, popularized by "buddy pictures" and television shows are also "where slash fiction finds its characters and stories", allowing for reinterpretation of male/male relationships. She further notes that there are opportunities present within slashfiction texts to change society's "expectations and roles for men", though this is subjective, and an area open to be questioned.

[76] Which is also a parody of a *MasterCard* advertisement.

[77] The caption is a parody of "… siting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g!"

3.4 BIDEN VS PALIN

The original context of the Biden vs Palin meme takes place during the 2008 US election's Vice Presidential debate between Delaware Senator Joe Biden and Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin. It was held on October 2, 2008 at Washington University, St Louis, and moderated by *PBS* journalist Gwen Ifill. It was a highly anticipated event due to the controversial candidates– Sarah Palin was considered an ill-informed newcomer, as evidenced in various media appearances.[78] In turn, Joe Biden was widely acknowledged to be a "gaffe prone veteran"[79] (Payne 2008). According to *CBS* (2008), it was, with 66.9 million viewers nationwide, "the most-watched Vice Presidential debate in history".[80]

The debate was characterized by an element of spectacle, preceded by media coverage alluding to gendered performances. Harp et. al's (2010) analysis of initial impressions of Sarah Palin during the first week of campaign media coverage reveals that Palin, while feminized in the way she is presented as mother and beauty queen, was also simultaneously framed as a tough politician (302). Her memorable comparison of "hockey moms to pit bulls", as well as her combination of hunting abilities, and "cultural reminders of a woman's femininity" reveals her ability to negotiate between the two traditionally opposing gender ideologies (Ibid: 302-303). Palin's femininity was however, emphasized later in the campaign, and in the lead up to the Vice Presidential debate, there was a media preoccupation that her femininity may become subject to Biden's "unflagging propensity to make absurd, imprudent and often offensive statements" (Halperin 2008). The lack of critical political discourse in relation to the debate is illustrated on *The Daily Show* (2008), which found that Biden's "recipe for success" for the debate, according to various mainstream media reports, is to be "respectful", and avoid being sexist and paternalistic, while Palin only has to "prove that she can simply speak in a normal English sentence". The mainstream discourse made it clear that Palin, as a female, needed to be "protected" from Biden.

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[78] Perhaps the most notable television interview was with *CBS*'s Katie Couric in September 2008, where the Vice Presidential nominee revealed among other things, an inability to name a newspaper she depends on for sources, claiming that she reads "all of them". Left-wing bloggers also attacked Palin for being unable to name examples of how McCain support for financial regulation, focusing mostly on his character as a "maverick". Other television interviews, such as with *ABC*'s Charlie Gibson, left viewers questioning Palin's knowledge of "the Bush doctrine in foreign affairs" (Payne 2008). For the world of comedy, Palin is largely considered to be a joke, with most significantly, Tina Fey's impersonation of the candidate on *Saturday Night Live* becoming a hit on national television– further blurring the lines between pop culture and politics, as the skit was also featured on various entertainment news programs. It was also spread virally across the web on sites such as YouTube.

[79] More of this will be explored in Chapter 4.

[80] The former record was set in 1984, also the last time until 2008 where a female candidate, then-Democratic candidate Geraldine Ferraro, was featured in a Vice Presidential debate (*CBS* 2008).

On the Internet, the debate inspired countless parodies,[81] and one of the most notable citizen response styles was presented as 4-Panes. This meme's format is an extension of the image macro, as participants add their own captions to photographs. However, in the 4-Pane,[82] multiple photographs are laid out like a storyboard, or a comic panel, to signify a sequence of events. This enables participants to create narrative sequences, rather than single moments. Utilizing the Biden/Palin 4-Pane meme as an example, this section analyzes the discourses of masculinity and power within the creation of online political humor. It also examines *FARK* as an affinity space, where like *Pundit Kitchen*, users congregate based on a particular interest and pattern of interaction. It finally discusses the Biden/Palin 4-Pane as a spreadable text, noting its presence in similar affinity spaces.

The Biden/Palin 4-pane originated on *FARK*, a popular humor-driven news aggregator [83]that like *Pundit Kitchen*, depends on user contributions. A user [84]posted four panels of screenshots from the Vice Presidential debate to the 'politics' section on October 16, 2008, two weeks after the original event (Figure 3.30). The directions, as with most of *FARK*'s 'Photoshop contests'[85], were straightforward– "What you've all been waiting for: Biden/Palin meme thread" (*FARK* 2008). This implies that its users have been waiting to respond to this political commonplace on *FARK*, or that the image being readily available for exploitation is no surprise, considering the nature of the specific affinity space. The thread was popular– it garnered 277 comments[86], and eventually, the meme spread across various websites, including *Pundit Kitchen*. Discussion threads addressing the meme were also seen on various forums, blogs, and *Macrochan*, a

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[81] A *Saturday Night Live* skit, featuring Tina Fey as Governor Palin, Jason Sudeikis as Senator Biden, and Queen Latifah as moderator Gwen Ifill was again, extremely popular, and was spread virally online. Several other popular parodies were in the form of citizen-created videos, where ordinary people either imitated the candidates, or made animated shorts based on their opinions. Throughout these texts, Palin's style and speech was consistently mocked, with her "folksy" charm and references to McCain as a "Maverick" being consistently exaggerated, though arguably not untruthfully, for comedic effect.

[82] Or '4-Panel'. As also evidenced in some examples in Chapter 5, these memes can consist of any number of panels (as long as it is more than one. Otherwise, it would remain a standard image macro).

[83] Created by Drew Curtis, *FARK* "is a news aggregator", that is, "an edited, community-driven news site". Curtis (2007) receives over 2,000 submissions daily, and some of them eventually get published, usually "based on how funny the submitted tagline is" (2). The tagline itself "is essentially the article headline rewritten into a one-line joke", which Curtis (2007) argues is original, at times more accurate, and most importantly, attractive to the reader.

[84] Unidentified, as it is with all of the headline posts on *FARK*.

[85] A regular section on *FARK*, where users alter images, usually photographs that are found in the mainstream press. A winner is selected based on a voting system, and receive a month's access to 'TOTAL FARK', which allows users to some extra features on the website. While the name 'Photoshop' suggests an element of manipulation beyond adding captions, image macros are also seen here from time to time.

[86] A 'FARK Biden/Palin Memes' album on Flickr reveals that there are at least 199 memes generated, with over 8,400 views (coachwdb 2008)

repository for image macros found on sites such as *4Chan*.[87] Several main discussions are reflected in the Biden/Palin 4-Pane meme: It reveals that *FARK*, like *Pundit Kitchen*, functions as a particular affinity space where users are able to engage in creating humor and play with texts that are appreciated by like-minded individuals. It however, differs from *Pundit Kitchen* in terms of editorial control. This section also shows that the memes may 'escape' the spaces from where they originate, an element further explored in Chapter 4.

The results of the Vice Presidential debate revealed both candidates as impressive. Palin was well-prepared, and "with a fair amount of credibility, [repeated] the formulations" assigned to her (Klein 2008). Biden too, averted criticism by directing attacks at McCain rather than his opponent (Ibid). However, polls conducted by television networks, including *CBS*, *CNN*, and even *FOX* show that viewers believed that Biden was the clear winner overall (Zenilman 2008; Swaine 2008). Commentators made judgments mostly on the presentation of each candidate. Palin, in particular, was simultaneously praised and maligned for adopting a "folksy" style. Through "intentionally informal" phrases such as "you betcha", Palin may have been able to "connect to a particular demographic", that is, as she claims, the "regular hockey mom" (*Newswise* 2008). On the other hand, she utilized talking points heavily, and at one point, refused to "answer the questions the way [Biden] and the moderator want to hear", choosing instead, to "talk straight to the American people" (Klein 2008). Biden spoke more formally, in a direct contrast to Palin's style, leaving him to be viewed as more intellectual and knowledgeable (*Newswise* 2008).

Regardless of the perceptions generated by polls, the caption creators on *FARK*'s comment thread primarily attacked Sarah Palin's capability as a political leader, mostly due to her gender. In these texts, Biden is accordingly used as a mouthpiece for the producer of the text, setting Palin up to act as a victim of punchlines that reveal the reasonings behind their disapproval of the candidate. These jokes are easily constructed due to the 4-Pane's frame, which acts as a blank canvas for sequential comedy (Figure 3.30). The reactions are provided in the images, and users only have to come up with the jokes to fit them. Panel 1 shows a medium shot of both candidates in the frame, though a front view of Biden suggests that it is his turn to speak. Panel 2 allows Palin to present a rebuttal to Biden, and Panel 3 displays Biden once again, smiling, as if he made a noteworthy statement. The final panel is a medium close-up of Palin looking downwards, displaying an expression of shame.

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[87] However, it is quite unclear what *Macrochan* really is. Like *4Chan*, it prides itself on being an 'exclusive' part of Web culture. A *4Chan* (2005) thread about *Macrochan* reveals very little about the site– a user posted, the "First rule of Macrochan is you do not talk about Macrochan" (this itself is a parody of the film/book, *Fight Club*.

Palin's apparent incompetency as was highlighted in the very first macro that was posted (Figure 3.31). The creator utilized the panels efficiently, including allowing Palin to launch an attack on Obama, who was criticized by many political commentators at the time for being inexperienced. The punchline however, is delivered by Biden, who reversed Palin's comments by insinuating that she is unable to read, allowing the final panel, a 'losing' Palin, to emphasize the Democrat's victory (Figure 3.31). Jokes such as this reveal a construction of Palin as unintelligent, and according to Edwards' (2001) framework for political leadership, less capable as a political leader. The 'losing Palin' panel certainly allowed insult comedy to be prominently utilized, again emphasizing her lack of intelligence. The conversational structure of these panels further allows this form of humor to flourish. The captions in Figure 3.32 for example, are a cultural allusion. Biden directly quotes the 'French taunt' scene in film, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1974), known for its idiosyncratic insults. The insults, however juvenile, always result with Palin as loser, affirming Biden's victory.

While in real life Biden dodged accusations of sexism, the Biden who starred in *FARK*'s 4-Panes reveled in them. Often, the insults tended towards attacks on Palin's gender and sexuality, while asserting Biden's masculinity. "Republicans don't have balls" in Figure 3.33 for example, is a pun, with 'balls' referring in this context to both a dance event, but more so, a colloquial term alluding to the Republicans' lack of guts. More literally, "balls", is a cultural allusion utilized to directly insult Republicans for not possessing masculine genitalia. Palin's– and consequently, her political party's loss here is framed as being determined by gender.

Jenkins (2008a) notes in regards to Palin that "for the first time, we have a vice presidential candidate" who does not "fit our expectations of what a female politician looks like"– a possible "step forward" in "pro-beauty feminism". The responses on *FARK* however, constantly undermine her based on her appearance, which links to discourses of femininity. Figure 3.34 for example, borrows from a common joke, a widely-known cultural allusion [88] that suggests women should "get back in the kitchen". A political commonplace and cultural allusion is used in Figure 3.35 to attack Palin's candidate personality. "Drill Baby Drill" is a slogan [89] for the McCain campaign that is extensively used by Palin, referring to drilling for oil in Alaska (*The New York Times* 2008). The use of "drill" in Figure 3.35 however, insinuates the slang for intercourse,

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[88] *Know Your Meme* (2010) claims that this began when British chef Gordon Ramsey made a "sexist remark" about young girls doing well with cooking. "Get Back to the Kitchen" was quickly popularized by *4Chan*, and now, many Internet forums to represent a standard sexist joke.

[89] First coined by Michael Steele at the 2008 Republican National Convention to encourage domestic production of oil (Carnevale 2008).

further emphasized by the word 'position'. Palin's lack of a response suggested by the creator is sign of weakness in her inability to overcome criticism directed at her gender and appearance.

The framing of the stock sequence of panels directs Biden's ability to overplay Palin's femininity condescendingly. Biden constantly emerging as the winner in the 4-Panes reveals a dominant discourse of masculinity as equivalent to power. Figure 3.36 received the most votes, and was the winner for this *FARK* Photoshop contest. Here, Palin's sexuality, personal life, and lack of intelligence gets scrutinized, with vulgar, straightforward references to female genitalia and a contextually offensive term, "retarded".[90] This is inarguably sexist, and yet, the participants on the *FARK* thread display an acknowledgment and understanding of the rules of this space, as openly illustrated in Figure 3.37. The first three panels argue for valid political discourse, but in reality, is setting up the tone for the punchline in the final panel, Sarah Palin ashamedly emitting a "*queef*",[91] a vulgar slang term referring to her genitalia. The juxtaposition between the need for "[rising] above partisan pettiness and filthy cheap shots" and the final panel, which personifies that, shows that the users on *FARK* are unashamed of making these jokes (Figure 3.37). Unlike *Pundit Kitchen*, *FARK*'s lack of editorial control may have influenced the overall misogynistic thread. Instead of letting their creations focus on political policy or 'constructive' discussion, contributors chose to exploit the freedom allowed by the *FARK* comments board to produce jokes that reflect their brand of humor and topical interests.

In spite of its repetitive theme of gender, the Biden/Palin 4-Pane meme quickly spread to various other spaces, including *Pundit Kitchen*. The jokes published there attacked Palin based on intelligence rather than gender, perhaps due to the editorial stance of the space. An example refers to Palin's odd pronunciation, one comparable to former President George W. Bush's, of the word 'nuclear' (Figure 3.38; Cesca 2008). The comments in response to it were wide-ranging, though the discourse, unlike on FARK, often stayed political, with users either defending or speaking against the present politicians. One user, 'mschoon', defended the pronunciation, noting that several other Presidents are do the same, and it should not be "an indication of intelligence". Palin's intelligence however, was criticized consistently throughout the other unpublished captions[92] in a manner similar to the threads in *FARK*. Another featured

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[90] The 'retarded thing' that "came out of [Palin's] vagina" is most likely a reference to her son Trig Palin [though some conspiracy theorists believe that he is not her biological child], who has Down syndrome.

[91] *Urban Dictionary* (2003), a user-contributed online slang dictionary describes the term, sometimes acknowledged as an onomatopoeia, as "an expulsion of wind from the vulva during coitus; a vaginal fart".

[92] These are viewable from a link underneath each published text. Unpublished captions are examples that are not featured on the front page, because they do did not receive enough votes or 'favorites', or are rejected due to editorial decisions.

caption on *Pundit Kitchen* makes fun of Palin's lack of "brains" by utilizing a cultural allusion that zombies eat brains (Figure 3.39). The entry received over 1,200 positive votes, and a comment thread that inspired a wide range of discussion on topics such as zombies, both candidates' intelligence, and the duties of Vice President.

While the comment threads on *Pundit Kitchen* certainly reveal more concrete political discussion than *FARK*'s, there are overall, very few themes utilized in the creation of this meme. Evidence of jokes insulting Palin and alluding to her lack of competency and intelligence are also found in discussion spaces, and sites such as *Macrochan*. Figure 3.40 for example, from Boston music forum *The Noise Board*, attacks Palin by announcing the hypocrisy apparent in her daughter's actions in regards to sex. [93] While the joke is still vulgar, it attacks Palin's policies rather than her appearance. Palins's gender however, is constantly subject to scrutiny. Figure 3.41 from *Macrochan*, is an example of the meme being reappropriated to suit alternative circumstances. As the meme evolved, users began to recreate the panels with different screenshots, allowing more opportunities for different 'conversations' between the two candidates to be written. The captions however, remain similar, despite Biden's solemn expression in the first panel, which may signify him as the loser. Rather than winning a debate based on political capability– Palin here is framed as succeeding because she has breasts. Palin even noted this in the first panel, proclaiming that nobody cares for her "levels of qualification for the job". While Palin can still win while overplaying her feminine qualities, the criticism is uncovered in the way she is presented as still, in fact, unqualified as a candidate.

Overall, the analysis reveals the similarities and difference in ways of approaching humor creation for a meme that has spread to various different spaces. The patterns of participation can differ throughout spaces, even if they focus on the same theme of politics. *Pundit Kitchen* for example, welcomes in-depth political discussion to supplement and respond to the image macros published. *FARK* on the other hand, at least in this thread, can be unquestionably sexist, and the structure of responses, that is in the form of mostly contest submissions, allows less actual conversations to happen. The regular users of these online spaces however, will have an understanding of the codes and conventions of each space, and therefore adhere to them. This is evident in the lack of public complaints witnessed on each space– users are encouraged to freely participate, although to do so in the end, they are bound by rules that they should only abide to if they allow themselves the permission to do so. This in itself, is a quality of play.

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[93] Bristol Palin announced her pregnancy and engagement to Levi Johnston at the age of 18, at the 2008 Republican National Convention. This was of course, largely controversial due to Palin's insistently conservative views regarding birth control and abortions.

The Biden/Palin 4-Pane is a meme that emerged as a citizen response to a political commonplace. The jokes are often derivatives of a single theme, with a primary focus on attacking Palin through undermining her femininity. This however, does not imply that there are limits to creativity. The jokes are (though subjectively) humorous, reveal a community's ability to cater to its participants by creating texts that suit each other's perceptions of what is considered humorous. Also, thematic similarities are themselves, powerful mimetic qualities. They reveal a sense of unity and agreement that encourage audiences and producers to keep creating. Furthermore, the lack of particular editorial processes perhaps more freely allow user opinions that are considered relevant and funny by those who belong to the same knowledge community. As seen in some *FARK* examples, these may be a well-constructed, though arguably distasteful jokes. As Jenkins (2007) asserts, "We should not reduce the value of participatory culture to its products rather than its process"– there is a lot of value in creating itself, as well as "the expansion of who gets to create".

3.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on the image macro, a version of editorial cartoons that allows citizens the power to shape perceptions of particular political figures and events. Online spaces such as *Pundit Kitchen* and *FARK*, which both function solely on user contributions, actively encourage participation, with the former in particular embedding simple editing tools on their website. The latter too, functions in a similar way by posting a 'base image' and directly asking users to submit their own captions. Spaces such as *Pundit Kitchen* and *FARK* represent an unconventional form of interacting with politics that is increasingly becoming an online phenomenon, as evident by the amount of users participating in the creation and dissemination of memes. At the same time, users are also developing new literacies and competencies as they continue to participate and understand the value of the spaces they frequent.

Image macros appeal to active audiences, for they demand playful participation. This is similar to Jones' (2010) argument that *The Colbert Report*'s critique of right-wing political culture through "serious play" demands the audience's recognition of its "parodic construct" (229). Image macros too, depend on the users' recognition that pre-manipulated photographs can display opportunities for both comedy and political criticism. The act of adding captions to political images are derivative of editorial cartoons. In both forms, participants get to participate by 'solving the puzzle', thus treating the original image as an open text, which Glasser (2000)

argues, is part of play. The process of creating image macros also reveals that while play is often important in approaching the activity itself, the results are far from frivolous– they can also become meaningful to the overall discussion of politics. In addition, the memes demand a relatively high level of political and pop culture knowledge from both creators and audiences in order to be able to actively 'figure them out' (Jones and Baym 2010:290).

The examples presented in this chapter show that humor is produced to suit the existing codes and conventions of particular affinity spaces. *Pundit Kitchen*, while being influenced by editorial control, is maintained as a space that both engages with absurd humor and genuine political discussion. Within the Vladurday meme, *Pundit Kitchen* also serves as a space where 'political fanfiction', can flourish, and in the case of Putin shows citizens being able to approach a terrifying political figure in a critical way behind the safety of humor. The Biden vs Palin meme that began on *FARK* on the other hand, largely echoed the mainstream media criticism of Palin's capabilities as a political leader, which are based on discourses of gender. This may be due to the lack of editorialization on *FARK*, although as a space it does allow particular forms of humor to flourish. Affinity spaces are thus catered to particular audiences who ideally understand the inside jokes and functions of the respective communities. The next chapter will advance the discussion on spaces. It will explore a different genre of political memes that often has an undetectable space of origin, a high level of dissemination, and like the Biden/Palin 4-Pane, lesser editorial constraints.

Chapter 3: Images

Figure 3.1: *Pundit Kitchen*'s 'LOL Builder', where users are able to select from a variety of pre-submitted images in order to create image macros.
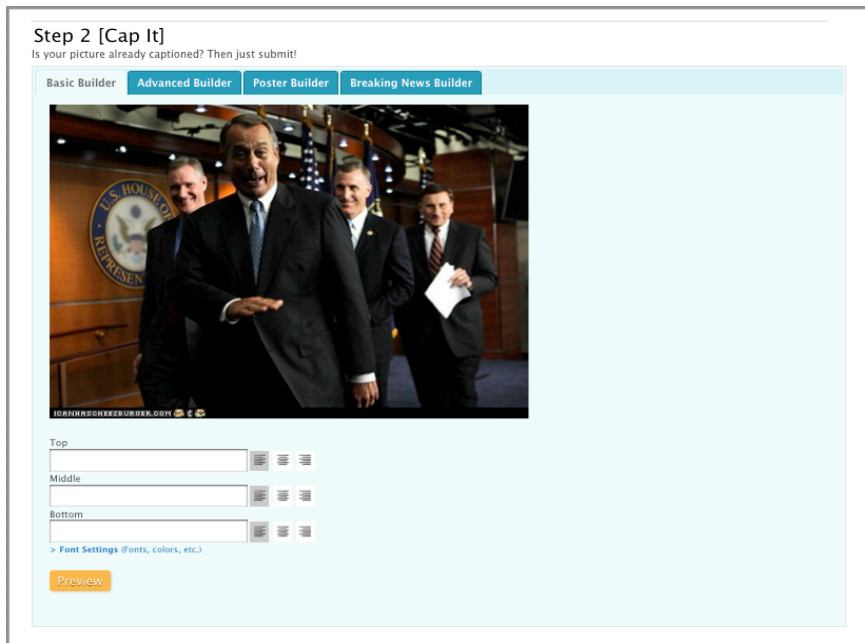
Figure 3.2: The second step in the 'LOL Builder', where captions can be simply added with the built-in editor.
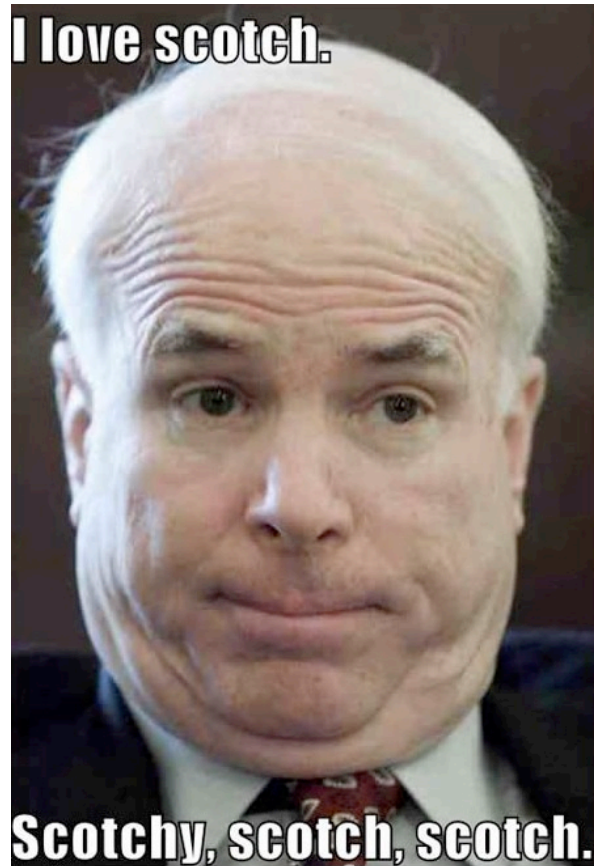
Figure 3.3 (Left): The first submission on *Pundit Kitchen*. User untraceable.

Figure 3.4: Palin is the anti-Christ. Submitted by 'Mike_Democrat'.

Figure 3.5: A crying John Boehner. Captioned by '1961-Shovel'.

Figure 3.6: Neither George Bush nor Dick Cheney are framed as 'real' leaders, according to 'coopopeJ'.

Figure 3.7: Glenn Beck as "journalist", by 'rafboy'.
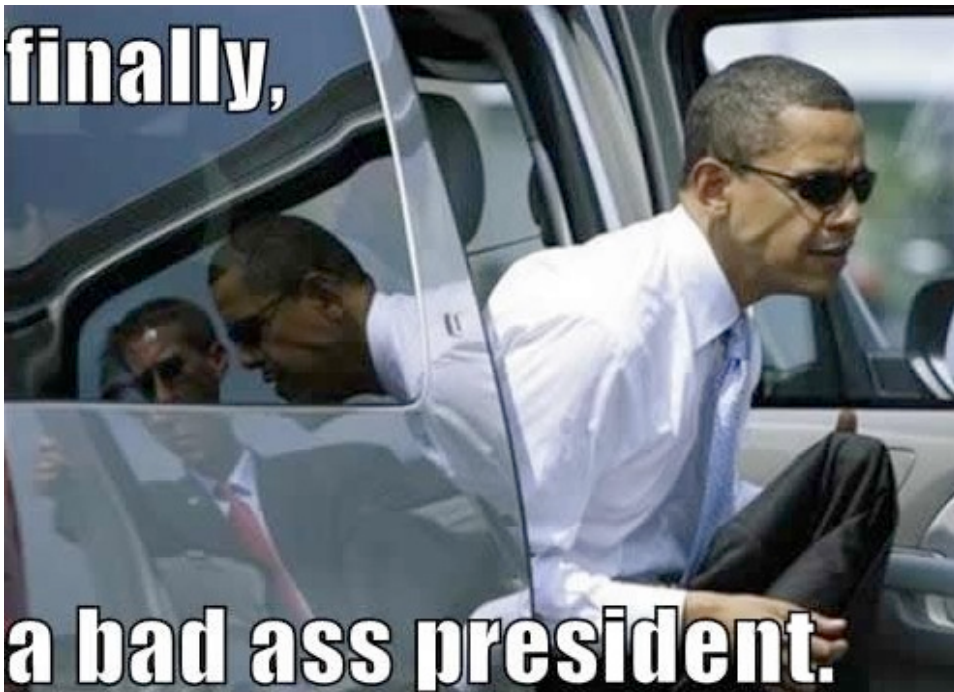
Figure 3.8: Obama framed as 'cool' political leader', as captioned by 'crasta'.

Figure 3,9: Bill Clinton as womanizer, by 'Onceand4all'.
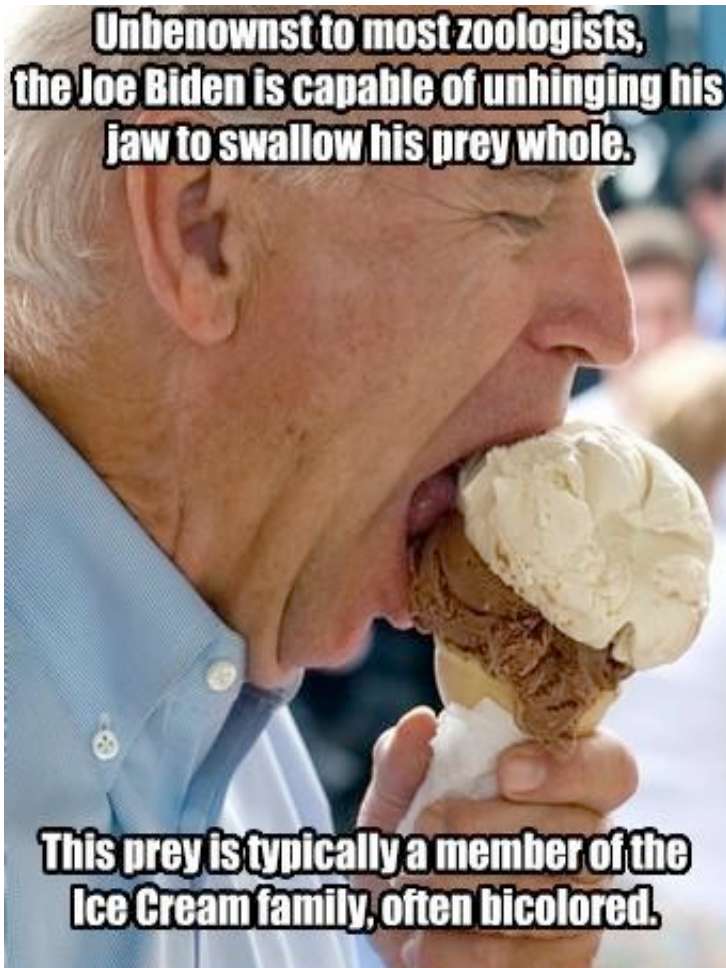
Figure 3.10 (Left): Joe Biden as subject of a nature documentary. Captioned by 'DrRandomness'.

Figure 3.11: Bush and Putin getting Punk'd. Submitted by 'missmaihkittehs'.

Figure 3.12: Obama as Superman; user unknown.

Figure 3.13 (Left): Rahm Emanuel's mercilessness, portrayed through a cultural allusion. Captioned by 'sockiemcpuppet'.

Figure 3.14 (Left): Obama sings Chamillionaire's lyrics. Submitted by 'keithybabes2'.

Figure 3.15 (Left): Ronald Reagan fails to understand a *Monty Python* joke. Captioned by 'Brown'.
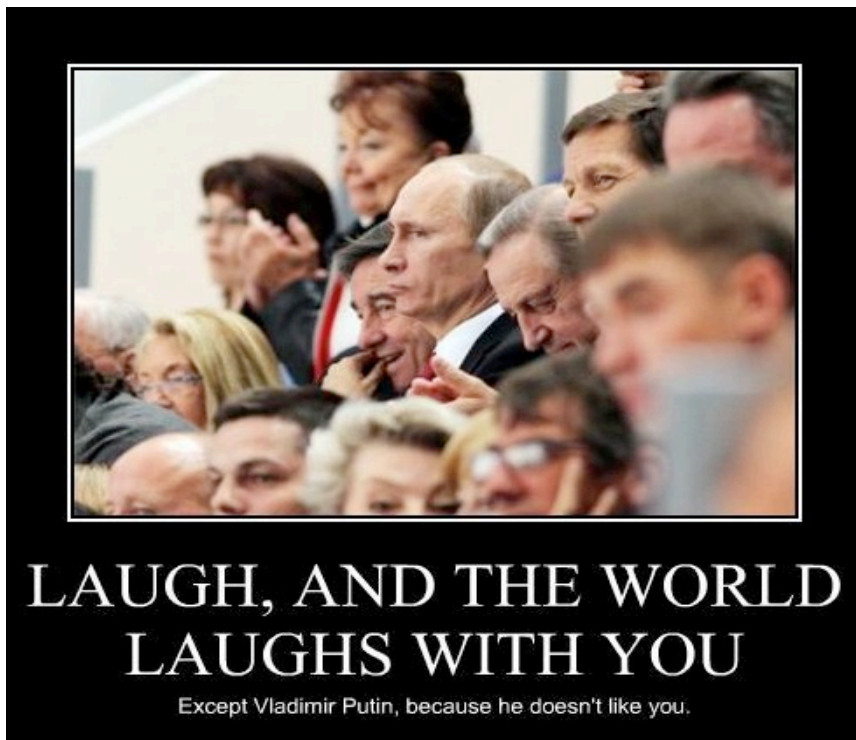
Figure 3.16 (Left): The first Vladurday post on *Pundit Kitchen*, a motivational poster parody. Captioned by 'Drabbler'.

Figure 3.17: Putin ready to take on comic book superhero, Iron Man. Written by 'scourge108'.
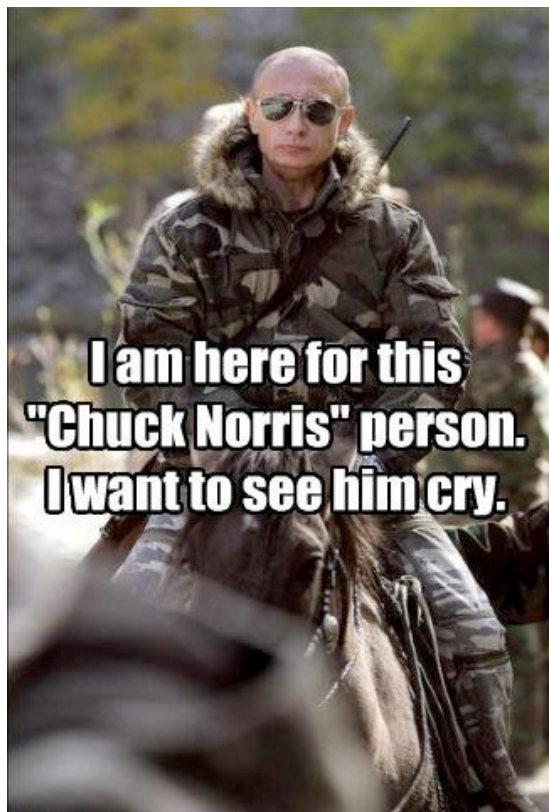
Figure 3.18 (Left): Putin would attack Chuck Norris, one of the most powerful men on the Internet, according to inside jokes from online forums. By 'Eric-in-STL'.

Figure 3.19: Putin will attack a child, according to 'jonesclantd'.

Figure 3.20: Putin sees a baby as a taco. By 'WilliamKeckler'.

Figure 3.21: Putin commands even small animals. By 'Los_Torta'.

Figure 3.22: Can't catch a butterfly, according to 'vivalapivo'
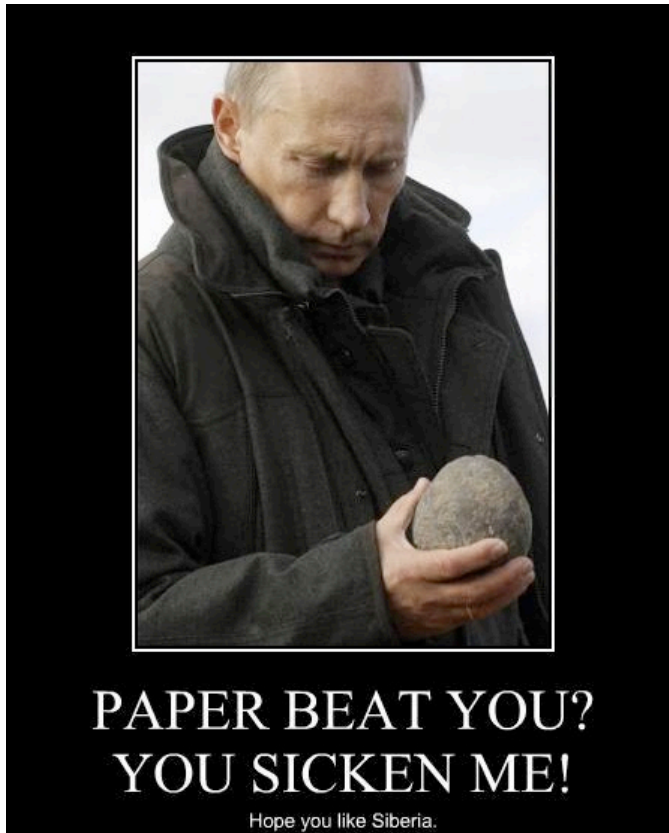
Figure 3.23 (Left): Putin is disappointed in a rock, and it therefore needs to be punished. Captioned by 'MrShineHimDiamond'.
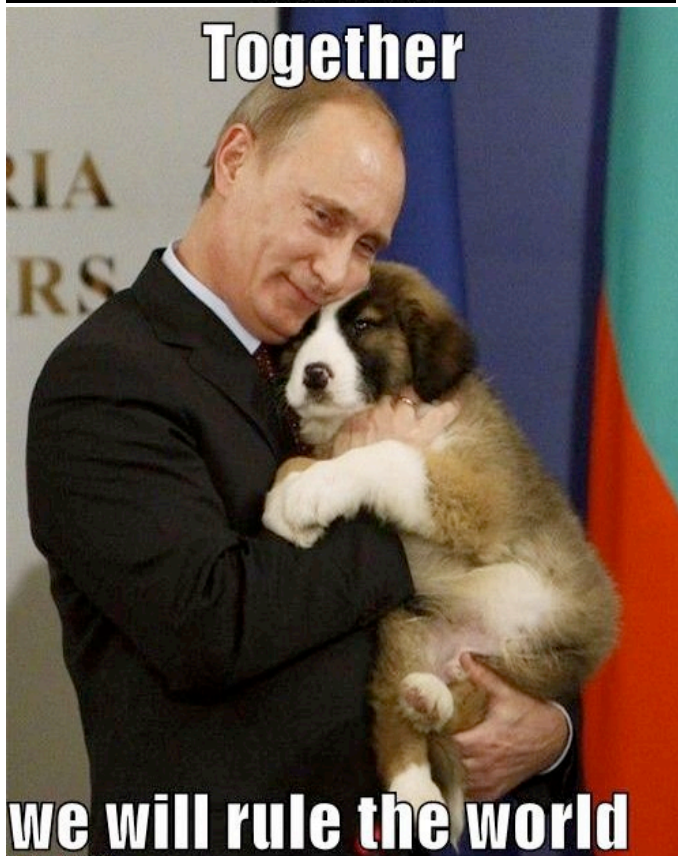
Figure 3.24 (Left): Putin's softer side. Author unknown.

Figure 3.25: Dmitry's "romantic dinner with Vlad"– a *MasterCard* spoof by 'Vanos_Ira'.
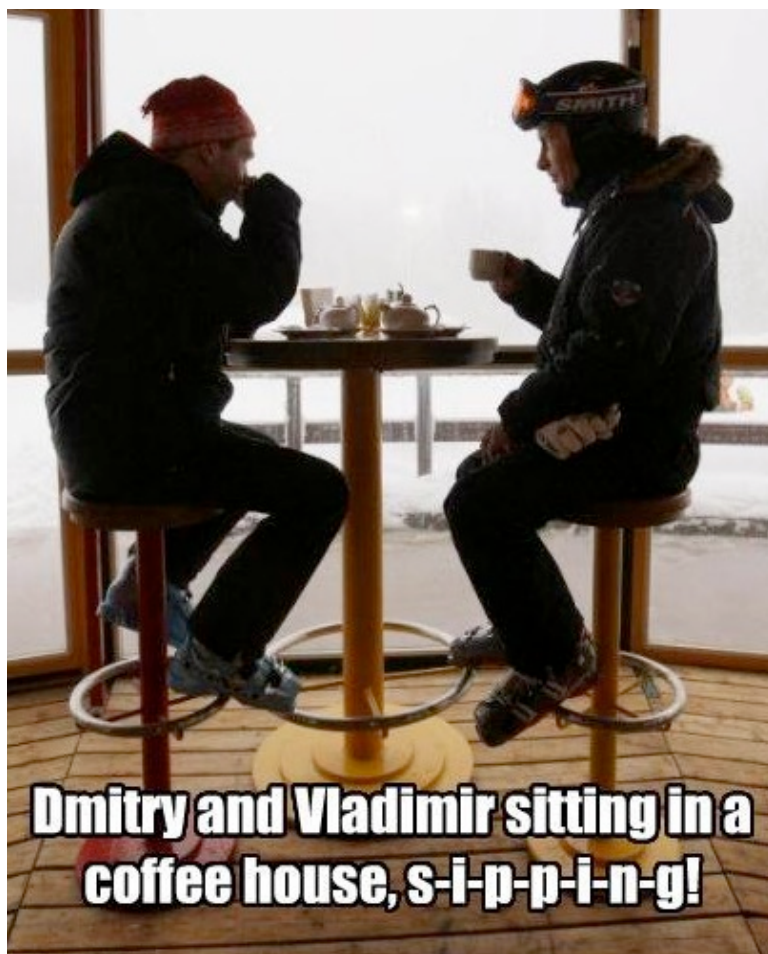
Figure 3.26 (Left): 'First comes love...', by 'Boxfull'.

Figure 3.27: Sarah Palin is Putin's enemy. Captioned by 'Nat'.

Figure 3.28: Angela Merkel as love interest. By 'DJAussie'.

Figure 3.29 (Left): Caption by 'davy.jones' showing Putin successfully courting Angela Merkel.
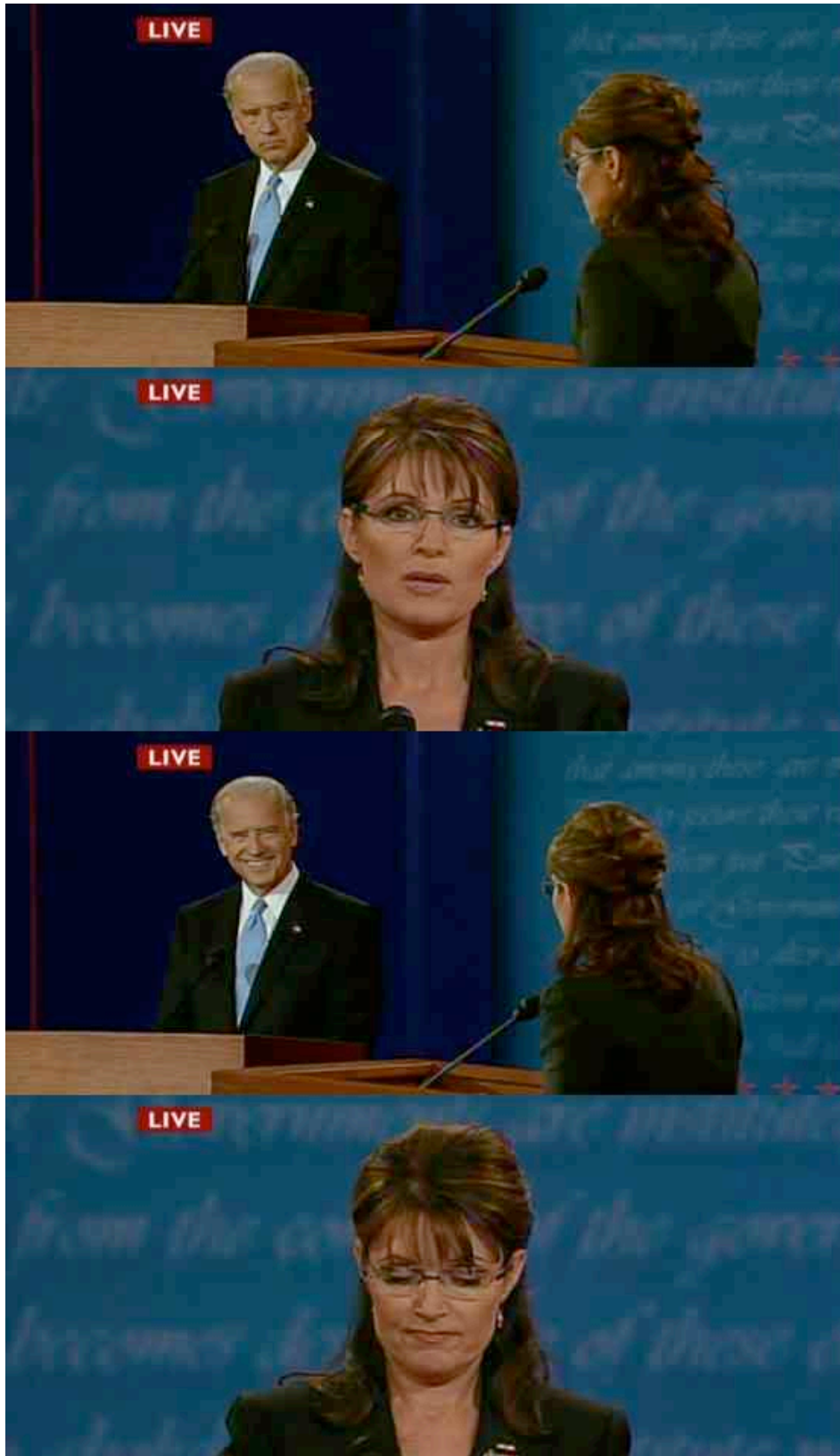
Figure 3.30: The original Biden/Palin debate screenshots on *FARK*.
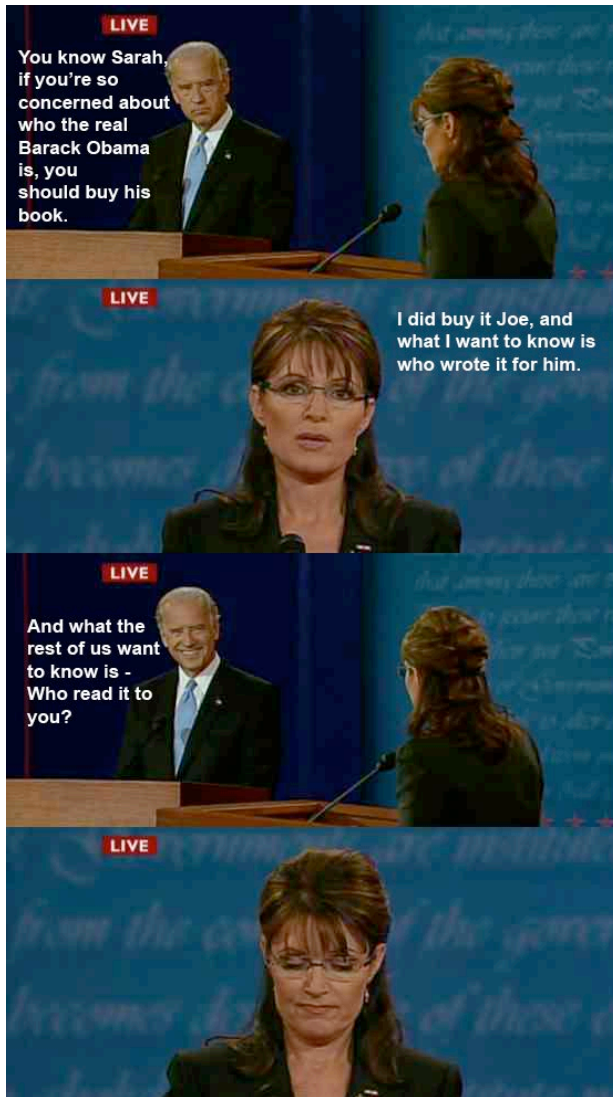
Figure 3.31 (Left): Palin's intelligence is undermined. By 'Outtaphase'.

Figure 3.32 (Right): A *Monty Python* reference, by 'Cyborg77'.

Figure 3.33 (Left): A pun is used to insult Palin and the Republican party. By 'RJames'.

Figure 3.34 (Right): 'StinkyMcButt' utilizes a generic sexist joke within the captions.
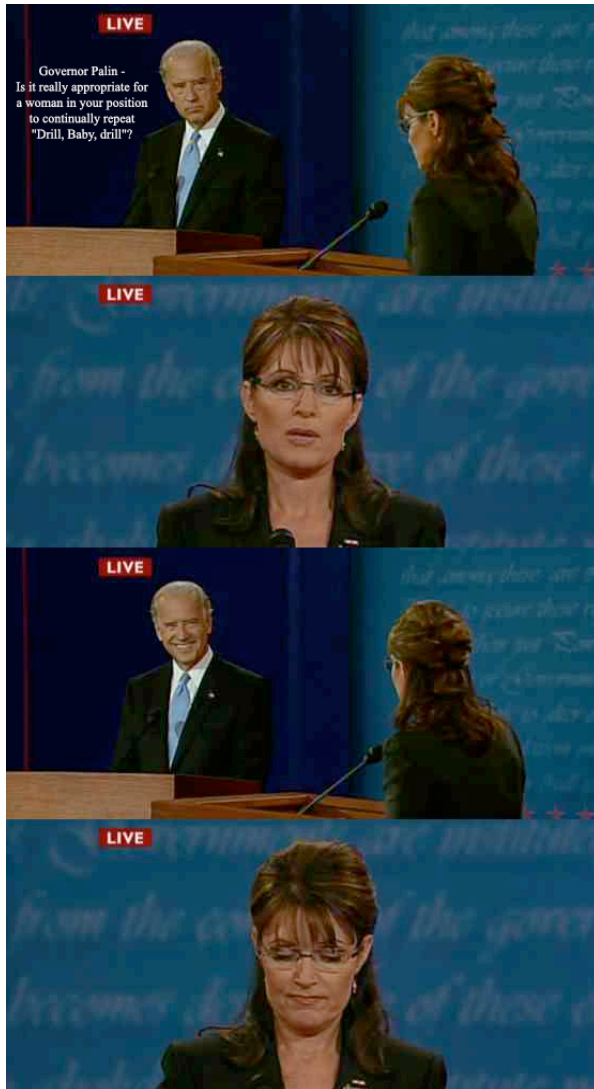
Figure 3.35 (Left): Political reference twisted into a pun, by 'Therion'.
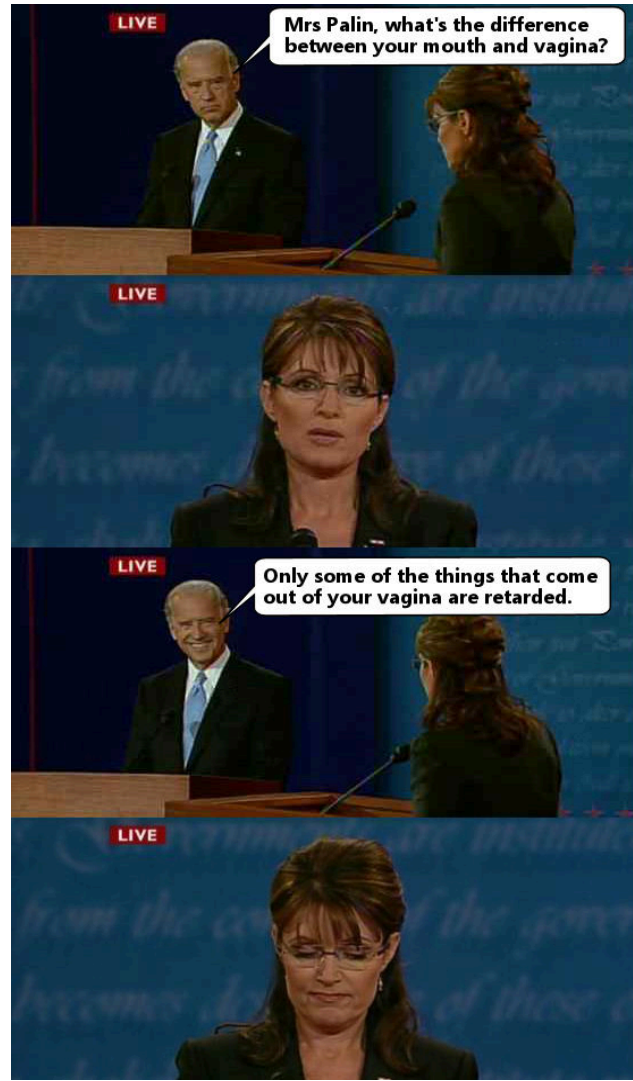
Figure 3.36 (Right): The winning caption on *FARK*, by 'BearToy'.
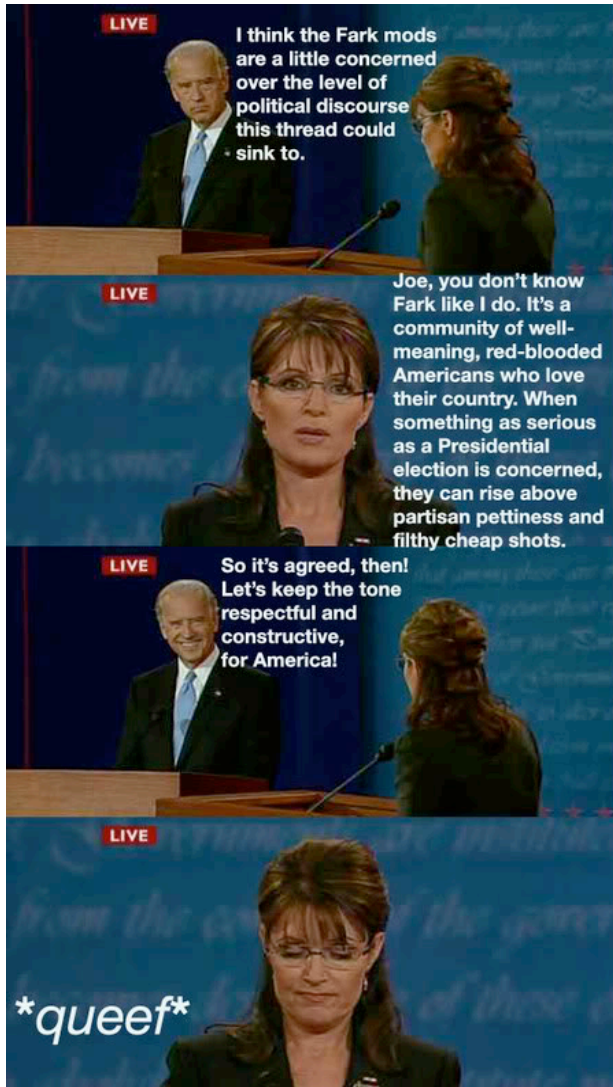
Figure 3.37 (Left): *FARK* users embracing their own brand of humor, by 'Adman12'.

Figure 3.38 (Right): An entry from the front page of *Pundit Kitchen*. Author unknown.

Figure 3.39 (Left): Another published entry on *Pundit Kitchen*, by 'the-chimmy-one'.

Figure 3.40 (Right): Posted by 'mfk' to *The Noise Board*'s forums. The joke refers to Palin's daughter, Bristol, who later revealed that at the age of 18, she was pregnant with her boyfriend's child.
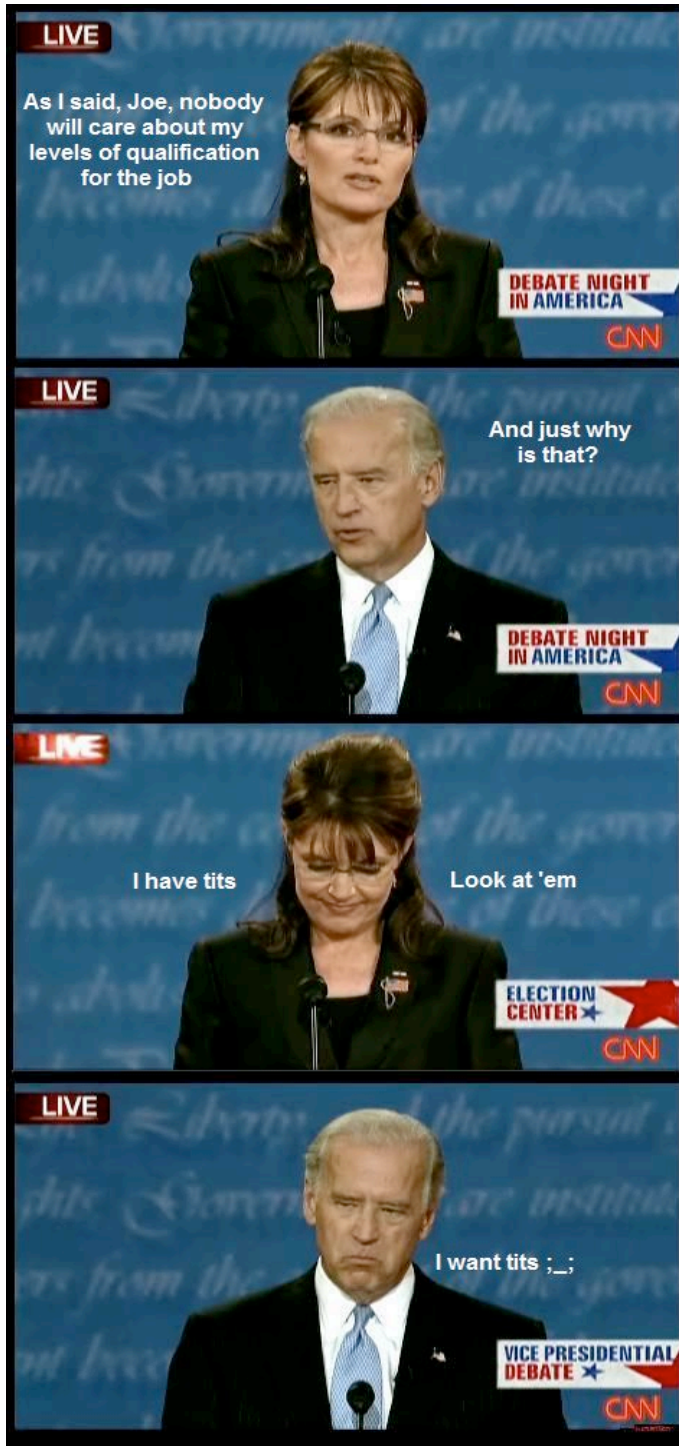
Figure 3.41 (Left): An alternative version of the meme, found on *Macrochan*. Origin untraceable. This base image has also been circulated on various spaces, including *FARK*.

Chapter 4
Into the Wild Green Yonder
Visual Manipulation and Situational Themes

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on how people play with political information by altering photographs of politicians in humorous, and sometimes critical ways. It begins with a comparison to a more traditional version of photomanipulation, the green screen, which also contains aspects of remix and play. This chapter expands the discussions regarding space explored in the previous chapter by looking at memes that take place outside of single affinity spaces. More online spaces, generally dedicated to a combination of popular culture and current events, are included in this chapter because they are crucial in spreading particular memes. Chapter 4 also explores the way memes remain viable by tracking how users reinterpret the same viral ideas across multiple spaces. The case studies in this chapter represent the development of memes through active user participation.

Stephen Colbert's 'Green Screen Challenge' exemplifies a mainstream version of traditional video remix that extends to playful participation from a mass audience. On the August 10, 2006 episode of *The Colbert Report* (2006a), Colbert visited California's 6th district as part of his *Better Know a District* segment. Among the 'attractions' there, according to Colbert, is 'Skywalker Ranch', home of Star Wars creator, George Lucas. To illustrate this point, Colbert plays with a blue toy Lightsaber in front of a green screen, a backdrop used by television and film producers to enable computer-generated backgrounds to be placed behind characters in a scene (Figure 4.1). The scene references *Star Wars*, but more specifically the well-known viral YouTube hit 'Star Wars Kid'.[94] Within a week, fans "all over the Internets" have posted remixes of the video with new background images and actions added (*The Colbert Report* 2006b). This prompted Colbert to announce 'Stephen Colbert's Green Screen Challenge', which asked the public to remix the original video and submit it to the show's official website (Ibid). Fan-produced videos were aired from time-to-time on the program, until a 'winner' was announced on October 11, 2006. Another Green Screen Challenge was launched on July 4, 2008, after Barack Obama's nomination as the Democratic Party's presidential candidate (Jones 2010: 231).

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[94] This viral video features a chubby Canadian high school student, Ghyslain Raza, passionately acting out a fight scene from *Star Wars* with a golf ball retriever (Bennett 2009). Various parodies of the original followed, "enhanced by music, graphics and special effects", as well as references being made to the video by mainstream television shows, such as *South Park* and *Arrested Development* (Bennett 2009).

Here, McCain gave a speech to "a small crowd", one that was "a lackluster appearance in front of an even more unappealing green backdrop" (Ibid). To Colbert, this was evidence of the Republican nominee's "bold challenge to America to make him seem interesting", prompting the 'Make McCain Exciting' challenge (*The Colbert Report* 2008). Viewers responded, creating videos remixing McCain's speech, formerly executed "in a monotone using robotic hand gestures", with texts such as *Citizen Kane*, *The Wire*, and Elvis Presley, and making "statements [that] were political, sophomoric, or plenty of things in-between" (Jones 2010:231-232). The videos were played during broadcasts of *The Colbert Report* for the next three months (Ibid: 231).

This chapter sees the creation of political humor still image memes as similar to Colbert's Green Screen Challenge in the way it demands audiences to play with open texts, and to remix politics with popular culture. It focuses on photomanipulated[95] memes, which differ from the memes discussed in Chapter 3 in that the transformations are more visually, rather than verbally focused. These creations are often highly intertextual, showing that this level of engagement allows citizens to display understandings of both popular and political culture in a sophisticated way. In these, stock photographs of politicians from news websites and official sources are actively altered by the ordinary citizens– contextually, and occasionally, physically. The green screen and photomanipulation are different versions of the same creative act– both involve producers actively altering a background to reinterpret the contexts for their character[s].

The memes in this chapter will also extend the discussion regarding online spaces from Chapter 3. Unlike with image macros however, there are a larger variety of websites that do feature photomanipulated texts responding to politics, and they often vary in terms of overall content. Photomanipulated memes are commonly featured and encouraged in a wide variety of spaces, such as the 'Photoshop' section on *FARK*, social news forums such as *Reddit* and *Digg*, blogs, entertainment or political websites, discussion boards, and sites dedicated to "tracking viral content on the Web", such as *Buzzfeed*. These memes do not originate from, or contain in a repository such as *Pundit Kitchen*. This also makes them more difficult to trace, because of their prominence on multiple affinity spaces. It does however, allow more opportunities for Web surfers to 'accidentally' stumble upon them.

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[95] Numerous sources, including Jenkins (2006a) often use the term 'Photoshop' images/memes/texts as a shortcut to refer to this specific genre of material. I have however, resisted this label, for associating the texts to a specific application automatically limits diversity of computer programming that may be just as widely utilized by users. Other programs, such as *Gimp* or even *Paint* are commonly-used, and depending on an individual's skill level, can still produce results similar to *Photoshop*. Also, the term 'photomanipulation' can reflect both an action as well as a genre of texts.

'Accidents', or perhaps, 'coincidences', are particularly important to this chapter. The three popular memes that will be explored here originated when something noteworthy, in terms of both politics and Internet humor happened. They all possess elements of candid moments, distinct from the polished performances commonly executed by political candidates in public. The irregularity of these happenings allows them to be categorized under Medhurst and DeSousa's (1981) framework as 'situational themes', for they are short-term, unexpected incidents that may be constituted as detached from the political process itself. Like 'Make McCain Exciting', jokes are prompted by coincidences that inspire citizen exploitation. This chapter explores how these origins can evolve into not just the production of a large variety of humorous reinterpretations, but also illustrates the different ways in which ordinary people can play with political information.

4.2 ZOMBIE McCAIN

The 2008 US Presidential Election inspired a huge amount of political satire. Comedic responses to the Presidential campaign proliferated online, with viral videos and still images being produced and distributed by both public personalities and ordinary citizens. 'Zombie McCain', a meme featuring the four-time Arizona Senator and Presidential hopeful John McCain, was perhaps one of the most successful collaborative still image memes of the time. The diversity of responses created via play with a single image positions this meme as possessing a high level of replicability.

Zombie McCain is a response to a candid photograph taken in the third and final 2008 US Presidential Debate, featuring Barack Obama and John McCain. Jim Bourg, a photographer for *Reuters*, managed to snap a photograph of John McCain following Barack Obama off the stage just as he was told he "should have exited in the opposite direction" (Hutcheon 2008). In the photograph, McCain's face is awkward– his tongue is hanging out, and his body hunched forwards with hands partially stretched out in a zombie-like fashion. It was a passing moment, as Bourg (2008) explains: "when I saw McCain lunge and his hands start to come up I hit the shutter and made two frames before it was over". The photographer claims that others around him were surprised that he managed to capture the detailed movement, and were unaware of the event even happening. The original photograph was published in numerous newspapers and websites, until citizens online exploited it by using image-editing software (Hutcheon 2008; Figure 4.2). Image responses in the form of photomanipulations were rapidly distributed across blogs, comment threads, discussion boards, and more (Bourg 2008).

Zombie McCain's popularity was arguably influenced by promotions from mainstream media organizations. *WFMU* (2008), a New York radio station, held a Photoshop contest based on the original image, with the submitted remixes on their blog. *Comedy Central*'s *Indecision* blog posted "a nice huge image" of the original *Reuters* photo for its readers to "work with", asking them to post links of their creations on the comments section (Lurie and DiClaudio 2008). Some of the submitted images were posted on the *Indecision* blog,[96] while others were hosted on a Flickr group entitled 'John McCain Photoshop CHUDlenge' (*Indecision 2008* 2008). While memes have the potential to spread at a high level based purely on citizens circulating them, the involvement of larger, more established organizations can arguably elevate this. Furthermore, most memes that become popular ultimately do receive coverage from larger media organizations, especially in online news magazines such as *Gawker*, *The Atlantic Wire*, and *Salon*, or sites that track popular culture on the web.[97] While *WFMU* and the *Indecision* blog were crucial in promoting the meme's circulation, it is difficult to track where the original response first emerged. This shows that unlike the memes discussed in Chapter 3, there are multiple affinity spaces that encourage citizens to play, and each of them have adopted the viral item, the McCain photograph, for their own unique purposes. *WFMU* ran Zombie McCain as a contest, thus it can act a way to encourage audience engagement for a mass medium, and the *Indecision* blog treats Zombie McCain as part of its function as an affinity space– the meme is just one of many common ways *Indecision* asks its readers to participate.[98]

Zombie McCain was also circulated across citizen-contributed websites and forums. A website, *Fun with McCain,*[99] published user-manipulated versions of the original photograph (Figure 4.3). The *Reuters* image is available on the website in Photoshop format, with McCain cropped out of the frame. Like a green screen, this enables his image to be superimposed against other backgrounds. Users are able to download, and then easily submit their work to the website, which hosts primarily images in .gif[100] format. Dozens of images were also recreated by users in

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[96] The creations were grouped under a section called 'John McCain's Photoshop CHUDlenge'. DiClaudio (2008) calls the odd-looking image of McCain 'C.H.U.D.', also known as "Cannibalistic Humanoid Underground Dweller", which explains the name of the challenge.

[97] This is further exemplified in the memes featured in Chapter 5.

[98] Other ways of participating in the *Indecision* blog includes posting and responding to comment threads, and creating and voting on jokes for a regular caption contest.

[99] The website is now unavailable, but its content is still accessible online via archival tools such as *The Wayback Machine*. The last active 'snapshot', or evidence of the site still running dates back to February 7. 2009.

[100] gif', an acronym for "Graphics Interchange Format", is the extension used for digital image files that comprise of multiple still images, forming one that is essentially "moving", much like a flipbook. Some .gif images can reveal a sequence of events.

discussion threads on websites such as *Democratic Underground*, a political satire website (beac 2008). The meme was a hit on *Democratic Underground*, garnering over 20,000 views within a day of its posting, prompting a user to exclaim, "Holy McTonguey! [...] must be a record on DU!".[101] Zombie McCain was also featured on sites such as *Buzzfeed*, with users posting their own contributions to the comments thread (Lamb 2008).

The analysis of Zombie McCain focuses on four main spaces– the submissions page of the *WFMU* contest, Comedy *Central*'s *Indecision* blog and its Flickr page, a *Democratic Underground* discussion thread, and *Fun With McCain*. These specific spaces were chosen because they were instrumental in the spread of the meme, and are overall consistent in the quantity of content generated. They were also similar in the way they all encouraged participation by directly providing the stock photograph of McCain, prompting users to play with it. Qualitatively, the range of interpretations generated by users can be categorized thematically– McCain was dehumanized, sexually humiliated, and used as a subject for political commentary. These texts overall possess layers of political critique, approached humorously, through 'serious play' (Jones 2010:185). There are however, also responses that can be treated as pure play, rather than actual criticism of McCain.

The logic behind Zombie McCain is simple– his unexpected body positioning prompted images that were closely linked to 'undead' fiction. An early creation by 'severa611' on the *Indecision* blog placed McCain in a *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) poster (Figure 4.4). Here, the hue of McCain's skin is altered to match those of the zombies, and he is depicted to be lunging towards the film's protagonist, Shaun, a 'living' human being. Similarly, McCain's skin is altered to a more Sepia tone in Figure 4.5, which depicts him as an undead creature stumbling towards the player in the 2005 third-person shooter video game, *Resident Evil 4*. The manipulations also went beyond zombies, and depicted McCain as characters from science fiction horror films, including 'Godzilla' from *King Kong vs Godzilla* (1962) (Figure 4.6), the Alien and 'Chestburster'[102] figures from *Alien* franchise (1979) (Figures 4.7 and 4.8), and 'Gollum' from *The Lord of The Rings* trilogy (Figure 4.9). This reveals the multiple visual interpretations that can emerge from a single viral theme– McCain as dehumanized.

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[101] Comment by 'BREMPRO'.

[102] In *Alien* (1979), Kane, played by John Hurt, was seen coughing, eventually collapsing on the table as he was enjoying a meal with friends. The other characters tried to hold him down as he struggles uncontrollably, until a worm-like creature with teeth bursts from his chest, as blood splattered across the scene. This creature, nicknamed the 'Chestburster' Alien, will quickly grow into an adult 'Alien'.

The portrayals of McCain as fictional creatures reveal individuals participating in the act of remixing– they reference "other cultural products", which in this case, is popular film (Knobel and Lankshear 2007:209). The photomanipulated texts can therefore 'poach' myths and narratives from the films to reveal in better depth how McCain is presented. Each of these creatures, as presented in their respective popular works of fiction, are not just far from human– they often become destructive to humankind, with no self control, and singular goals and motivations. Zombies for example, have been widely known as a metaphor for mindless consumerism. Physically, they possess only the capabilities for hunger for human flesh (and brains), and "none of the physical wants or needs expressed in mortal life" (Brooks 2003:16). Popular media often portrays Godzilla as a destructive beast, an allegory for the destruction caused by nuclear weapons. Like zombies, the Aliens in *Alien* are predatory creatures with singular goals. For the Alien, it is to reproduce, and perhaps cause some destruction along the way. Gollum, similarly, had a noticeable single mission throughout the entire series of *Lord of the Rings* films– to possess the 'One Ring' that caused his initial destruction in his first place.

As a slave to singular goals, these photomanipulations of McCain, when judged according to Edwards' (2001) criteria for leadership, show the Presidential hopeful to be viewed undesirably. The allegory of self-serving goals do not reveal an ideal trait in terms of character, or competency– the latter further emphasized by the lack of intelligence attributed to these creatures. While most villains show remorse, or have ulterior motives for wreaking havoc, the creatures here perform their tasks with no real ability for self-control. This does however, arguably shows a dimension of independence in McCain, for he is free from "overt influences" aside from his obvious primary goals. The element of charisma on the other hand, is certainly lacking in these photomanipulations of McCain– while the pop culture fans may argue otherwise, the creatures often represent objects of fear. They are portrayed to be unlikeable, destructive, antagonists with no real 'human' personalities. McCain, using the cultural allusions of horror and science fiction films, is portrayed as predatory, unlikeable, impersonal, far from human, and definitely not ideal as a political leader.

The discourse of sexual humiliation is commonly seen throughout the Zombie McCain meme. The decision to categorize it as 'humiliation' here is based on the constant placement of McCain in various sexually suggestive situations, alluding to themes of homosexual and heterosexual sex, and even bestiality. While these jokes are funny because of the juxtaposition between McCain's candid expression and the nature of the sexual acts, they also function as responses to John McCain's personal life and social policies– despite being married twice, he remains close

to his families, and remains close to conservative values when it came to political issues and policies such as traditional marriage[103] (Tolson 2008).

Fun with McCain in particular, prominently featured texts that were sexually explicit, with the acts further emphasized with the use of an animated .gif format. Figures 4.10 and 4.11 for example, were placed at the top of the webpage, positioning them as the first images that a viewer will encounter, thus shaping the tone of the particular space. They both feature McCain and Obama engaging in homosexual sex. Here, only McCain is 'animated' to perform a humping motion, while Obama remains stationary. Homosexual behavior is also featured in other spaces. In a *Democratic Underground* submission, McCain is cropped out of his original setting, and placed directly next to George Bush, with the two embracing each other, and the former attempting to lick the latter (Figure 4.11). This not only claims a 'taboo' (for conservatives) sexual intimacy between the two, but also suggests the similarities between McCain and Bush, perhaps also acting as a visual pun alluding to Bush's endorsement of McCain.

Another combination of homosexuality and politics is seen in Figure 4.12, referencing the scandal of Republican Idaho senator, Larry Craig. Zombie McCain is cropped as if he is posing next to (and licking) Craig, who is wearing a shirt with the print "I'm not gay, but my boyfriend is!" with an arrow underneath pointing directly at McCain. This refers to a situational theme that occurred in 2007. Craig, the then-senator was arrested in July 2007 under suspicion of performing homosexual sex in an airport bathroom, which he pleaded guilty to on August 2007. Later, Craig (2007, in Murphy 2007) reportedly regretted his plea, blaming it on a spectacle-driven media, stating that "I am not gay; I have never been gay" in spite of what happened. The quote itself is referenced in Figure 4.12. The placement of McCain next to Craig is shows the similarities in both Republicans– they promote values promoting institutionalized homophobia, while the photomanipulation suggests that both have led closeted homosexual lifestyles. As a contrast to this politically-driven statement, Figure 4.13 shows two John McCains embracing each other. While it does suggest homosexuality, it offers less commentary beyond the joke itself, revealing that the photomanipulations can remain apolitical, with humor deriving from the Zombie McCain's appearance.

Other jokes maintain the sentiment that McCain may be sexually perverse. McCain is placed as if he were grabbing Sarah Palin in (Figure 4.14) with his 'zombie' expression intact. The user chose a well-circulated photograph of Palin in a US flag-print bikini and holding onto a rifle,

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[103] The idea that marriage should be considered as a union between a man and a woman, therefore often disregarding the right for homosexual couples to get married.

which is in fact, photomanipulated (Andersen 2008). The body in the photograph is not of Palin, though rather widely accepted to be. This text emphasizes Palin's status as a sex symbol, as well as her femininity, as explored in Chapter 3. As reflected in both Figure 4.14 and the discussion on *Democratic Underground,* Palin, and consequently, McCain's credibility is questioned here in relation to discourses of sexuality. Sexual jokes also involve McCain engaging in bestiality. Figure 4.15 for example, is a .gif showing McCain and with his body animated to be intensely thrusting towards a polar bear's backside. While texts such as Figure 4.15 may not link to any specific political statement, they do take advantage of the shock values infused by social and cultural taboos, as well as undermine McCain's political values.

As discussed above, political knowledge can provide a deeper commentary on what may be jokes plainly based on sexual perversion. Overall, the focus on political issues is not of primary importance throughout the jokes, even on ideologically-driven forums such as *Democratic Underground*. There are however, several jokes that are constructed with Medhurst and DeSousa's (1981) theme of political commonplaces in mind (200). The most common texts in this category closely associate John McCain with then-President George W. Bush. While Figure 4.16 contains references to McCain's sexual perversion, the image was uploaded to the *Indecision*'s Flickr page with the title 'mcsame', revealing the creator's political intent. The original candid photograph was taken on August 2008, when Bush was propositioned by Misty May-Treanor to pat her backside in accordance with sporting tradition [104] in front of cameras when he attended the women's beach volleyball team's practice session (Schor 2008). While he was taken aback, Bush complied, "brushing the back of his hand against the base of her spine", which resulted in an awkward photographic moment (Ibid). This seemingly innocent situation is taken out of its context in Figure 4.16, where Zombie McCain is situated leaning behind the scantly-clad player next to Bush, his hands between her legs, as if ready to grope May-Treanor's backside. The title expresses the similarities between Bush and McCain, in this case, both unable to control themselves. Figure 4.17 shows a play on a similar theme, with McCain's head visibly cropped out and placed on the body of a baby that Bush is holding onto. The *WFMU* entry is named 'Baby Cain', connoting that the infantilized version of the Senator either belongs to Bush, or is under his care. McCain thus represents a continuation of the Bush administration should he be elected. This, according to Edwards (2001), proposes that McCain may be lacking in leadership quality of independence– he is unable to "remove himself" from the "influence" of Bush (2147).

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[104] Traditionally, volleyball players "slap one another's backsides after a successful point" (Schor 2008).

Occasionally, some concrete political arguments emerge within the Zombie McCain meme. Figure 4.18 is only meaningful with an understanding of McCain's political stances. Here, Zombie McCain is seen holding a Shell oil drum, presumably lusting over it. This may refer to McCain's foreign policy, in particular, his opposition towards withdrawing US troops from Iraq, a war criticized by some to be about the acquisition of oil. More likely, it refers to McCain reportedly receiving large campaign donations from Big Oil, which raised questions over why he changed his formerly solid stance on offshore drilling[105] (Frick 2008). The issue of political trust is raised here, and lowers the perceptions of McCain as a good political leader. His leadership is also questioned in Figure 4.19, titled 'Evolution', a parody of Darwin's theory that man evolved from apes. Visually, this joke is successful due to McCain's stance. It also places McCain in between Obama and a Neanderthal, directly portraying the Republican candidate as less physically and mentally capable. This suggests a lack of intelligence, which in return, shows that the creator is expressing a lack of competency in McCain.

On the whole, most of the Zombie McCain submissions are prompted by the humor value contained in the candid photograph. Dehumanization and sexual humiliation can act just as well as vehicles for insult comedy without drawing from factual information. While some texts offer political commentary, contained within the mythic representations– McCain as science fiction villain, sexual predator, or politically unethical, the submissions were largely characterized by play. Users treated the *Reuters* photograph as an open text to create parodies, because the distinctly coincidental quality was out of the politician's control, and is an aesthetic portrayal of the candidate that is far from glossy advertisements and photo-ops. Individuals cannot resist having fun with it, as evidenced in Figures 4.20 and 4.21, where McCain is respectively cast as a turtle and Gene Simmons, and also Figures 4.22 and 4.23 which portray McCain as lusting after a giant taco, and a life-sized ice cream cone.

Play is also reflected in *WFMU*'s winning entry, where McCain finds himself in famous scene from *A Christmas Story* (1983), where the main character's best friend, Flick, was dared to lick a frozen pole, resulting in his tongue getting stuck to it (Figure 4.24). This cultural allusion is perfectly utilized to the comedy contained within the original photograph simultaneously references the film. The play element is also further imbued in another reinterpretation of the viral idea, featuring ordinary individuals photographing themselves impersonating McCain's pose, revealing that the motivation to participate and play with Zombie McCain certainly

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[105] McCain formerly strongly disapproved of offshore drilling, until he "pledged his support" for ending a federal ban on it in June 2008 (Frick 2008). Environmental groups showed disdain over this, but in return, McCain's campaign donations from oil companies increased by as much as 73 percent (Ibid).

contributes to the meme's replicability. These images are compiled in a collection known as 'Zombie Nation' on FFlickr[106] (Figure 4.25; Dubs 2008).

4.3 LIGHTSABER OBAMA

As explored in Chapter 1, *Star Wars* is prominently referenced throughout US political culture. President Barack Obama's open performances of fandom eventually prompted popular culture to cast him as a Jedi. This escalated to a point that even *Star Wars* creator, George Lucas (cited in *The Washington Examiner* 2008), proclaimed, "Barack Obama would most certainly be a Jedi. I would say that's reasonably obvious". This largely enhances Obama's overall image as a politician– his status as "the nerd President" gives him an alternative level of appeal, especially for pop culture aficionados who may not otherwise be aware of political issues. Numerous news sources have noted Obama's tendency to make references to pop culture texts, including *Star Trek*, Spider-Man, and Superman (Moyland 2009). In early 2009, a Hong Kong-based action figure manufacturer*, Dragon in Dream Corporation*, released a Barack Obama doll, which among other eccentric accessories such as katana blades, guns, and microphones, was equipped with a blue Lightsaber (Jardin 2009; Figure 4.26).

Obama's open engagement with fandom shows that he embraces, and even happily pokes fun at this public perception of himself. The Lightsaber Obama meme proves that the public too, are happy to 'play along' in maintaining this image of the President. The meme began on September 15, 2009, when President Obama promoted Chicago's 2016 Olympics bid in a White House rally (*Reuters* 2009). During a fencing demonstration on the White House lawn, Obama was witnessed picking up a blue plastic toy Lightsaber, and jokingly joisting with Olympic fencer Tim Morehouse (*The Huffington Post* 2009). Photographs, sourced from *Getty* and circulated via news media such as *The Huffington Post*, quickly appeared on websites such as *Gawker*, *Buzzfeed*, and *Digg*, which inspired people to create parodies of the original images (Figures 4.27 and 4.28). *Gawker* (2009) a news and gossip blog, even released a "bonus, green-screen-challenge-ready shot" for their readers to create their own photomanipulated texts. Similarly, a user on *IGN* (2009), a video game and movie review website, also provided a ready-made cutout of Obama with his Lightsaber on the discussion board, prompting users to create their own parodies there. *Buzzfeed* notably encouraged participation by embedding an image editor in the main article which singles out the figure of Obama with his Lightsaber, sourced from *Gawker*

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[106] 'FuckFlickr', an open-source image gallery created as an alternative to the Yahoo-owned Flickr, due to political reasons.

(Sheperd 2009). This allows the user, like with a green screen, to easily upload whatever image they please to replace the original background (Figure 4.29). Users are then encouraged to post their creations in the comments section of the article.

As stated above, the *Getty* images were quickly disseminated across various different affinity spaces. The posts on *Buzzfeed* and *Gawker*, as well as the *IGN* forums will be utilized as case studies here because they offer a balance of quantity and quality in terms of texts created. A few notable examples from social news websites *Digg* and *Reddit* will also be included in the analysis. In addition to helping spread the meme, these spaces also demonstrate their users encouraging each other to play with the image, either by attaching the original photograph, or by commenting and sharing each others' work. Overall, the texts created draw on three distinct themes: *Star Wars*, politics, and popular culture, both mainstream, and web-specific inside jokes.

Star Wars, a cultural allusion, is most obvious reference for the manipulation of the original *Getty* photograph. Users on various websites, including the *IGN* discussion boards and *Gawker* have edited Obama's toy Lightsaber to look like a 'real' one featured in the films (Figure 4.30). The *IGN* (2009) user proclaimed, "it had to be done", showing a need to refer back to *Star Wars*, and consequently, to blend political reality with popular fiction. Users also share photomanipulations from other sources, as evidenced in a post on the *IGN* message board. Figure 4.31 was from an unknown source, and directly references *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) with an image of Luke Skywalker replaced by the Obama cutout. Another reference to this film is seen in a *Gawker* comment post, with Obama again taking the place of Luke Skywalker in a scene in Dagobah; Yoda is edited onto Obama's back, drawing even closer links to the film (Figure 4.32). The commenter quotes Yoda: "do or do not, there is no try" (*Gawker* 2009). A poster on *Digg* placed the original cutout of Obama into a scene from *The Phantom Menace* (1999), portraying the President as fighting on the side of the Jedi (Milian 2009; Figure 4.33).

In the *Star Wars* texts, Obama is framed as the protagonist, which may be due to the original *Getty* image of him wielding a blue Lightsaber. [107] At the same time, it also reinforces a common thread in mainstream discourse that Obama is a Jedi, as already mentioned by Lucas. Obama is also Luke Skywalker, a comparison commonly made in the mainstream media such as *The Daily Show* (2011) to describe Obama's endless battles with the 'Republican empire' to achieve

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[107] In the *Star Wars* films, Jedis (the heroes) use blue or green Lightsabers.

legislative victories (Figure 4.34). The use of *Star Wars* as a cultural allusion, and more importantly, the myths from the films to justify Obama as protagonist across these affinity spaces show that these individuals agree with the discourses provided by popular culture. This shapes an overall dominant discourse throughout both mainstream and online media of Obama as Jedi. In addition, these photomanipulations are playful celebrations of this portrayal, and adds to Obama's image, resulting in him being portrayed as a 'good' political leader. The wide use of popular culture to communicate this point shows that the boundaries between the cultures of the public (politics) and personal (fandom) are no longer distinguishable.

As demonstrated throughout the *Star Wars* parodies, the advantage of an actual photograph of the President in a dueling stance is obvious. Obama is also framed as fighting 'evil' when texts reference real-life politics. Images of this sort draw from both cultural allusions (*Star Wars*) and political commonplaces (politicians and day-to-day duties faced by Obama). The antagonists represented in the memes are broad ranging, taken from specific events and more 'generalized' rivalries. By applying Edwards' (2001) framework for political leadership, Obama is represented throughout these examples as fighting on the side of good rather than evil. This signifies likability and capability, which reflects and enhances his status as a political leader.

Figure 4.35 features Obama dueling with South Carolina Representative Joe Wilson. The latter gained widespread notoriety by shouting "you lie!" as President Obama was delivering his address to Congress regarding his proposal to reform health care (*CNN* 2009). The outburst, considered to be heckling by most, resulted in widespread pranks and comments from unimpressed individuals on the Internet[108] (Ahmed 2009). This happened exactly a week before the release of the *Getty* photographs, when Joe Wilson was fresh in the minds of citizens as being against Obama. It is therefore no surprise to see various manipulated images of Lightsaber Obama 'at war' with Joe Wilson, a notable one being an image of the two dueling with Lightsabers, with the image and caption referring to both *Star Wars* and the political incident (Figure 4.35). A similar case is visible in Figure 4.36. The 'Tea Party Movement',[109] generally associated with conservative and libertarian values, are known to strongly oppose the Obama administration's policies (Vogel 2010). Figure 4.36, sourced from *Reddit* (2009a), depicts the original photograph, with the caption, '"this tea party's over!" superimposed on it. While the

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[108] Wilson's Wikipedia page was altered to reveal him as having "no respect for the office he holds", and 'Joe Wilson' became a Twitter trend that night, with users signing up just to express their views (Ahmed 2009). In addition to Internet pranks, Wilson was also demanded an apology from White House Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, showing an agreement between the political world and popular culture that Wilson's actions were unimpressive.

[109] The movement has openly sponsored candidates and protests since early 2009. While they claim no party affiliations, polls have proven that the members largely Republican.

verbal cues provide a large part of the joke here, the visual changes enhance the joke. Obama's Lightsaber is visibly altered to purple, so it matches Mace Windu's in *Attack of the Clones* (2002). The caption refers to a quote by Windu in the film, "this party's over". Mace Windu is powerful, and the only well-known dark-skinned Jedi Knight in the *Star Wars* franchise's canon. Mace Windu's character is 'poached' and assigned to Obama, and the President's playful expression takes on a different meaning when juxtaposed against the quote. The caption now suggests an authoritative tone. Obama's ability to confront his enemies here arguably elevates his capability as a political candidate (Edwards 2001).

Political differences are also reflected in the memes by comparing figures from the two main US political parties through the myths presented in *Star Wars*. The relationship between President Obama and former President George W. Bush has been described as "collegial and cooperative"– the two have never outwardly revealed any sense of rivalry (Stein 2008). They do however, differ strongly in political policies and affiliation, and Obama's victory in the 2008 Presidential election at the time was defined as change to the previous administration. The mainstream news media consistently compares the achievements and failures of President Obama to his predecessor. A submission on the *IGN* discussion board reflects this discourse, placing Obama and Bush in the *Star Wars* set, overlooked by Darth Vader's Master, Emperor Palpatine. George W. Bush is given a red Lightsaber, just like Darth Vader's, showing the former President as being commanded by evil (Palpatine) to lure the Jedi (Obama) to 'the dark side' (Figure 4.37). Similarly, Zombie McCain attempts to take control over Obama in Figure 4.38, and asks him to join the 'evil' side, with a direct quote from *The Return of the Jedi* (1983) included[110] within the frame.

Humorous memes are essentially considered as popular culture within the context of Internet discourse. The incorporation of web-specific references, which can be labeled as cultural allusions, are common in the creation of online humor. The act of 'blending' multiple online memes is also common. Zombie McCain for example, was referenced in Figure 4.38. This text is deeply intertextual, allowing references to be drawn from Lightsaber Obama as a phenomenon, storylines from the *Star Wars* films, and also Zombie McCain, allowing a wide variety of interpretations to be formed by the reader. Figure 4.39 depicts Lightsaber Obama fighting alongside 'Star Wars Kid'. While the original viral video turned Ghyslain Raza into a joke, with the boy ending up in a psychiatric ward and suing his bullies, the playfulness contained in Lightsaber Obama alters the discourse in Figure 4.39 (Popkin 2007). Tragedy aside, the viral

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[110] "GOOD[,] I CAN FEEL YOUR ANGER!", was quoted by Darth Vader, who attempts to take control of Luke Skywalker, begging the hero to join "the dark side of the Force".

video was best known for its juvenile humor– a commenter on YouTube states, "it's funny because he's fat" (raze7ds 2006). Raza's video was also reminiscent of a fan tribute, except this one was enjoyed by over 20 million people. Placing Obama with his toy Lightsaber next to Raza, with his toy Lightsaber shows the connection they both have as *Star Wars* fans, and is also a playful mockery of it. Participants also lightly poke fun at Obama's 'nerdiness' by allowing the President to duel with online 'inside jokes' such as LOLcats (Figure 4.40), and a 'raging' Gary Busey [111](Figure 4.41; *Reddit* 2009c). This shows the incorporation of cultural allusions drawn from online humor into a mainstream text, which reaffirms the shared habits of participants in these online affinity spaces.

Mainstream popular culture was also heavily incorporated in the users' photomanipulations. Multiple users have edited Lightsaber Obama into movie posters and scenes (Figure 4.42, for example). Parodies featuring rapper, singer and producer Kanye West, and pop singer Taylor Swift were also found on various forums and comment threads. The two were part of a widely recognized debacle that took place on September 13, 2009. Swift, who won an *MTV* Video Music Award, was unexpectedly interrupted by West [112] (Kreps 2009) This incident promoted Kanye West to meme status, spawning texts such as 'Kanye Interrupts' remixes, websites such as a 'Kanye West Apology Generator', [113] and a Tumblr blog featuring cutouts of Kanye West interrupting various vital moments in movies, television, or video games (*Atom* 2009; *Kanye Gate* 2008). In remixes of Lightsaber Obama and Kanye West, the President is always framed as the 'hero', ready to stop the latter from harassing Swift (Figure 4.43). While the absurdity of the US President stopping Kanye West with a toy Lightsaber itself is both silly and funny, the meme in particular, utilizes Obama as a figure to respond to popular culture events.

The manipulations strongly reveal the constantly narrowing boundaries between politics and popular culture. They illustrate a willingness to play with the possibility that the Obama can possibly engage with characters in their favorite films, or Lightsaber-weilding animals. The user-created texts are often silly by nature, and yet, reveal a perception of President Obama that is overwhelmingly positive towards the original event. This is further reinforced by Obama's own

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[111] While the origins of the latter as an Internet phenomenon is difficult to trace, Busey is generally used as a character substitute for everything, in some ways, just because it provides an eccentric twist. The terms 'rage' is often used on Internet discussion boards (sometimes accompanied by a doodle of an angry, scowling character) to bluntly and directly define exactly what it means.

[112] The rapper seemingly appeared out of nowhere, and proclaimed that Beyoncé should have won the award instead of Swift.

[113] A website that works in a similar fashion to MadLibs, where users fill in details such as celebrity names and nouns, and a poorly-written, all capitalized apology similar to Kanye West's actual apology letter on his website is automatically generated.

openness when it comes to his fandom, as Moylan (2009) writes, the images of Obama "brandishing a Lightsaber […] shouldn't be a surprise to anyone who knows that Mr. President is the nerdiest man living outside of his mother's basement". Furthermore, Lightsaber Obama reveals a complex negotiation of the President's presentation of his own image– while an image of one of the world's most powerful figures wielding a toy is inherently juvenile, this happened at a public event, and the photo opportunity appeared to be intentional. Rather than mockery, the this elevated his credibility as both nerd and 'cool President', showing the online users' appreciation of a leader who appears more human, by connecting to their own interests. This is reflected in the comment threads throughout the various websites. *Digg* (2009) users, for example, posted comments such as, "coolest president of all time?" and "this is how every senate debate should end". A commenter on *Gawker* (2009) proclaimed, "He's a total nerd…and the coolest president ever!". The conversation is similar on *Reddit* (2009b); a user posted, "I was on the fence with Obama, but I like him more now after looking at Life's dork photo set". On message boards, individuals shared their love for the original *Star Wars* films by posting quotes, and at the same time, making connections to Obama's status as not just a President, but one who seems down to earth enough to enjoy the same things they do. *Star Wars* thus becomes associated with Obama's 'political brand', allowing consumers to make positive associations between the two. Jones (2005) argues that political engagement can be occur by not separating it with "other things that matter in people's culture" (193). The discussions in this section show that participation can be driven by an active engagement with politics and fandom, rather than seeing both as mutually exclusive.

4.4 JOE F*CKING BIDEN

Ever since Barack Obama nominated Delaware senator Joe Biden as his running mate, much media attention has been paid to the latter's 'classic' gaffes. Earlier incidents include telling wheelchair-bound Senator Chuck Graham to "stand up" at a campaign rally in Missouri, and addressing Barack Obama as "Barack America" during an August 2008 rally (Talmazan 2010). Richard Adams (2010b), a blogger for *The Guardian*, describes the Vice President as "famous for having a mouth that out-runs his brain from time to time". Overall however, political media, from weblogs to mainstream publications such as *TIME* seem to embrace Biden's poor luck with verbal timing, by creating humorous lists such as 'Top 10 Joe Biden Gaffes' (*TIME* 2010).

One of Biden's most popular gaffes occurred during the signing of the Health Care and Education Affordability Reconciliation Act of 2010 on March 23, 2010. This happened at a

"packed" White House ceremony, attended by "a crowd of congressional leaders, guests and members of the Kennedy family, including Vicki Kennedy, […] who had fought for years to reform America's healthcare system" (Adams 2010b). Here, Biden introduced Obama, and just as the two embraced, Biden was heard "excitedly whispering" to President, "this is a big fucking deal!" (Adams 2010a; Figure 4.44). The statement was caught on microphones in the room, and quickly became a talking point for mainstream news media, beginning with *FOX News*. The clip was broadcast repeatedly, reinforcing the impression that Biden is prone to making foolish mistakes such as these (Ibid).

Within hours, Biden's statement was turned into easily-manipulated still image pieces. These often comprise of stock photographs of the Vice President, combined with either his now-infamous words, or altered versions of them. Like the previous two memes, it has been featured on spaces such as *Comedy Central's Indecision* blog, and *Buzzfeed*, with the latter providing an online image editor similar to that used for Lightsaber Obama (Ringerud 2010). Joe Biden was also featured on news website *The Huffington Post*, and *Bite*, a comedy website. *Bite* published a selection of memes of their own, and encouraged readers to do the same by providing raw, readily-cropped images of Biden in both Photoshop and .png[114] formats (Figure 4.45). A Tumblr blog called *This is a Big Fucking Tumblr…* was created a few days after the gaffe. While it stopped becoming active after several days, it represents an effort by ordinary individuals to host a collection of user-generated images of this meme. The Tumblr blog also provided users with a cropped image of 'Joe Biden's head' to use in meme-creation.

This meme however, differs from Zombie McCain and Lightsaber Obama in terms of its spread and evolution. Big F*cking Deal appears to be commonly found on individuals' websites and blogs. Although featured prominently on better-known websites, as mentioned above, the original creators of some of the texts sometimes remain anonymous, and are largely untraceable, a quality that is later explored in Chapter 5. This meme in particular represents the wide adoption of a single viral idea, the Biden gaffe, across the realm of both politics and online popular culture for various purposes. This section will explore the online texts created by ordinary individuals, as well as how the meme flourished offline.

The citizen-created texts online mostly focus on visual puns. These are produced via a recognition of Biden's gaffe, constructing verbal jokes by creating similar sentences that rhyme with the phrase. The verbal joke is then juxtaposed against an image, which is often a

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[114] Also known as 'Portable Network Graphics'. This was included presumably for users who do not own Photoshop software, and therefore can edit images on cheaper, or free software, such as Gimp, or other Paint-type applications.

photograph of what is said by 'Joe Biden'. To more strongly connote the idea that he is the one saying the reconstructed phrase, a photograph of Biden is always included in these pieces. While Figure 4.44 is an arguably iconic image (and an iconic situation), a more-humorous looking photograph of Biden is often used. The stock image files included by websites such as *Buzzfeed* and *Bite* are examples of this (Figure 4.45).

The image puns were the most popular version of Joe F*cking Biden meme, being widely circulated across *Buzzfeed*, and Tumblr, as well as on several personal blogs. Figure 4.46 reflects the quintessential example of this reinterpretation of the viral idea. The photomanipulation here is more professional-looking than most, though the aesthetic 'quality' matters less than the process, as reflected in the users' high level of participation in playing with the images and gaffe. In Figure 4.46, a smiling photograph of Biden is cropped into an underwater background with an eel, reinforced by his head being contained in a bubble. The caption, "this is a big fucking eel", references the background visual, and is in a comical-looking font, suggesting a playful, childlike take on the gaffe. This example first appeared on the creator's blog, and was widely spread across various websites, including *The Daily What*, a popular news and humor site affiliated with *The Cheezburger Network*. It was also published on *Buzzfeed* as an 'example' to inspire readers to create manipulations of their own. Similarly, Figure 4.47 initially posted on the creator's Tumblr blog, has been widely-circulated across multiple websites, and was 'reblogged' by many users on Tumblr. While Tumblr itself hosts a variety of spaces, most of them are non-political[115]. The wide spread of Figures 4.46 and 4.47 therefore show that political humor can be consumed by a wide range of individuals.

Buzzfeed's image editor inspired plenty of eccentric texts, mostly prompted by its users' engagement with wordplay. The cropped image of Joe Biden provided is one of him in the middle of a speech, with a somewhat bewildered expression on his face. His hands are raised, connoting that he was proclaiming something noteworthy. The default font is in white capitalized letters, which may suggest a bold statement, or an overall format that is reminiscent of image macros. The online editor was utilized to create jokes that juxtaposes the bewilderment in Biden's face with verbal puns and the visual joke. Figure 4.48 for example, shows Biden to be impressed at a "big fucking deal" of outdoor cards. His original statement here is retained, but the meaning is altered with the choice of visual image uploaded by the creator. Others alter any section of "This is a big fucking deal!" in any way they please. 'Big' is changed to 'Pig' in Figure 4.49, with Biden placed in front of a photograph of humping pigs. A further alteration of the pun

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[115] Tumblr itself is very visually-driven platform, and is more known for fanfiction, screen-captures of television programs, or other art, such as photography.

is exemplified in Figure 4.50, where Joe Biden is describing the "big bucket seal" behind him. The user notes that "Joey B got mad trivia knowledge", for the animal is in fact, "an obese elephant seal". The simplicity and replicability of this meme allows a large variety of unified jokes to be found across the various spaces. The images of Joe Biden and the fonts used for example, may change, but the format of the joke remains the same, as evident in examples spread across the *Indecision* blog (Figure 4.51), Tumblr, and other personal blogs (Figure 4.52).

While idiosyncratic captions and images were popular, cultural allusions were also utilized throughout the meme. Figures 4.53 and 4.54 for example, substitutes "deal" with the last names of celebrity figures, which in this case is actress Jessica Biel and basketball player Shaquille O'Neal. The verbal jokes here are reinforced with stock photographs of the celebrity figures. Similarly, an Internet-specific cultural allusion is used in Figure 4.55. Joe Biden's elongated "FFFFFFFFFFUUUUUUUUU...", as well as the background image directly references the 'rageface' meme. The 'Rage Guy' is "a main character of a series of crudely-drawn comics" commonly seen throughout Internet forums and blogs "portraying situations [that] bring rage and exasperation" (*Know Your Meme* 2009; Figure 4.56). The utilization of 'Rage Guy' here perhaps has more to do with Biden's choice of words rather than the situation portrayed as frustrating, and the cultural allusions reaffirm *Buzzfeed* as a space where users recognize and share particular online-specific inside jokes. Particular knowledge of current events is also required to interpret some of the examples. Figure 4.57 for example, would arguably be meaningless to a viewer with no further knowledge of the person in the photograph. The text, "this is a big fucking steal", simultaneously reveals very little unless the context is understood. In this image, Biden is most likely referring to Bernie Madoff, whose photograph serves as a background in this piece. Madoff was involved in a widely-publicized investment scandal, and was jailed in March 2009 after pleading guilty to running "one of the largest frauds in history" (Frank et al 2009).

Cultural allusions were also utilized in the images posted in *Bite* (Scott 2010). This website also reveals an attempt to express a different take on the gaffe, adding to the meme's replicability. Here, the creator utilizes a similar format as the other memes, with Biden being placed in the foreground, and an image related to the verbal joke placed in the background, as if projected on a green screen. *Bite*'s texts utilize speech bubbles containing dialogue with a humorous spin on historical events, followed by "IT'S A BIG FUCKIN' DEAL" in capitalized letters, signifying the importance of those specific events. Figure 4.58 for example, shows Biden acknowledging the relevance of "the Wright Brothers [getting] this piece of shit in da air", while in Figure 4.59, Biden explains that "Chaplin's Evil Twin (with an image of Hitler in the background) trying to

pwn The World" is "A BIG FUCKIN' DEAL". The language used, such as "da" and "pwn",[116] further reaffirms that these memes take place online, with its vernacular being actively utilized throughout online message boards.

Image macros were also featured as an online reinterpretation of the gaffe. While they may be considerably easier to create in terms of technicality, image macros are less popular, at least in terms of their spread. Instead of being promoted by well-known websites and blogs, image macros were more commonly seen in lesser-known or personal weblogs. Here, as with the generic format of image macros, a caption is superimposed on a stock photograph of Joe Biden in a specific situation. The play on words however, is still apparent. For the image macros, the texts often echo what is portrayed in stock photographs of Biden, and individuals do tend to pick unflattering though humorous candids. Examples include Figure 4.60, a photograph of Joe Biden holding up his biography, with a superimposed speech bubble stating, "This is 200 pages of big fucking deals", and well-known candid photograph of Biden munching on an ice cream cone while holding on to another one proclaiming that his love for ice cream is a "big fucking deal" (Figure 4.61).

For ordinary Internet users, Biden's mistake turned into a remarkable catchphrase, and eventually evolved beyond the spaces where visual memes are ordinarily found. It became so memorable that several users have added "big fucking deal", while associating it with Biden, into *Urban Dictionary*, an online dictionary that catalogues user-submitted slang words and phrases that are often closely associated with popular culture, both offline and online (Figure 4.62). The phrase also became validated in popular culture offline, when on March 25, 2010, Biden's quote became available on a T-shirt on *BustedTees*, a T-shirt store featuring designs related to popular culture (Figure 4.63). Biden's "big fucking deal" shows the treatment of politics as popular culture, and Biden, despite his gaffe, is celebrated as a sort of celebrity, with people being motivated to even buy T-shirts containing his now-infamous phrase.

The most notable responses offline came from the political world. Rather than consider Biden as an embarrassment, the Obama administration appreciated the joke by lightheartedly poking fun at it. This offline response adds to the cycle of humor generated by the event. Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, within minutes of the event, Tweeted, "And yes, Mr. Vice President, you're right..."[117]. President Obama (cited in *The Huffington Post* 2010) even reportedly noted that

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[116] Internet slang for the word "own", which is short for "gaining ownership" of an opponent, commonly used in online gaming.

[117] http://twitter.com/#!/PressSec/status/10933796367

"Joe's comment" was "the best thing" about the event. In fact, the President loved it so much that he "tried to have a T-shirt made with the remark" (Ibid). This, in the end, was successful, and T-shirts with the text "Health Reform is a BFD" soon became available to purchase from Obama's official website, showing a public recognition of acceptance of the statement, and perhaps, the meme (Figure 4.64). Furthermore, On May 1, 2010, President Obama's speech during the White House Correspondents Dinner referenced the gaffe–

> …I wasn't sure that I should actually come tonight. Biden talked me into it. He leaned over and he said, 'Mr President, [pauses] this is no ordinary dinner. This is a big [bleep]ing meal!' (*TheDailyBeastVideo* 2010).

As noted by *The Daily Beast* (cited in Ibid 2010), it is "comforting to imagine even the most powerful man in the world is not above a good meme".

Paul Waldman (cited in Garfield and Gladstone 2011) theorizes that politicians are increasingly more defined by the media

> by their most prominent character flaw, and the gaffe is one of the primary ways that reporters communicate that to us, essentially by saying, see, this thing that I've been thinking about this [politician] all the time, it's true, and here's the evidence.

This is again, strongly influenced by a politician's need to take control of an image. Waldman (cited in Ibid) further elaborates that "all of campaigning is theater", and gaffes essentially strip "away that veneer", uncovering "the real person". Gaffes, as candid moments, strongly undermine carefully-constructed images prominent in political presentation, and can potentially harm a candidate's credibility. Gaffes can be evaluated according to Edwards' (2001) "leadership-relevant elements" (2142). While the Zombie McCain candid photograph did not allow memes to reflect on his charisma positively, Joe F*cking Biden was an interesting case. The gaffe, as well as the jokes do not point towards Biden's competency as a political leader, with little references to intelligence or effectiveness (unless when it comes to making puns). The celebration of the mistake however, showed a positive reaction towards Biden's charisma. This is because the silly mistake ultimately made him more human, and thus likable. It also unexpectedly drawn positive reactions to his viability as a political leader. The idiosyncratic humor contained in the memes brings Biden, who is in reality a powerful figure, to the level of an ordinary person, just like the creators of these texts, and they can therefore relate to him. Viability, which is Biden's "potential for victory", is reflected in Obama's adoption of the meme– despite the negative nature of gaffes, the campaign is able to subvert the notion that it may be potentially damaging, and like the online memes, embraced the humor contained within it.

4.5 CONCLUSION

The memes focused on this chapter were based on situational themes, and each created different results. Overall, the similarities were evident in the replicability of the original viral ideas– citizens often draw from cultural allusions and political knowledge to create responses, and find creative ways to consistently recreate and reinterpret particular viral ideas. There is evidence of utilizing mythical representations from popular culture, as well as humor, to communicate criticism of a politician, as particularly evident in Zombie McCain. Similarly, these memes were reversed to reveal a positive reaction towards Obama and his Lightsaber-wielding. The case studies here also reflect how situational themes can create responses that can either further criticize a candidate, or alternatively, celebrate and embrace them for their capability to connect to 'ordinary' citizens. The 'ordinary human' element is especially important in the way citizens often reinterpret situations within the contexts of popular culture, and is especially valuable in a political candidate's construction of an approachable, likable, and 'cool' image. This again, links the culture of politics to that of celebrity, and within its participants, the act of fandom, as especially evident in Lightsaber Obama and Joe F*cking Biden. In turn, the merging of politics and popular culture leave authority figures to be, at least within the memes, closer to ordinary citizens, a theme that will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

Unlike in Chapter 3, the memes here have expanded beyond the confines of single affinity spaces, revealing multiple web communities, some that do not focus on politics, participating in the same inside joke. Still, like *Pundit Kitchen* and *FARK*, these websites encourage users to participate in meme creation by giving them opportunities to play with open texts that are inherently funny, and intriguing, regardless of skill level. The intents were not initially political, but purely for fun, though the results can be. Participants join in to become part of the culture of creation and response to news media, and this will be further illustrated in Chapter 5, where citizens react without being motivated by the need for affinity spaces. In addition, the news and popular-centric nature of the spaces in this chapter also assure that the longevity of particular memes extends to only when the situational themes remain relevant. While the memes may appear in web spaces from time to time, like most products of popular culture, these texts eventually become less dominant. They however, as demonstrated, are immensely replicable. Furthermore, short-term memes can just be as powerful, especially because they act as responses to news and political events, which characteristically thrive on being 'fresh'. This element of immediacy, especially in meme responses, will be further concentrated in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Images

Figure 4.1: Stephen Colbert plays with a toy Lightsaber in front of a green screen in a 2006 episode of *The Colbert Report*.

Figure 4.2: The original 'Zombie McCain' candid photograph captured by Jim Bourg for *Reuters*.

Figure 4.3: *Fun with McCain*, a website that is dedicated solely to users making fun of the *Reuters* photograph.

Figure 4.4: "Zombie! McCain is after Shaun. O noes!" – One of the earliest submissions featured on the *Indecision* blog. Submitted by 'severa611'.

Figure 4.5: A *WFMU* entry featuring McCain as a zombie in *Resident Evil 4*, by 'Oldshake'.

Figure 4.6: 'King Kong vs McCain' by 'number1usa'. Submitted to the *Indecision* Flickr page.

Figure 4.7 (Top): McCain as an Alien from *Alien*, by 'Savage-Heathen'. Featured on the *Indecision* blog.

Figure 4.8 (Bottom): McCain emerges as a 'Chestburster' from a well-known scene in *Alien*. Posted by 'Pam4Water' on the *Democratic Underground* discussion board.

Figure 4.9: McCain is turned into Gollum from the *Lord of the Rings* franchise. Creator unknown. All of the submissions on *Fun with McCain* are uncredited.

Figure 4.10 (Top-left) and Figure 4.11 (Bottom-left): McCain and Obama engaging in homosexual sex. Both are .gif images featured on *Fun with McCain*, with only McCain 'animated' to display a thrusting motion.
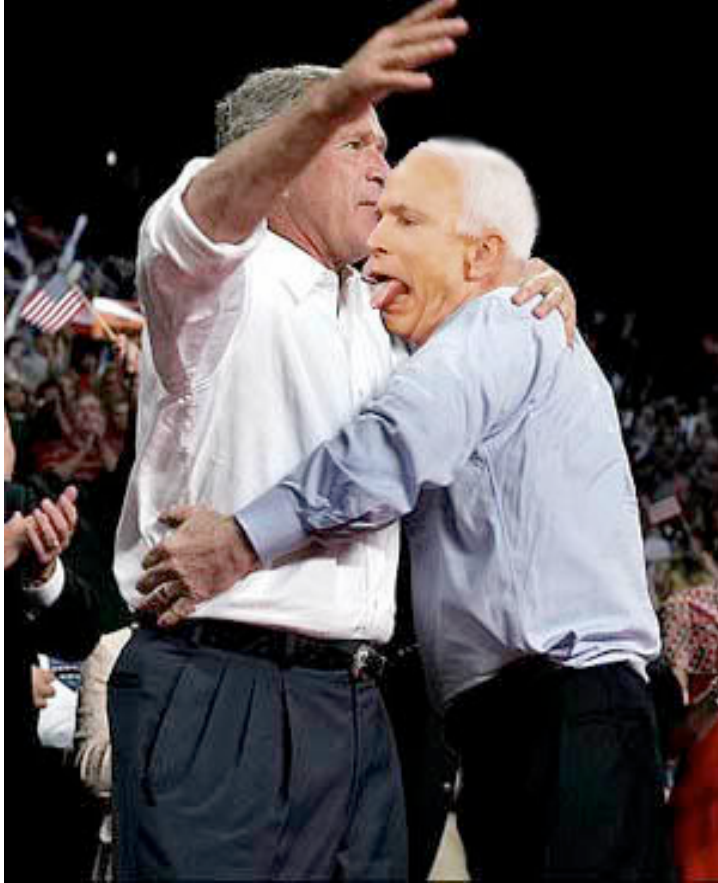
Figure 4.11 (Left): John McCain attempts to 'lick' George W. Bush. A *Democratic Underground* submission by 'zulchzulu'.

Figure 4.12 (Left): Zombie McCain with shamed former Idaho senator, Larry Craig. Submitted to *WFMU* by 'Rick'.

Figure 4.13: McCain loves McCain, by 'Ced'. Submitted to *WFMU*.
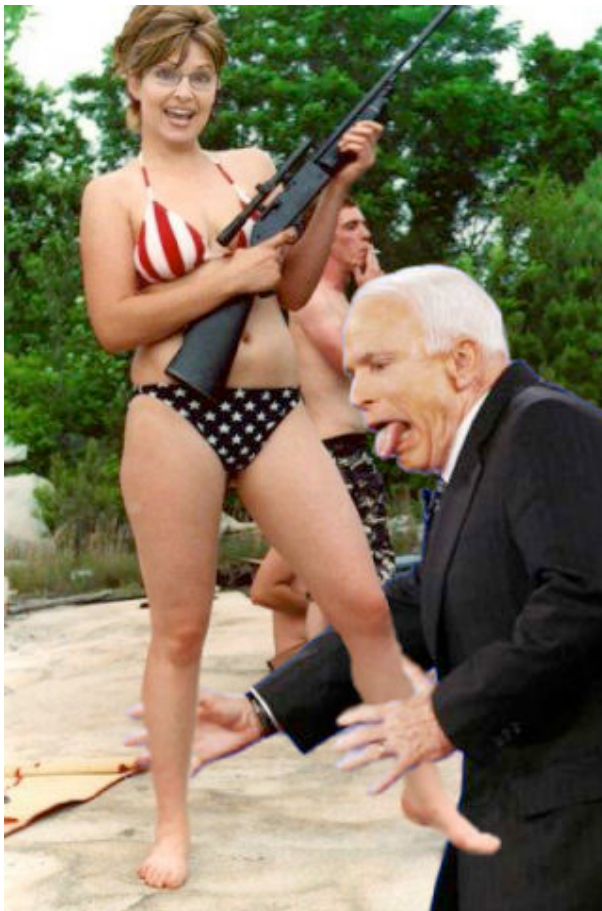
Figure 4.14 (Left): The first entry on *Democratic Underground*'s discussion thread, by 'DUerOneself', featuring John McCain, and a photomanipulated photograph of Sarah Palin.

Figure 4.15: McCain has sex with a polar bear, on *Fun with McCain*.

Figure 4.16 (Left): 'McSame'–George W Bush and John McCain as essentially possessing similar characteristics. Submitted by 'Miranda' to the *Indecision* Flickr page.

Figure 4.17 (Left): 'Baby Cain', a *WFMU* submission by 'Luis M.'

Figure 4.18: McCain and oil, submitted by 'Smud' to the *WFMU* contest.

Figure 4.19: 'Evolution'. Posted to *Democratic Underground* by 'nichomachus'.

Figure 4.20: Turtle McCain, by 'zarzoso', a *WFMU* submission.

Figure 4.21: One of several photomanipulated images depicting McCain as *KISS* frontman Gene Simmons. Posted by 'detroitsuperfly' to *WFMU*.
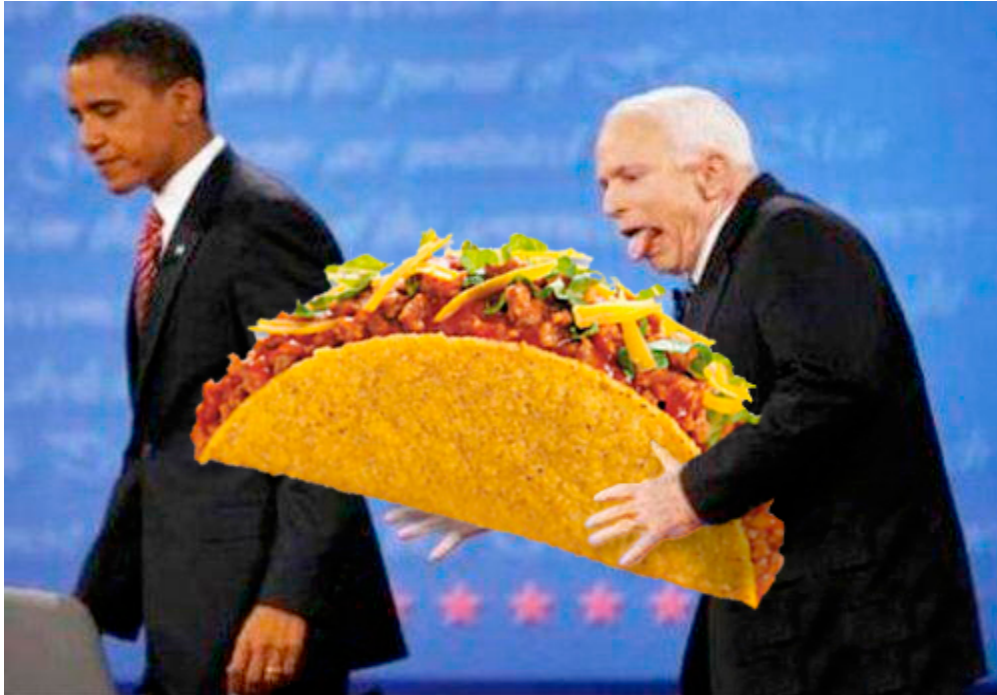
Figure 4.22 (Top): McCain and a giant taco. Submitted to *WFMU*'s contest by 'Drew'.

Figure 4.23 (Bottom): The first submission to *Indecision*'s Photoshop challenge– "John McCain Screams for Ice Cream", by 'jonesaholic', who admits to feeling "sorry for the guy".

Figure 4.24: *WFMU*'s winning submission. McCain is placed into a well-known scene from *A Christmas Story* by 'Brian C'.

Figure 4.25: Zombie McCain impersonators on FFlickr.

Figure 4.26: A Barack Obama action figure.

Figure 4.27: Obama jousts with Tim Moorehouse, a US Olympic fencer.

Figure 4.28: Original photograph of Obama with a toy Lightsaber, which was used for *Buzzfeed*'s image editor.

Figure 4.29: *Buzzfeed*'s 'image editor', which allows users to replace the White House lawn setting with literally anything they want.

Figure 4.30: Obama with a 'real' Lightsaber, by 'HeL1HaWk91' on the *IGN* discussion boards.

Figure 4.31: From the *IGN* board, by a user who claims, "I didn't make this".

Figure 4.32: "Do, or do not. There is no try". Submitted to *Gawker* by 'gjones999'.
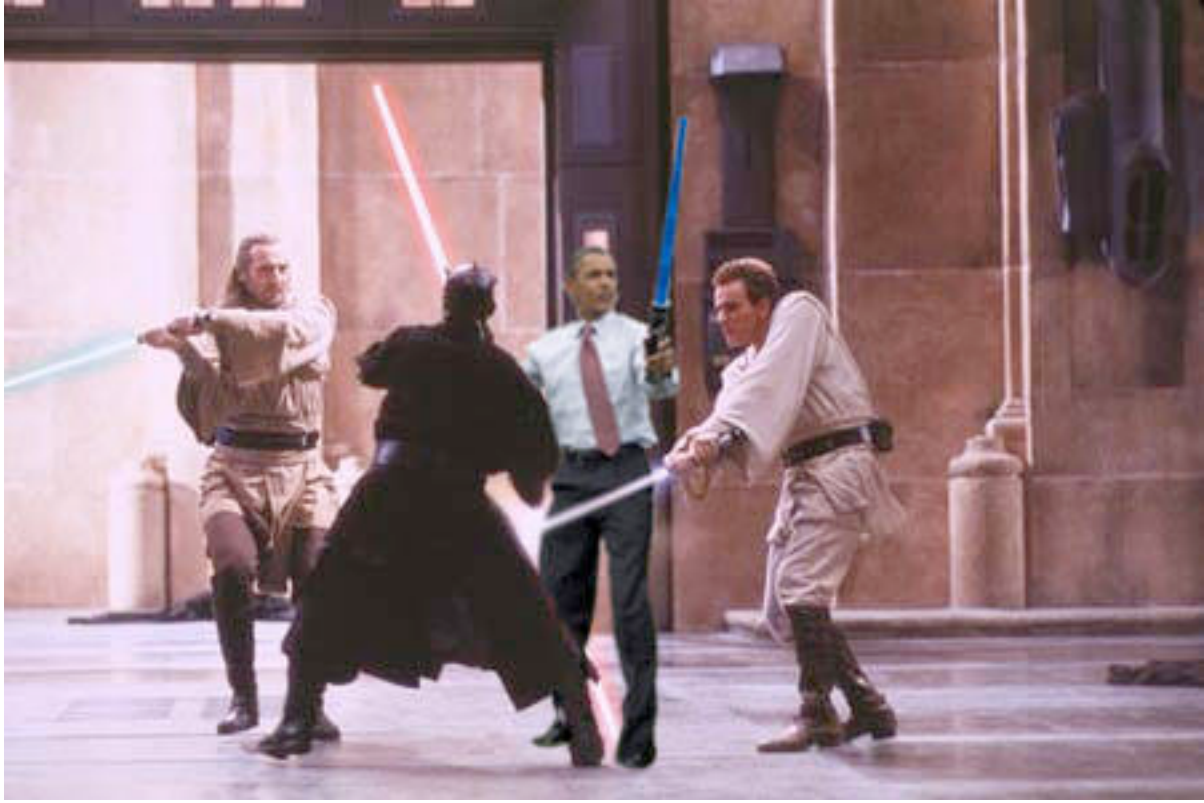
Figure 4.33: Obama fights on the side of the Jedi in 'Obama Wars', originally sourced from *Digg*.

Figure 4.34: Obama is Luke Skywalker, on *The Daily Show*.

Figure 4.35: "Joe, I am your President" "You Lieeeeeeee!" By 'Nrbelex', on the *Gawker* comments thread.

Figure 4.36: Posted by 'rainer511' to *Reddit*, though its original author is unknown
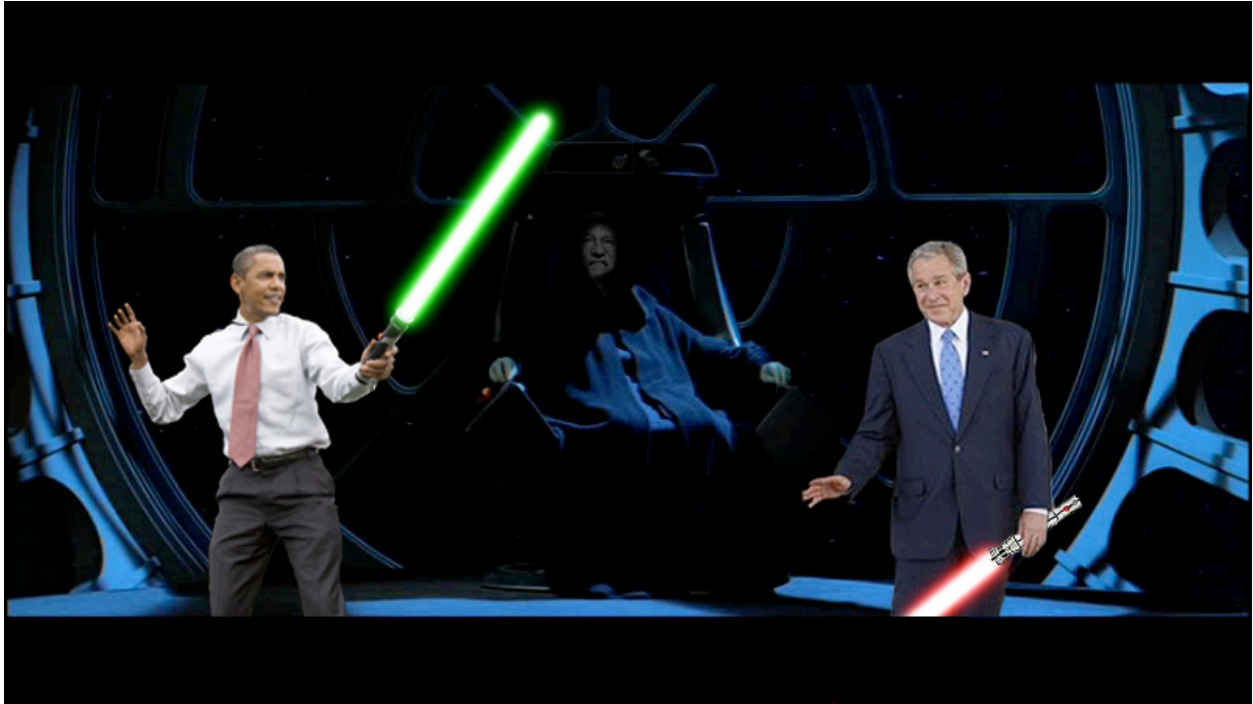
Figure 4.37: Obama, Bush, and Palpatine. By 'Bob_Bobson' on *IGN*.

Figure 4.38: Zombie McCain meets Lightsaber Obama, by 'schwilj' in the *Buzzfeed* comments section.

Figure 4.39: "Barry, I've got a very *baaad* feeling about this..." – Obama fights on the side of 'Star Wars Kid', by 'Ben Miller'. Posted on *Buzzfeed*'s comments thread.

Figure 4.40: Obama vs a LOLcat, by Kelly Reeves on *Buzzfeed*.

Figure 4.41: Obama gleefully beats Gary Busey in a Lightsaber duel. Posted on *Reddit*. Original author unknown.

Figure 4.42: Obama edited into a scene from Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2003). Posted by 'mcKain' to *Buzzfeed*'s comments section.

Figure 4.43 (Left): "Obama wasn't quick enough", according to 'Dexter Bond', on *Buzzfeed.*

Figure 4.44 (Left): Biden embraces Obama after introducing him, unaware that microphones were on as he committed the very public gaffe.

Figure 4.45: A cropped image of Biden from *Bite*. The background here is transparent, so creators can easily 'layer' this over any background of their choice easily, much like the green screen in filmmaking.

Figure 4.46 (Left): One of the most well-known examples of this meme. This was created by Ben Grelle, known as 'the frogman', and hosted on his personal blog. It has however been disseminated across various websites as a popular example of this meme, to the point that the original author would be unknown if it were not for the watermark at the bottom of the image.

Figure 4.47: A big fucking dill, by 'Derek Dik Dik' on their personal Tumblr blog.

Figure 4.48: Biden is amazed at a deck of life-sized playing cards, by 'twincam' on *Buzzfeed*'s comments section.

Figure 4.49: Wordplay by 'Tanner Ringerud', on *Buzzfeed*.

Figure 4.50 (Left): By 'eixo', who posted this on the *Buzzfeed* comments thread. They described, "Minazo– who passed away in 2008 at the age of 11– was in fact not a walrus but an obese elephant seal. Joey B got mad trivia knowledge!"
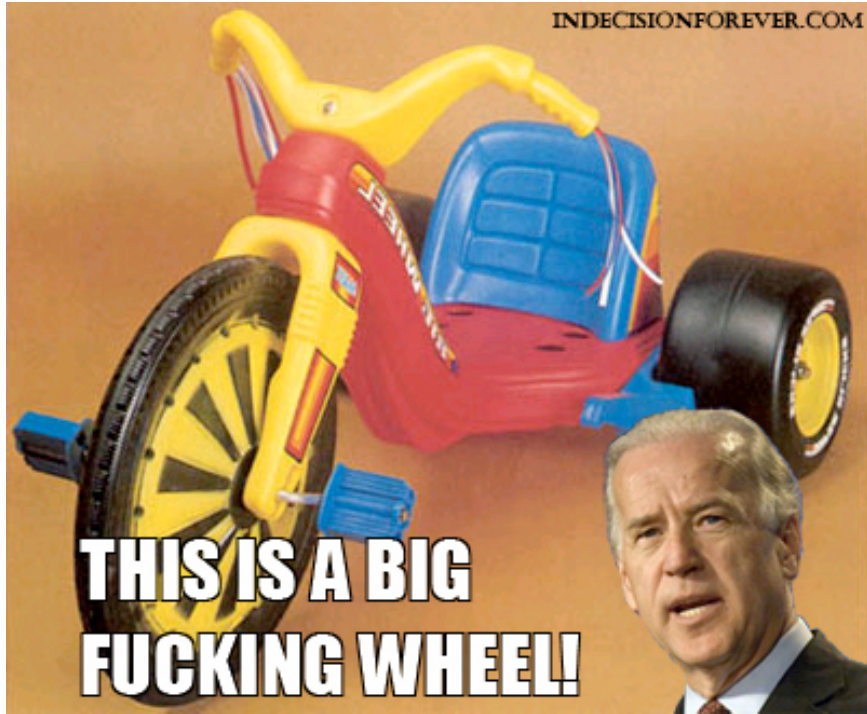
Figure 4.51: The meme, as interpreted by *Comedy Central*'s indecision website.

Figure 4.52: Posted by 'PunkPatriot' on their personal blog. No evidence of who the original author may be.

Figure 4.53: Biden comments on actress Jessica Biel, from *A Big Fucking Tumblr*.
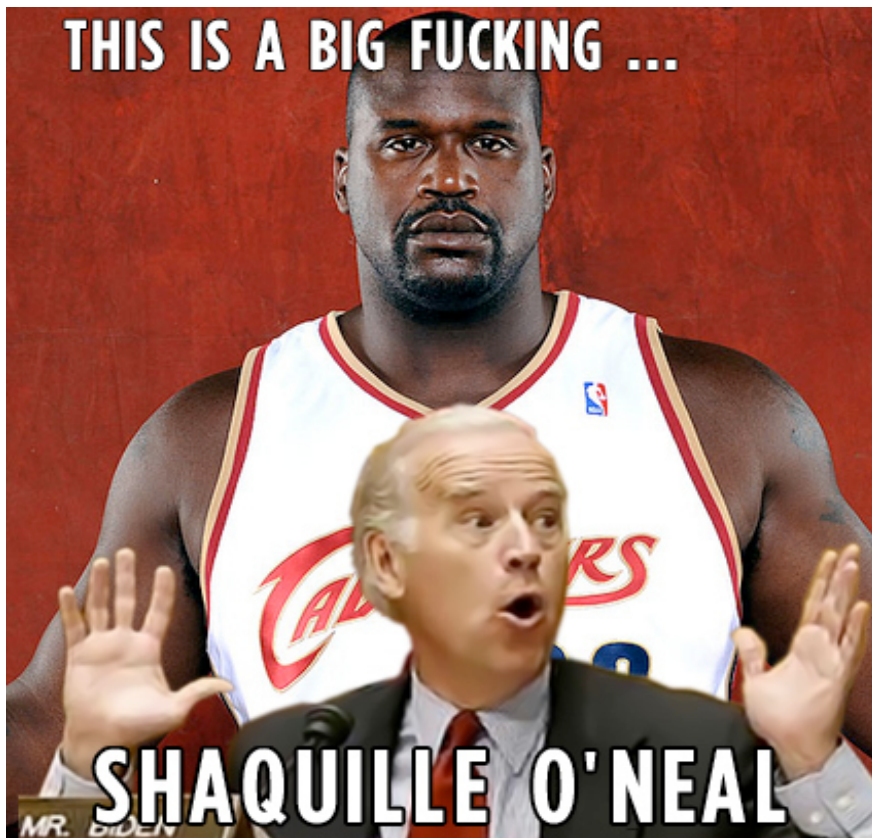
Figure 4.54: Biden and a big fucking O'Neal, by 'Bruce Chorney' on *Buzzfeed*'s comments thread.

Figure 4.55: Biden emotes in meme form. Posted on *Buzzfeed* by 'madanthony'.

Figure 4.56: 'Rage Guy', also known as 'FFFFFFFUUUUUUUUUUUU–".
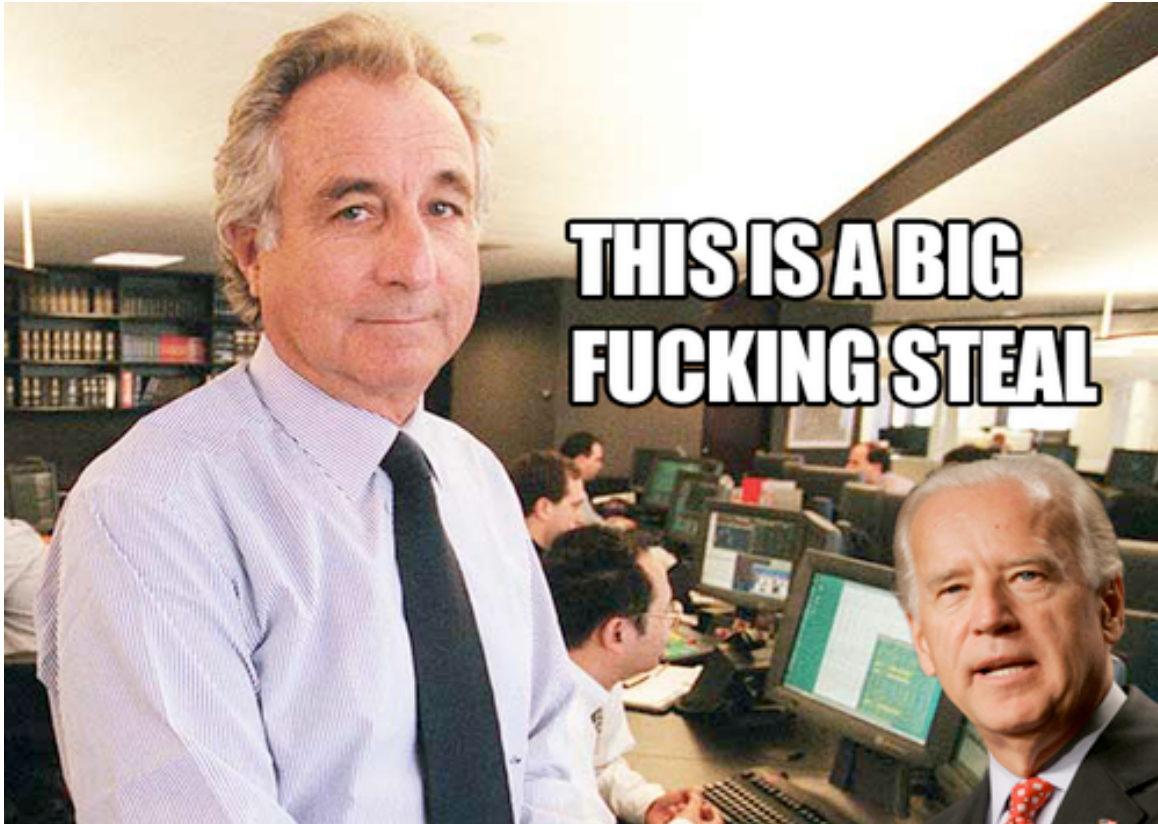
Figure 4.57: Joe Biden is aware of Bernie Madoff's shenanigans. From *This is a Big Fucking Tumblr...*

Figure 4.58 (Top) and Figure 4.59 (Bottom): *Bite*'s take on the meme, showing Biden as an excitable history buff.
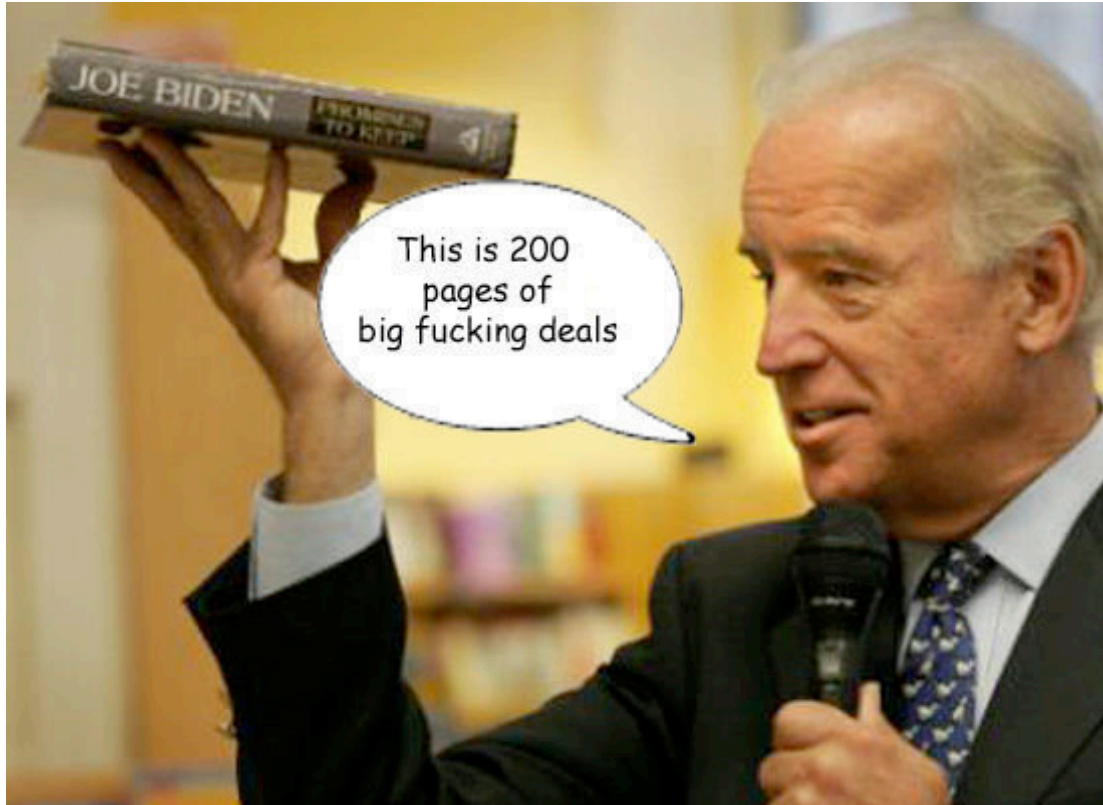
Figure 4.60: Biden with his biography, from *The Huffington Post*. Original author unknown.
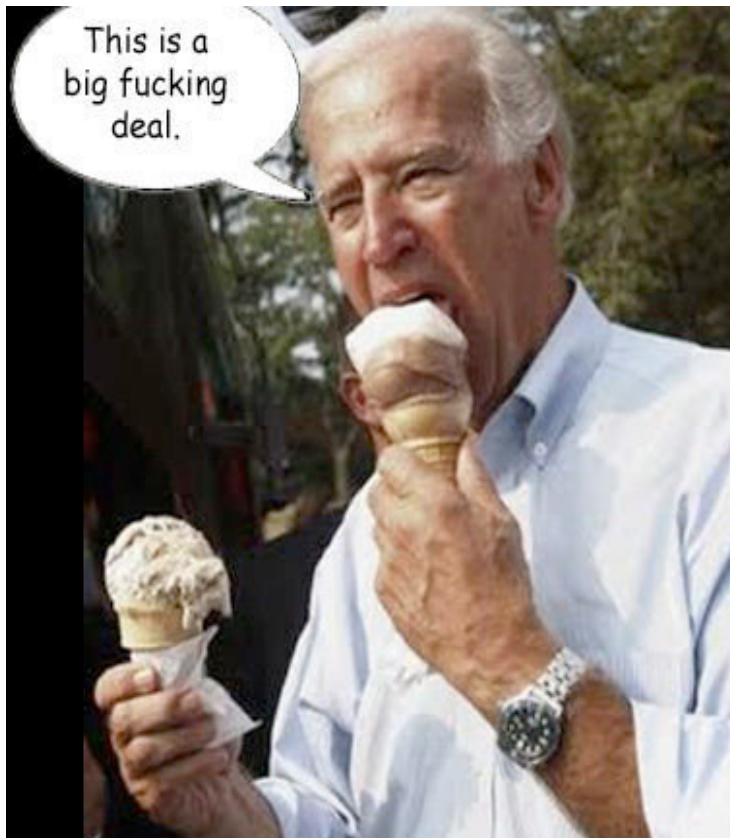
Figure 4.61: Featured on *The Huffington Post*, this blends both a candid photograph and a candid phrase to create a humorous image. Original source unknwon.

Figure 4.62: Biden, now immortalized in *Urban Dictionary*.

Figure 4.63: A T-shirt from *BustedTees* featuring Biden's gaffe.

Figure 4.64: 'Health Reform is a BFD' T-shirt, available to purchase from Obama's official candidate website.

Chapter 5
Osama bin Laden: Forever a Joke?
Online Political Humor Across a Decade

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapters 3 and 4 highlighted the way that ordinary individuals are able to play with the images of politicians by actively participating meme creation in various affinity spaces. They also show that cultural allusions are often used in humorous or critical ways. This chapter will bring together these aspects to analyze a specific case study, the meme responses to the death of Osama bin Laden. It will also advance some of the discussions regarding spaces, arguing that citizens responding to newsworthy events can be driven to participate without being tied to specific online spaces. It develops from a mode of reacting to news media developing from the early to mid 2000s, which represented "the evolution of the computer from a predominantly text-driven medium to a text-and-graphics-driven medium" (Frank 2004:108). This chapter asks what happens when the most serious and momentous news are treated as open texts for play, and considers comedy as the dominant form of response. As comedian John Hodgman (cited in Hartsell 2011) claims,

> I think that it's certainly an opportunity to reflect and especially to remember how this all started, and to think of all of those who have lost their lives and family members in pursuit of this person. But laughter is always an unwilled and explosive response to surprise. A joke sets up a reality, breaks that reality, and we survive that break in reality, and so we laugh. That is why laughter is cathartic, and that is why it is wholly appropriate.

This chapter therefore examines the culture of online humor post-9/11, and as the death of bin Laden was announced, arguing that the decade began and ended with laughter. It discusses a tradition of using humor and popular culture to respond to political figures, and will firstly examine the portrayals of bin Laden in both the mainstream media and citizen responses after 9/11. It will also focus on popular memes circulated during the period of bin Laden death, and what they mean to the culture of participation and creation.

5.2 BIN LADEN IN CULTURE: 9/11-2011

The death of the world's "most wanted enemy" was one of the most newsworthy events in the past decade (Thompson 2011). Osama bin Laden, a Saudi Arabian militant Muslim, has become a staple mainstream news figure since his Al Qaeda organization claimed responsibility for the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001 (*CBC News* 2004). He was a notable figure in political and cultural discourse, and remained in hiding throughout three Presidential administrations. Over

the years, multiple false theories of his death were circulated through the mainstream media. [118] The obsession with finding bin Laden is so powerful that it became a notable talking point of Barack Obama's foreign policy during the 2008 Presidential election (Ratnesar 2011).

For the past decade, Osama bin Laden was constantly present in political and cultural discourse. Like political leaders, he was highly aware of his personal image. The media constructed Bin Laden as charismatic, with a 'larger than life' personality, and he appeared to the mainstream news audience as a"frighteningly smart" villain, embodying

> precisely the kind of intellect that corporate America craves: a man who thought outside the box, who made no small plans, a man who knew how to harness the power of teamwork, a big-picture leader and a details guy at the same time. He drew upon Stone Age tribalism and Iron Age tropes of battle, but he had also mastered personal mythmaking in the wired world of networks and video imagery. He knew the modern PR playbook, releasing videos filled with a horrifying mix of rationalism and phantasmagoria (Kennicott 2011).

While the dominant discourse throughout news and political culture was one of fear of a character so capable and dangerous, popular culture representations of bin Laden freely lampooned and reconstructed it. News media presented bin Laden as more of an unstoppable and dangerous villain, but popular culture eventually reduced him to a lovable buffoon. Humor however, was not the initial reaction to the news.

September 11 was framed as 'the death of comedy', with late-night comedians[119] in particular performing emotional monologues. On *The Daily Show* in particular, Jon Stewart "directly addressed the (im)possibility of humor" by expressing grief over the events of 9/11 [120](Kuipers 2005:73). In addition, *The Onion* ceased to publish for two weeks, and *The New Yorker* refused to print cartoons (Ibid:70;72). This trend however, did not last for long. Barshad and Rahman (2011) claims *South Park* as one of the first programs brave enough to approach the sensitive subject through humor, by directly parodying bin Laden. The episode, 'Osama bin Laden has Farty Pants', aired just two months after 9/11, [121] depicted the citizens of *South Park* as fearful and patriotic in the wake of recent terrorist attacks. Osama bin Laden however, was later revealed to be goofy, and obsessed with his appearance– emphasized with the presence of his

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[118] False theories of his death were released in the wake of the Tora Bora bombing in December 2001, and multiple other assumptions were made throughout the years, including death from lack of medical care since he (apparently) lived in a cave, frozen by the Bush administration, and CIA and FBI officers pronouncing him dead in 2008 (Cunningham, cited in Gladstone 2011)

[119] Including Conan O'Brien, Jay Leno, and Jon Stewart.

[120] The video, available on *The Daily Show*'s website, was circulated widely on blogs such as Tumblr on the 10th anniversary of 9/11 as a solemn, though rational reaction towards the events.

[121] Season 5, episode 9. First aired on November 7, 2001 on *Comedy Central*.

own production crew and make-up team [122](Figure 5.1). In *South Park*, bin Laden was killed in a juvenile manner, after being revealed as "an idiot".[123] This treatment of bin Laden was bold, and it provided a sharp criticism of the media's obsession with irrational fear-mongering.[124] Through mainstream comedy, the power of bin Laden becomes "punctured… by cheap laughs" (Gladstone 2011). As the tragedy of 9/11 remained a cultural taboo for comedy, popular culture turned to the antagonist, the founder of Al-Qaeda. Further reconstructions of bin Laden's character were evident in *Family Guy,*[125] *Saturday Night Live*, and *The Simpsons*. Comedic versions of him appeared in hip-hop music videos, and he was killed in *Postal 2*, a 2004 videogame, and *Planet Terror* (2007), an apocalyptic horror movie (Barshad and Rahman 2011; Epstein 2011). Popular culture consistently illustrated bin Laden as incompetent, goofy, or cowardly. While the real-life version inspires "nightmares", comedy provides a space for "transgression", for "we have an inexhaustible supply of fresh fears and we'll always feel the need of a cheap laugh to chase them away" (Gladstone 2011).

The online responses to 9/11 too, were largely expressed through comedy. Kuipers (2002) performed a content analysis on 9/11-related jokes, and found that unlike "earlier joke cycles" such as Princess Diana's death or the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, the WTC attacks "consisted mainly of pictures, sent by email or collected on websites", and rather than the traditional orally transmitted jokes", they have now been "transferred to the Internet" (451). Ellis (2002, cited in Frank 2004) too, notes in a survey's results that 'World Trade Center humor' is an increasingly prolific phenomenon of "computer generated art" that "will need much closer study in the future" (634). Frank (2004) considers the texts as "newslore", which illuminates "the relationship between folklore and news", and displays "an understanding of a public reaction to a catastrophic moment in American history" (634). Rather than relying on news media

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[122] Bin Laden was portrayed as goofy as he constantly mutters himself, and the production and make up crew was utilized to exaggerate his real life tendency to spread video messages.

[123]The most obnoxious main character, Eric Cartman, explains that bin Laden is "not crazy, he's an idiot. I know how to deal with these people". Cartman successfully lures bin Laden out of his cave and into the war zone outside by directly impersonating Bugs Bunny. Bin Laden then responds as Elmer Fudd from the Looney Tunes cartoons, foolishly falling for Cartman's moves while also revealing that "what this is all about" was his underwhelming genitals, as well as his sexual preference towards camels. In bin Laden's final scene, the Jihadist, infatuated with a camel, was easily tricked by Cartman into filming a video, while dressed as Uncle Sam and holding a stick of dynamite as a 'microphone'. He then exploded. The death scene was comical, absurd, and relatively non-graphic– his remaining teeth played the melodic lines to 'America the Beautiful' like a piano, before a US soldier shot him in the head.

[124] Stan's mother, Sharon, was seen throughout the episode helplessly lying on the couch and watching alarming stories on a 24-hour cable news channel for eight consecutive weeks after 9/11, to the point where she is unaware that her son has been missing for days (and in fact, being held hostage in bin Laden's cave).

[125] In episode 14, from season 4, titled 'PTV', originally aired on November 6, 2005, on *Fox*. Here, Osama bin Laden attempts to make a terrorist video, only to break character and reveal "himself as a lovably self-deprecating dude intent on cracking the cave up" by using props like a rubber chicken and oversized sunglasses (Barshad and Rahman 2011).

constructions, citizens were motivated to respond to the tragic event by generating texts of their own. The pictures "almost exclusively" made "references to popular culture", were often of consciously non-professional quality, and at times, were combined with captions for humorous effect (Kuipers 2002:451). An example includes a user-created image of King Kong on the WTC (Figure 5.2). The circulated texts can thus be considered as examples of remix, or as Kuipers (2002) considers, "genre play"– the intermingling of different mediums, including user-generated photmanipulation, popular film, and politics (467).

Osama bin Laden was the most prominent subject of the citizen-created visual jokes about 9/11 on the Web. Some images of him were humorous, and align with popular culture portrayals of bin Laden as a lovable goof, such as a mashup of bin Laden and 'Mr Bean', a popular juvenile British television character, dubbed as 'Mr Bean Laden' which was widely circulated through email (Figure 5.3). Frank (2004) however, argues that citizen-circulated texts were more emotional. While mainstream news displays "reassurance and a sense of control in times of national trauma", the emotion of anger– "not just angry, [but] cursing angry", is often left out because of institutional constraints– mainstream journalism does not allow room for the 'real' emotions to be heard (645). On the Internet however, individuals can communicate feelings missing from the mainstream news cycle. Frank (2004) categorizes his analysis of citizen-manipulated images of bin Laden into three categories: annihilation, humiliation, and victimization.

Annihilation was communicated because citizens have the ability to direct anger towards a subject. Hostile treatments of bin Laden are visible in images such as one of him at the center of crosshairs with "who wants to bomb a millionaire" in the circle's perimeter (Ibid). According to Kuipers (2002), there were citizen-circulated "pictures of bin Laden being hanged, gutted or raped", and his "severed head being eaten by an American eagle" (459). A photomanipulated image of bin Laden as Darth Vader on a *Star Wars* poster for example, also shows a hostile treatment of the character– members of the Bush administrated here are portrayed as Jedis, a casting that is contrary to the dominant discourse explored in Chapter 1 (Ibid:460; Figure 5.4). This affirms bin Laden as a villain, and the public's fear of his capabilities of taking over the country. The category of humiliation often features scatological humor, alluding to the idea of bin Laden as "a piece of shit"[126] (Frank 2004:642). Homosexual assault was also included as part of this category– one image displays "the martyr's supposed reward in heaven: 70 virgins, only virgins are gay men" (Ibid:646). Humiliations based on heterosexual jokes are prominent

[126] Examples include bin Laden being used as a target while a dog defecates, and his face placed in the center of a urinal.

too, which Ellis (2002, cited in Ibid) argues is a reflection of mainstream news discourse on "the Puritanism and misogyny of fundamentalist Islamic movements" (646). To place bin Laden in sexual situations shows a deliberate travesty for his religious beliefs. Images such as one of "bin Laden pinned beneath a woman flexing her muscles while waving an American flag" however, takes the humiliation to a point where the man is feminized (Ibid; Figure 5.5).

Throughout online citizen discourse, the US is consistently seen as the victim. This is also reflected in one of the few notable images that included the President– it contains the caption "What will happen if the Taliban wins?" , and shows the Statue of Liberty and George W. Bush, with a long white beard, in traditional Middle Eastern clothing (Figure 5.6). Citizen discourses of victimization display a darker view on "the precariousness of life"– "where the news media dwelled on the solemnity of it all, the newslore focused on the absurdity" (Frank 2004:647-648). 'Tourist Guy', a widely spread photograph that appeared a few days after 9/11, features an image of a man dressed in stereotypical tourist attire– a wool hat, jacket and backpack, standing on the roof of the World Trade Center, apparently seconds before the plane, visible in the photograph, crashed into the building (Ibid; Figure 5.7). Tourist Guy was widely circulated via email, with messages connoting tones of sympathy, especially in story form, such as,

> the first to be struck by a terrorist attack [...] the subject in the picture had not been located. Makes you see things from a very different position. Please share this and find any way you can to help Americans not be victims in the future of such cowardly attacks (Ibid 648-649).

This theme was repeated in most emails– an innocent tourist was being photographed at the World Trade Center, completely unaware of what would ultimately happen seconds later. The photograph was spread across various websites, and was later revealed to be a hoax.[127] It however, inspired multiple parodies, turning Tourist Guy into a widely-known humorous online meme. Tourist Guy was inserted in various contexts outside of its original, similar to the visual parodies in Chapter 4. Early photomanipulations placed Tourist Guy in other historical tragedies, such as the Kennedy assassination (Figure 5.8) or the Hindenburg crash. In another parody, Osama replaces Tourist Guy, connecting "the newslore of victimization back to the newslore of vengeance" (Ibid:651; Figure 5.9). There were playful takes on the original theme, such as Tourist Guy being unaware of the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man [128] approaching from a distance (Figure 5.10). The meme remained in circulation, though not to a high extent,

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[127] The original Tourist Guy photograph was a fake, manipulated image, with "obvious illogicalities", such as his clothing not suiting the temperature of the event, and the impossibility that a camera can even survive the disaster (Ibid:649).

[128] An antagonist from the movie *Ghostbusters* (1984).

throughout the next half-decade, and played, often absurdly [129] with the theme of 'the unaware tourist'. [130] Tourist Guy is seen as a reflection of citizens responding and sharing the unpredictable, disturbing events of 9/11 within the safe confines of absurd comedy.

9/11 represented a point in time where US, and effectively, global politics changed forever. Under the leadership of President George W. Bush, the figure of bin Laden was consistently viewed by the mainstream media as responsible for a catastrophic event that fueled widespread shock, anger, and fear (Frank 2004:641). Popular culture however, freely mocked the figure, characterizing him as goofy and self-absorbed, a tradition of comedy that was consistent throughout the next decade. The online citizen-created texts circulated around 9/11 using email and some web spaces, reflected both rage or ridicule. While bin Laden was portrayed by the mainstream media as a terrifying and capable villain, online discourses show an active need to take away that power, needing him to be "scatologically and sexually humiliated" (Frank 2011:63). The death of bin Laden however, shows a shift in the central focus– bin Laden, while still a major target, is no longer the only character commonly seen throughout the texts. While insults are still popular, the texts are more openly humorous and nonsensical, showing evidence of play. There is also an increase in the circulation of citizen-made texts, in line with the developments of Web 2.0, which ultimately encourages more participation from users.

5.3 THE DEATH OF BIN LADEN

Although now-President Obama's commitment to kill bin Laden was criticized by both Hillary Clinton and John McCain throughout the 2008 election, with the latter calling Obama "naïve", the promise was fulfilled in 2011 (Ratnesar 2011). After 10 years of pursuing Osama bin Laden, President Barack Obama announced that the Al Qaeda leader was "killed in a firefight" inside Pakistan shortly after 1am local time on May 2, 2011 [131](Cooper 2011). This was considered by many as "a defining moment in the American-led war on terrorism", and the breaking news sparked a multitude of reactions nationwide– from crowds cheering outside the White House as they eagerly waited for the President's confirmation, to patriotic crowds singing and chanting as

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[129] One image for example, showed tourist guy having his photo taken, while white rappers and the comedically homoerotic superhero characters from a *Saturday Night Live* cartoon, 'The Ambiguously Gay Duo' posed suggestively behind him (Figure 5.11).

[130] An archive, though it does not contain every photomanipulated image in existence, can still be viewed at *Tourist of Death*.

[131] The operation, coded as 'Operation Neptune Spear', was an intricate and secretive one, A small team of US Navy SEALs executed the raid on bin Laden's compound in Abbotabad, Pakistan, led by CIA operatives on the ground, with the President and his selected advisers viewing the entire incident from the White House's Situation Room (Miller 2011, Sherwell 2011)

they gather outside Ground Zero and Times Square (Cooper 2011, Harris 2011). Some described it as defining moment of their generation (Myers and Bumiller 2011). The average age of the crowds celebrating outside the White House, as noted by a college graduate, was around 20-25– people who were "in middle school when the terrorists struck. [They] all vividly remember 9/11 and this is the close of that chapter" (Baker, Cooper and Mazzetti 2011). This powerful sense of victory was also conveyed through President Obama himself, who on that night proclaimed, "justice has been done" (Cooper 2011).

The reactions from the virtual world were notable. A "major spike in Internet traffic" was reported, as citizens checked for information on news websites (Ostrow 2011a). Users of Foursquare, a location-based mobile social networking website, "checked in" ceremoniously to locations with humorous names like 'Osama bin gonathon' and 'Osamapacolypse 2011' (Ehrlich 2011). On Facebook, an 'Osama Bin Laden is DEAD' page[132] went viral, acquiring over 150,000 "likes" within two hours of the initial news reports (Ostrow 2011b). Users of Google Maps, an online mapping application, added a pinpoint for 'Osama bin Laden's Compound' near Abbotabed, Pakistan [133](Figure 5.12). They later posted humorous "reviews" about the place, treating it as a form of holiday accommodation, [134] revealing a remix of genres of review-writing and insult comedy. A photograph of bin Laden's corpse from a Middle Eastern online newspaper, later revealed to be fake, [135] was circulated widely online, mostly through social networks and several newspaper websites, including *The Daily Mail* (Hill 2011). Similarly, videos and photos of on-air gaffes concerning the confusion between 'Osama' and 'Obama' (Figure 5.13, for example) by mainstream news anchors were virally spread throughout

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[132] The page itself appeared to have been created before any initial knowledge of the actual death, according to Ostrow (2011), perhaps in alignment with a previous conspiracy theory. It currently has over 499,500 "likes".

[133] Viewable at http://bit.ly/kdiWIo

[134] As many as 233 reviews were posted within hours of the breaking news, and at the time of writing, there has been 1589 and an average 3/5 star review for 'Osama bin Laden's Hideout Compound' (O'Dell 2011a). Comments were often funny; for example, "For rent: One highly private compound with neighbors who respect privacy", and "A home away from home, when you really need to escape the harsh realities of living in a cave". At times, quirky but very direct references to the actual facts presented in the news were included, such as "Can't get working internet connection, useless", "If dominoes delivered from Pakistan military base THEY WOULD WALK", and "It is a wonderful place to play cricket, with unending supplies of cricket balls regularly flying over the walls supplied by generous local children". While some reviews were more bland, straightforward, and celebratory in nature, much like the "USA! USA!" chants, most appeared to have put in the effort to create "proper" entries. Overall, there was more humor than hostility, with many references to the event itself, as well as comments on Internet and phone services, "staff" and customer service, food, and privacy, as one would see in any location review.

[135] It was noted in the newspaper that the image came from an unverified source. The photograph was later revealed to be a fake "composite of two separate images" (Hill 2011)

Facebook and Twitter. In addition, a quote, incorrectly attributed to Martin Luther King, Jr. went viral, as it was "retweeted, reblogged and shared across the web"[136] (Gibson 2011a).

Twitter was particularly active as the event unfolded, in terms of quantity and the variety in quality of responses. The death of Bin Laden was momentous; as "one of the most Tweeted events in history", "it generated the highest sustained rate of Tweets ever" (Parr 2011). Rosoff (2011) claims that Twitter "had its *CNN* moment". Some of the better-known stories involving Twitter was the way the news was spread virally, even before President Obama's official announcement. Stelter (2011) claims that "Keith Urbahn, the chief of staff for the former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld" Tweeted the following message: "So I'm told by a reputable person they have killed Osama Bin Laden. Hot damn".[137] Sohaib Athar, an Abbotabad-based IT consultant, became known for unintentionally live-Tweeting the bin Laden raid (O'Dell 2011b). His first related Tweet on @ReallyVirtual stated, "Helicopter hovering above Abbotabed at 1AM (is a rare event)".[138] His Tweets chronicled some newsworthy events, including the presence of four helicopters, and an image of streets being shut down in Abbotabed (Ibid). Nine hours later, the news was officially broken, and he Tweeted, "Uh oh, now I'm the guy who liveblogged the Osama raid without knowing it".[139]

Humor was extremely prominent on Twitter. Jokes were Tweeted by celebrities and well-known comedians, including Albert Brooks, [140] Chris Hardwick, [141] and Lizz Winstead, [142] and the level of participation in joke creating and sharing by ordinary individuals, was notable. The *Pew*

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[136] While the final sentence in the quote was from King himself, the rest of it, although with an appropriate sentiment, became a mistake repeated by thousands across the Internet, "all within 24 hours" (McCardle 2011). The following is the incorrect quotation that went viral:

> *I mourn the loss of thousands of precious lives, but I will not rejoice in the death of one, not even an enemy. Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.*

[137] Urbahn later noted that he was unsure of whether or not it was verified, but was "credited by many on the web with breaking the news" (Stelter 2011).

[138] https://twitter.com/#!/ReallyVirtual/status/64780730286358528

[139] https://twitter.com/#!/ReallyVirtual/status/64912440353234944

[140] American actor and comedian, well known for films such as *Taxi Driver* and *Broadcast News*. His Tweet read, "All my Bin Laden jokes are shit now". At https://twitter.com/#!/AlbertBrooks/status/64901246292738049

[141] Stand-up comedian and host of *The Nerdist* podcast. He Tweeted: "Just wait...juuuuuuuust wait till tomorrow you ass-clowns..." -Barack Obama, to himself at White House Correspondents' Dinner. This was a reference to Obama's generally self-deprecating humor the White House Correspondents' Dinner on April 30, 2011. At http://twitter.com/#!/nerdist/status/64946836913389568

[142] Comedian and co-creator of The Daily Show. She Tweeted, "I really hope they keep Bin Ladens Facebook page up as a memorial". At http://twitter.com/#!/lizzwinstead/status/64895123149946884

Research Center (2011), reveals the wide range of humor found on Twitter throughout the days following the breaking news, including topical jokes[143] and "insult comedy".[144] Aside from Tweeting funny comments, some individuals started parody Twitter accounts portraying Osama bin Laden. The fictional depictions of the figure on Twitter include @OsamainHell (Figure 5.14) and @GhostOsama. Their updates consists of humorous descriptions of 'hell', references to bin Laden,[145] celebrities, news, or popular culture trends. Both accounts are still active as of the time of writing, and often comment on current events. Parody Twitter accounts, as noted by A.T. (2011), a blogger for *The Economist*, can become "fully realized work[s] of fiction"– they utilized "the best tropes of Twitter": immediacy, in terms of responses to current events and "reader reactions". The ongoing absurdity provided by these fictional accounts show an understanding of Twitter's language, and the nature of the humor it is able to provide. A well-known parody of Rahm Emanuel[146] account for example, is "over the top and sophomoric still, but the pathos is real" (Ibid). The success of these parody accounts display a deep understanding of the political characters portrayed, as well as the possibilities for humor and criticism allowed by the utilization of the social networking platform.

Humor is a dominant discourse in citizen responses to bin Laden's death. A special report conducted by the *Pew Research Cente*r (2011) on media coverage in the wake of bin Laden's death, compiled across the first three days since the news broke, reveals a wide range of online platforms being utilized by citizens to process the emotions and information contained in both mainstream and citizen-generated media. The mainstream media was more focused on factual details, such as Operation Neptune Spear, reactions from worldwide leaders, and matters of political and diplomatic importance. User-driven media such as Twitter and Facebook however, were used to "express black humor about bin Laden's death", which at 19%, dominated "the largest share of discussion" on these platform (Ibid). These platforms "reflected more of the ordinary citizen response to the events", and "might be the most robust in quantity" (Ibid). The act of openly sharing jokes online was considered to be "something of a national ritual and emotional outlet for momentous events from the triumphant to tragic" (Ibid). These citizen-

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[143] These focus on related current events, such as references to Donald Trump demanding to see bin Laden's birth certificate, as he had been asking of President Obama for weeks prior to this event (*Pew Research Center* 2011)

[144] Insult comedy usually place relate bin Laden to jokes about the death of global villains, such as Hitler or Saddam Hussein (*Pew Research Center* 2011).

[145] Jokes about '72 virgins' for example, were popular.

[146] Currently the Mayor of Chicago, and former White House Chief of Staff for President Barack Obama. The @MayorEmanuel Twitter account often displays the character's brash, and occasionally insulting personality when responding to current events.

driven online jokes represent the immediate need to contribute to a historical event in a playful way.

5.4 THE MEMES

The visual responses generated by ordinary citizens online were often humorous. The rest of this chapter will feature the prominent memes circulated as responses to the death of bin Laden, and the process of citizens actively participating in a playful humor creation and disseminating them across the Web. The texts included in this chapter were found throughout various online spaces, and emerged within a very short amount of time. They were seen in multiple blogs, social networking platforms, social news forums, political and non-political discussion boards, and pop culture-tracking websites such as *Buzzfeed*, *Urlesque*, and *BoingBoing*. Instead of being created and mostly contained in affinity spaces such as *Pundit Kitchen*, or users being encouraged to play with pre-uploaded images in the spaces discussed in Chapter 4, the creations here are shared in such a high volume and across so many spaces that their original authors are untraceable. This perhaps is a consequence of the global, powerful scale of the news event, which caused immediate humorous responses. Also, the circulation of the texts in this chapter extends beyond user-contributed spaces. Its global reach allowed not just individuals familiar with US news to generate and share responses. The memes also garnered widespread attention from mainstream news outlets, including *TIME* and *MSNBC*, revealing an acknowledgment of the popularity of the culture of humorous citizen responses (Gibson 2011b; *The Daily Beast* 2011).

An adaptation of DeSousa and Medhurst's (1982) four inventional resources for political cartooning will be applied to the analysis. Because the original framework was utilized for political cartoons during the election period, it has been adjusted to fit the overall motif of this chapter. The classifications for political commonplaces and situational themes in particular will be slightly altered. For the duration of this chapter, political commonplaces will represent the relations between bin Laden's death, current events, and the political process itself. Situational themes refer to the unexpected situations around the timeline of events surrounding the Presidency of Barack Obama before and after he ordered for the killing of bin Laden. The other themes include literary and cultural allusions, and personal character traits of the figures present in each text. Here, the large quantity of images circulated online will be categorized under 'character-focused jokes' for they focus on particular political figures. The other memes analyzed here include 'The Situation Room', and 'What's Osama bin Watchin'?'

5.4.2 CHARACTER-FOCUSED JOKES

Still image memes containing visual and verbal jokes focused on several main figures. The target subjects here, Donald Trump, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Osama bin Laden, functioned as 'open texts' for users to exploit using cultural allusions and some political knowledge. The analysis reveals users humorously reinterpreting the quality of these political figures in relation to the death of bin Laden, and also in culture.

5.4.2.1 Donald Trump

There was a strong presence of Donald Trump, a well-known American business magnate and television personality, in citizen discourse throughout the period of bin Laden's death, and also in the weeks before this event. A large proportion of jokes on Twitter made references to Trump's demands to see Obama's birth certificate. This refer to events from early as March 2011,[147] when Trump has been expressing his skepticism [148]over President Obama's US citizenship, despite legal documents being available online for over three years (*The Huffington Post* 2011b). This, coupled with the media speculation on whether or not Trump will run for President in 2012,[149] resulted in the businessman becoming a staple figure in news stories throughout the months of March and April 2011 (Luippold 2011; Madison 2010). When The White House released President Obama's long-form birth certificate to the public on April 27, 2011, Trump arrogantly stated that he was "honored to play such a big role in hopefully, hopefully getting rid of this issue", expressing how proud he was to accomplish "something that no one else has been able to accomplish" (*The Huffington Post* 2011b). In his press conference, Trump also suspiciously considers the fact that the document "appeared all of a sudden" to be "amazing", and suggests that it needed to be inspected further to "ensure its authenticity" (Ibid).

The close proximity between the release of Obama's birth certificate and bin Laden's death acted as inspiration for citizens to create humorous responses. As seen in Figures 5.15, 5.16, 5.17 and

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[147] Trump has persistently expressed his demands on various mainstream news programs, including daytime programs on *ABC*34, *NBC News*35, and *Anderson Cooper 360°*36, and even released his own birth certificate on *ABC News* (Falcone 2011).

[148] Allegations he has made include the possibility that Obama was secretly a Muslim, or is hiding the fact that he is not a natural-born US citizen. This has caused Trump himself to be accused of some mainstream media pundits as being part of the 'Birther' movement, a group of (often) radical right-winged individuals advocating for the claim that the current President is not rightfully a citizen of the US. The movement is often criticized as being "unable to accept an African American President" (Tomasky 2011).

[149] This was a possibility discussed from as early as October 2010, Trump later revealed that he was not running for President in 2012 on May 16, 2011 (*CNN Political Unit* 2011).

5.18, variations of Trump's dialogue were twisted to appear as if he is responding to the death of bin Laden. These are superimposed onto stock photos of Trump, with serious, almost scowling, expressions. While the photographs are not candid, they do not appear flattering, thus portraying Trump as lacking in charisma (Edwards 2001). Trump is casted as a bossy authority figure, demanding proof for an event that at the time, is already considered to be factual. The juxtaposition between his stoic sense of authority and the misinterpretation of facts also adds to a discourse of Trump as clueless, already commonly explored in the popular culture portrayals of him in comedy, such as *Saturday Night Live*.[150] The citizens' portrayal of Trump in these memes thus echoes, and add to a pre-existing cultural tradition and discourse surrounding the figure. In addition, the political bent here reinforces the ongoing blending of politics and popular culture.

The Trump incident is considered as a situational theme rather than in the category of political commonplaces, because it is arguably unnecessary to the political process itself.[151] Trump's consistent presence in the news media solely for this issue, has been argued by its critics (as well as the President himself[152]) to be a hindrance, often getting in the way of the execution of more important issues. It sparked "short-term controversy", that is unlikely to "endure beyond [its] immediate historical context" (DeSousa and Medhurst 1982:90). For these texts, context matters strongly, and it would be difficult to predict whether or not Trump-centered jokes may be prominent if the events were not timed so coincidentally close to each other. To fully understand these jokes, a viewer needs to be aware of the meanings generated from previous events. The jokes too, in some ways, remain as artifacts of this point in history. They remind a viewer of a point of view from an event that is in the mainstream media largely overshadowed by celebration, gory details, and actual political weight. It allowed users to play with the irony of timing, and shows that their relationship with noteworthy events expand to inclusions of other cultural knowledge. By treating the death of bin Laden as an open text, some individuals are

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[150] Jokes about Trump are also a relatively long-running comedy staple in the US, due to his presence in the public arena since the mid-1980s, when he "rose to fame as a symbol of wealth and access" (Luippold 2011). Topics such as his high-profile personal life and marriages, his brash personality, and perhaps most prominently, his floppy hairdo, have been included in US late-night television monologues for years. Darrell Hammond's impersonation of Trump on *Saturday Night Live*, however, is considered as one of the most well-known, due to its accurate portrayal of mannerisms and the amount of times the character was able to be reused. Here, Trump's stoic, overconfident persona is often overplayed for comedic effect. Hammond speaks in a distinct monotone that reveals a character who takes himself seriously, even when placed in embarrassing situations out of his control. Examples include Donald Trump unsuccessfully reading his lines while filming an episode of *Days of our Lives*, and being the spokesperson for a Domino's pizza commercial (Figure 5.19). In both sketches, Trump was portrayed as a character that pretends to be aware of the situation, even when he was not.

[151] Even it is arguably an item of political significance to the 'Birther' movement.

[152] Right after the release of his long-form birth certificate, the President was seen "scolding" the press corps for their time-wasting preoccupation with "silliness" (Stein 2011).

seen to make sense of it overall by juxtaposing it against Trump's recent actions, and the persona they know via popular culture.

5.4.2.2 George W. Bush

Despite the event happening during his time in office, references to former US President George W. Bush was for most part, missing in viral citizen-created images shortly after 9/11. In her content analysis, Kuipers (2002) noted that there were about ten times as many bin Laden-centric jokes as there was Bush ones, and the nature of the images was often "degrading rather than violent or bellicose"[153] (Ibid:455;461). This is considered as contradictory, or sympathetic to the mainstream media portrayal that saw George W. Bush at the time as a fearless leader, ready to protect US citizens from the terrors of the Middle East.

The remaining years of his Presidency however, left Bush to be openly and consistently criticized throughout popular culture, including being reduced to childlike caricatures in animated television programs such as *South Park* and *Lil' Bush*,[154] impersonated in sketch comedy programs such as *Saturday Night Live* and *MADtv*, and being fodder for countless online comedy texts. The latter includes a wide range spanning from image macros, to photomanipulated images, and more technically complicated texts, such as parody videos and animated Flash games. As Frank (2004) argues, Bush's time in the White House unfortunately coincides with the early development of Web 2.0, allowing more users to participate in the circulation and creation of visual jokes (108). Within these texts, Bush is often characterized as a bumbling fool, unable to comprehend the situation he is in, or likened to a child. The availability of the Internet, user-generated spaces, and image manipulation software has allowed ordinary users plenty of opportunities to create texts that more often than not, exposes the lack of intelligence in the former leader.

The responses to bin Laden's death made by online citizens continued to reflect the personality of Bush that has dominated post-9/11 popular culture. Citizens have since then display a more openly cynical view of Bush– instead of the brave, heroic figure the mainstream news media displayed after the initial disaster, popular culture began, and continued until today, to focus on

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[153] For example, visuals of Bush and bin Laden in sexual acts were common, primarily showing the President as being violated and victimized.

[154] A *Comedy Central* animated series that features members of George W. Bush's administration and other political figures literally, as children. W, or Lil' Bush, is often portrayed as rather stupid, and potentially dangerous as he causes problems worldwide with his friends Lil' Cheney, Lil' Condi, and Lil' Romney.

the side of the former President that revels in his failure. The goofiness of Bush was reaffirmed, and the texts constantly reminded viewers of the fact that he did not actually do his job, or fulfill his promise of ultimately capturing bin Laden. As a result, bin Laden's death has prompted citizen-generated images that directly makes comparisons between the two most prominently affected US leaders– Bush and Obama.

Figure 5.20, a photomanipulated image, shows President Obama 'photobombing'[155] one of George W. Bush's most well-known moments in his mostly failed war against terrorism. The referenced event here is Bush's 'Mission Accomplished' speech.[156] The viewer cannot really focus on this image and understand the complete joke without recognizing "at least momentarily, on some [...] component of politics" (DeSousa and Medhurst 1981:200). It is thus, a political commonplace. In Figure 5.20 a smiling image of Barack Obama is placed in the frame of the infamous staged photo opportunity. The humor, as well as criticism in this image is thus drawn from a mix of a political commonplace, and a cultural allusion– the photobomb. Figure 5.20 would be considered as a 'successful' photobomb, in the way that the prankster, Obama, is able to cheekily stand in the way of Bush, therefore ruining what could otherwise be a 'good' photograph of the latter. It thus 'poaches' the meaning derived from a photobomb to communicate the idea that Obama is the winner, and has overshadowed Bush. Figure 5.21 functions in a similar way. Another cultural allusion and Internet-specific inside joke is utilized here, and the text itself is a political reinterpretation of the 'U MAD?' meme[157]. It also shows possibilities of a play on Obama's personal character traits. The original meme's roots in hip hop culture may directly allude to the portrayal of Obama in much popular and mainstream political

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[155] 'Photobombing', which can be considered as an inside joke particular to online communities, is the act of appearing in a photo unexpectedly, with the possible intention of ruining the other person's photo, often for humorous effect. Photobombing can be seen as a real-life prank that spawned into an online trend when various humor sites started featuring collections of the act, as well as multiple interpretations, such as animals photobombing. *The Cheezburger Network* for example, dedicates an entire section to user-submitted images of this activity, called 'This is Photobomb'.

[156] On May 1, 2003, a televised address showed the then-President in a flight suit strutting out of the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier, declaring, "Major combat operations in Iraq have ended" (Roberts 2007). A banner with the words "Mission Accomplished" boldly set against the American flag, was visible as Bush addressed the nation, despite the Iraq war being far from over (Ibid).

[157] 'U MAD?' may also be considered as LOLspeak due to its idiosyncratic, shorthanded spelling. The 'U MAD?' meme began as a popular catchphrase that is often used in discussion threads [such as 4Chan] from around 2004 to imply that "someone is losing their temper during the course of an argument, and is often used to taunt or bait others into a flamewar [;] it is often considered as a form of trolling" ('Brad', cited in *Know Your Meme* 2011b). 'Flamewars' refer to occasions where multiple users (generally on a discussion board) start arguing with each other, often in unnecessarily provocative manners– they usually deviate from the original discussion, and are generally characterized by purposeful hostility. At times, users may also take sides to insult, or 'troll' the opposing side. Originally, the phrase itself may have begun in hip hop music, with "you mad", often following another derogatory statement justifying the fact that the person mentioning it is in the correct position within an argument (Ibid). Other variations include "you mad?" or "u mad bro?" (Ibid). Numerous image macros have appeared since then, usually consisting of a character, either fictional or real, with a smug expression with the phrase, or a variation of it, superimposed on them in bold, capitalized letters.

culture's racial makeup, which as discussed in Chapter 2, is connected to his political style. This is further propelled by the photographs chosen by the creator of the text– Obama has a cheeky grin on his face, an expression similar to the 'trollface' commonly used along with the insult, which adheres to the 'rules' of this meme (Figure 5.22). A photograph of Bush crying is also used, perhaps in defeat while being 'mocked' by Obama. Through an understanding of online humor, the notion of Obama successfully 'trolling' Bush is evident in Figures 5.20 and 5.21.

5.4.2.3 Barack Obama

Unlike 9/11, which was initially depicted as a shocking occurrence out of the government's control, bin Laden's death saw President Barack Obama as a fundamental figure vital to the operation. This is one of the main differences in citizen-manipulated imagery between the two decades. While the texts responding to 9/11 hardly involved President Bush, the still images circulated in May 2011 featured Obama as the central subject. Although it has been subject to ethical dispute, the killing of bin Laden was widely considered as a victory for the US– a direct contrast to the 9/11 discourse of victimization. This overall boosted the public's approval of President Obama, at least temporarily. The President's presence within the realm of Internet humor, as explored in Chapter 4, is often positive– the jokes are often delivered with the figure's likability and capability to relate to ordinary people in mind, rather than function as criticism. Obama's own personality provokes these acts– his ability to appear laid back and able to take a joke in real life makes him an open target, and text to be played with.

Memes featuring Obama were the most highly-circulated across the web, which reveals the discourse of celebration that is largely visible online and offline. The texts humorously reflect an overall positive outlook on the President, and a sense of appreciation, and belief that his actions were time well-spent. Figures 5.23 and 5.24 for example, are some of the most popular [158] texts that emerged as a response to the death of bin Laden. The captions in the image macros contain punchlines referring to the birth certificate issue involving Donald Trump and the 'Birther' movement. Both the photographs of Obama chosen contained props that may allude to 'coolness' in mainstream culture– Obama is seen wearing dark sunglasses in Figure 5.23, and a Western cowboy hat in Figure 5.24. His expression in Figure 5.23 is reminiscent of the prankster 'trollface' (Figure 5.22). The props and expressions in both images are cultural allusions that communicate Obama as a charismatic, humorous personality (Figure 5.23), and a self-assured,

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[158] The two image macros were found on almost every web compilation of memes surrounding this event.

individualistic leader (Figure 5.24). More importantly, the captions, written in casual language that suggests a non-serious tone, casts Obama as a capable leader who 'gets the job done'.

Cultural allusions are strongly utilized to humorously reinforce Obama's leadership capabilities. Discourses of race and 'coolness' are again, evident in Figures 5.25, 5.26, and 5.27. The caption in Figure 5.25 for example, is playful pun on well-known rapper Jay-Z's *99 Problems*.[159] This associates Obama with urban culture, and thus elevates his connection to a young demographic. This is also repeated in Figure 5.26, where a screenshot of Obama walking off after his successful national address regarding the killing of bin Laden is superimposed with the hashtag[160] '#SWAG'. This alludes to the President's well-publicized swagger (Chapter 2), and confident demeanor. A similar take on Obama's personality was exploited in an animated .gif treated as if it were part of his Presidential address (Figure 27). The .gif sequence was directly taken from a well-edited parody video[161] that went viral of Obama confidently kicking a door open as he left the stage (Ibid). While it was not the national address, it was however reappropriate for this setting, simply with the .gif creator adding the caption, "he's dead" at the start of the text, suggesting that bin Laden's death was addressed here. The .gif was well-circulated across various mainstream news sites, and also Tumblr, whose users are particularly known for utilizing .gifs to represent emotional responses.[162] These examples reveal a celebration of Obama's achievement, and also his charismatic, 'cool' political image.

Obama was also constantly reworked into existing Internet memes. The joke in Figure 5.28 is based strongly on the choice of photograph. Like in Figure 5.21, Obama's expression in Figure 28 is reminiscent of a 'trollface'. The expression in Figure 5.28 however, is derived from a photograph of professional basketball player Yao Ming looking dismissive[163] (Figure 5.29). 'Trollfaces' are also utilized in Figure 5.30. The text originated on *Reddit*, where 'trollfaces' are a common mode used to communicate emotions. This 3-Pane comic references a point during the White House Correspondent's dinner, held two days before bin Laden was killed, where

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[159] The original song is allegedly deals with Jay-Z's problems he encountered with racist policemen and rap critics, but not women– in the song, he mentions, "I've got 99 problems but a bitch ain't one"

[160] While hashtags are popularized as 'tagging' systems on Twitter, they sometimes signify an action.

[161] This setting, while it features Obama at a podium, is actually taken from a speech in 2010 when the President announced that the Bush tax cuts would remain for wealthy Americans (Yerman 2010).

[162] Usually sequences of characters from particular television programs or movies expressing sadness, happiness, or other emotions. Users generally use these .gifs to respond to each other's posts.

[163] The trollface meme is often utilized through online message boards to enforce the user's nonchalant reaction towards something that has been mentioned.

comedian Seth Meyers jokingly stated that very few people actually pay attention to *C-SPAN*[164], possibly meaning that bin Laden hosts a program on the network every day. Obama's reaction upon hearing that joke was laughter, and was later noted[165] by 'Redditors' that "HE KNEW!". The trollface, similar to Figure 5.22, communicates this. Figure 5.31 on another hand, is a derivative of the *CSI* 4-Pane meme[166], often used to "provide commentaries on another user's comment" in discussion boards (*Know Your Meme* 2011a). This example communicates one of the common online jokes, that is, President Obama's national address interrupting *NBC*'s weekly broadcast of *The Apprentice*. While Donald Trump is insulted here, the joke lies mainly in the way the Obama photographs[167] utilized in Figure 5.31 perfectly matches all the original panels (Figure 5.32), thus following the 'rules' commonly applied to the meme. Figures 5.33 and 5.34 mimic 'Advice Animal'-format[168] memes, in particular, 'The Most Interesting Man in the World'.[169] The formula for the meme involves a repeatedly-used stock photograph, and two captions, both describing different, sometimes contradictory actions that ultimately resolve with a successful completion of a particular act. The incorporation of Obama into meme culture not just show the need to bring the President into the world of citizens, but also reflects a playful

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[164] A US cable network that broadcasts federal government proceedings (*C-SPAN* 2011).

[165] The news later revealed that the raid would have been planned before the White House Correspondent's Dinner.

[166] The original meme began around 2006, and is an "exploitable comic" featuring drawings of the protagonist of the popular crime television series, *Crime Scene Investigation:Miami* ('glumauig21' and 'CyberSora', cited in *Know Your Meme* 2011a; Figure 5.32). The character, Lt. Horatio Caine, played by David Caruso, is frequently seen at the end of most of the television show's cold opens[34] "describing a particular situation [with a rather cheesy one-liner] before [dramatically] putting on or removing" his 'sunglasses of doom' (Ibid). Panel 4 of the comic usually displays a wide-shot of the character's environment, and the phrase "YEEEAAAHHH!" in bold letters. The scene in the original meme mirrors the one in the series' opening credits, and "YEEEAAAHHH!" is a direct reference to the beginning of The Who's *Won't Get Fooled Again*, the show's theme song.

[167] Stock images of Obama that mirror the David Caruso drawings were utilized in the first three panels of the comic, with a wide-shot of Obama's main 'office', the White House, placed in panel 4. Caruso's rather 'hammy' and almost self-parodying performance was mimicked here, with the meme creator utilizing images of not just Obama in sunglasses, but looking appropriately confident, and without a care in the world. The dialogue too, was loyal to the original product– a clear description of the situation was given in panel 1, and panel 2 reveals the character's knowledge of 'the fact'. A one-liner is often placed in panel 3, usually involving puns. This was successfully integrated in Figure 25, with 'Trump' both suggesting a powerful trick in card games, and also directly referencing the situational theme involving Donald Trump and his birth certificate.

[168] 'Advice Animals' are a genre of memes circulated on forums such as *4Chan*, *Reddit*, and Tumblr that feature particular animals (though the meme has evolved so far that human personalities, such as 'annoying Facebook girl', are used), with captions superimposed on them giving 'advice' specific to the animal's personality (Childs 2011). 'Courage Wolf' for example, always confronts his fears, and 'Socially Awkward Penguin' describes relatable social situations that are particularly embarrassing. They are used to express emotions, or act as a humorous approach in describing particular events and sequences of action.

[169] 'The Most Interesting Man in the World' is a well-known derivative of the 'Advice Animals' meme. It is a parody based on a series of Don Equis beer advertisement campaigns which feature Jonathan Goldsmith, a man who charmingly narrates his adventurous exploits according to a particular pattern of catchphrases. The catchphrase, the element most consistently parodied in the meme, also utilized in Figure 5.33 follows this formula: "I don't always [perform particular action], but when I do, I [successfully performs action, in addition to also exceeded expectations]".

participation and understanding of the specific memes, thus portraying the creators'
competency in a new literacy practice (Knobel and Lankshear 2007:203).

Edwards' (2011) framework for evaluating the qualities of a leader is applicable to most of these
memes, reveal the citizens' perception of Obama. Overall, the President is characterized as
confident and 'urban' in his mannerisms, and able to exude a "cool" factor desired by most
political candidates. The qualities embedded in the way Obama is presented also directs towards
the elements of competency and charisma (Ibid:2142). The element of viability– "his chances for
winning" are also clearly communicated, and is further emphasized in an over-the-top
photomanipulation in Figure 5.35, which portrays Obama as a mythical fantasy hero. The
unflattering references to figures such as Bush and Trump on the other hand, allows Obama to
be rendered as a proficient leader who as an underdog, is also able to "disassociate [himself]
from overt influences" (Ibid:2143). Furthermore, Obama, while celebrated as a leader, is also
treated in a playful manner– a unifying trait throughout these responses is an engagement with
elements that are ultimately non-serious, and humorous in their tone.

5.4.2.4 Osama bin Laden

Aside from President Obama, the most prominent images that appeared in response to the event
were of Osama bin Laden. As already mentioned in the case of post-9/11 citizen-created still
images, the treatment of bin Laden often displays some level of violence, and hatred towards the
character. This later evolved into a depiction of bin Laden as a childish and goofy caricature. The
still image memes circulated as a response to his death tended towards the latter portrayal, often
punctuated by insults and communicated with cultural allusions. Hostile treatments however,
do still appear in some examples.

Combinations of cultural allusion and political commonplaces are often used to create
humorous responses to political events. Figures 5.36 and 5.37, both image macros, utilize
recognizable stock photographs of bin Laden. The captions in Figure 5.36, "HIDE AND SEEK
CHAMPION", "2001-2011", functions in two primary ways. The first refers to a situation that
has permeated politics for an entire decade. Those familiar with mainstream politics will be able
to interpret 'hide and seek champion' as a metaphor to represent the US government's active
search for bin Laden since the events of 9/11. The term "hide and seek", also a cultural allusion,
arguably complicates the more serious nature of the context, as it alludes to a children's game.
This image macro perhaps captured the event perfectly– it is playful in a sense that the joke

depends on a pop culture view of bin Laden as childlike, while also simultaneously refers to the fact that he has been a huge part of US and global politics and culture for an entire decade. Figure 5.37 suggests that bin Laden was presumably tracked down by the US government because he mistakenly put his "real address on [his] PSN".[170] This is a play on facts– it has been revealed that the government managed to track the location of bin Laden's hideout via his "personal couriers" (*NBC News* 2011). The political fact is then remixed with a cultural allusion, a *PlayStation Network* hack that occurred in April 2011.[171] The joke here is clear to those who understand both contexts– bin Laden did not expect to be tracked so easily, and the utilization of a gaming console joke infantilizes the figure in the same way as Figure 5.36.

Cultural allusions are used to frame Osama bin Laden as a villain. Figure 5.38 for example, casts bin Laden as Voldemort, the antagonist in the *Harry Potter* franchise. Bin Laden's face is completely altered, with the creator skillfully replacing the original with Voldemort's face while still retaining the Jihadist's clothing and facial hair, remixing the two characters as one. The caption, which references nobody knowing "about [his] Horcruxes", is directly 'poached' from the *Harry Potter* text.[172] Deeper knowledge of the cultural allusion Figure 5.38 communicates a lack of knowledge about bin Voldemort's Horcruxes, noting that he may not be actually dead. At a more direct level, the image reveals a cultural application of bin Laden to a popular, recognizable villain. This is further propelled by the buzz surrounding the final *Harry Potter* film to be released around two months after the death of bin Laden, in which fans will know that Voldemort ultimately gets killed.

Popular Internet memes were also used to respond to current events. Figure 5.39 is a derivative of the 'Interrupting Kanye' meme already explored in Chapter 4. The caption here also draws from a traditional cultural allusion, 'Waldo',[173] which again, reinforces the juvenile tone of these creations. Unlike the Barack Obama example in Figure 4.43, Kanye West is now used as a prop to victimize bin Laden. A parody of the 2010 film, *The Social Network*, serves as the basis for the meme in Figure 5.40, the Zuckerberg Note Pass", a reference to a scene in the Sorkin-penned

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[170] 'PSN' refers to the PlayStation Network. Individuals who utilize the PS3 platform, usually for online gaming and downloads, are required to include personal information such as their address and credit card numbers in order to sign up for an account.

[171] The incident was a PR nightmare for *Sony*, as it reportedly released customers' information, which includes "names, birthdays, physical and e-mail addresses", to hackers (Schreier 2011).

[172] In the *Harry Potter* books and films, Voldemort is divided by magic into seven parts– one resides in his own body, and the others reside in inanimate or live objects, known as Horcruxes.

[173] From the well-known series of children's books, *Where's Waldo*. These are activity books where the reader is supposed to find a character dressed in a red and white-striped shirt, glasses and beanie amongst illustrated pages of crowds at specific locations.

film, where the main character, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, is passed a note from a girl in his class (*Know Your Meme* 2011c). The original film reveals the message as "u dick", showing Zuckerberg's advances as rejected by a girl who is disgusted with his self-absorbed behaviour. The meme is a play on this scene. It is developed as a 3-pane comic,[174] and in Figure 5.40, bin Laden is placed in Zuckerberg's body, with a similar glum expression, and the 'trolling' Obama is utilized again, punctuating the note, "LOL We found u". The term 'LOL' suggests a joke– it is implied that Obama finds it amusing that bin Laden was caught. The language used is as playful as the almost amateurish image manipulation, and further connotes a silly tone with roots in Internet culture.

Hostile treatments of bin Laden similar to images circulated in 9/11 are still visible in the responses to his death. The Jihadist's severed head, with crosses in his eyes symbolizing death, is being held by the Statue of Liberty in Figure 5.41 Lady Liberty appeared various times throughout the post-9/11 memes, often serving as a symbol of both the heavily affected New York, and America (Frank 2004:646). This image therefore communicates revenge, and is a visual proclamation that the US has won, and bin Laden is finally defeated. Figure 5.42 also exhibits hostility showing bin Laden manipulated to look like a zombie, with blood dripping from his forehead, as if he has been shot in the head– a well-known way to kill zombies as seen in fictional accounts. He is holding a 'flag gun' with the caption, "BANG", suggesting the cause of his death. As with the humorous images, Figure 5.42 communicates a message by using a cultural allusion. While it was circulated alongside the humorous texts, it contains a darker layer that allows it to be applied closer to Frank's (2004) discourse of annihilation.

Still image texts, like mainstream popular culture, mostly focus on the goofy, infantile, image-conscious side of bin Laden. The function of comedy to safely provide critical responses to powerful figures is evident throughout these texts. A once powerful and dangerous character is rendered small and vulnerable, and turned into a victim, ready to be humiliated in funny and creative ways by ordinary people. These responses perhaps show a sense of closure in citizens– they are now free to make fun of what is according to mainstream news media, the source of a lot of fear. More importantly, they emphasize the fact that bin Laden is now gone. In other words, they are no longer afraid, and are therefore able to laugh openly about it. Figure 5.43, another derivative of an 'Advice' meme, acts as a concise summary of what bin Laden means to the relationship between citizens, popular culture, and politics. The caption suggests that even

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[174] Although there are several variations of this meme, the three panels often comprise of the following: the message in the note, the sender's reaction, and the recipient's, which is often in this case, Zuckerberg's solemn reaction (*Know Your Meme* 2011c).

in death, bin Laden will "stay alive in meme form", communicating that the Internet will never leave him alone. Osama bin Laden is therefore, forever a joke.

5.4.3 THE SITUATION ROOM

Over the last few years, the Obama administration has consistently updated the official White House photostream on Flickr with behind-the-scenes photographs of Obama and his family and staff as they carried out their daily duties. This was continued as the bin Laden raid was unfolded. A notable photograph, now widely referred to as 'The Situation Room', was taken by Pete Souza (2011), an official White House photographer, of everyone in the room, including the President and Vice President, presumably watching the updates on the raid on the same screen, with a pixelated classified document on Hillary Clinton's laptop (Figure 5.44). This photograph garnered over 600,000 views within the first hour of its release, making it the fastest-viewed image ever on Flickr [175] (Yin 2011). Leung (cited in Ibid), the product manager of Flickr states, "photos have a powerful ability to tell a story in an instant [and] a very personal level", and that through the photo-sharing service, "the world got a unique glimpse into the tension of the Situation Room and the emotions of US leaders". John Blake (2011) considers the original image to be powerful, not just because of the subsequent events, but also because of its portrayal of race and gender, is an image that was "unimaginable 30 years ago". [176] While the feelings provoked by the iconic original image include drama, intensity, suspense, and perhaps even patriotism, individuals on the Internet have taken advantage of its popularity, and altered it in more unexpected ways. As Gloijan (2011) puts it, the "photo [has been] viewed as often as it is parodied".

Like most of the memes circulated during this time period, the origins of each 'Situation Room' manipulation are difficult to track. Images have been found in humor and news blogs, forums, and personal websites. The mainstream media were also responsible for disseminating this meme. The Situation Room meme has been covered by various mainstream publications, and its reach was international, extending to examples such as *Zaeega* (2011), a Japanese entertainment culture and news site, dedicating a story to the photomanipulated images. *Uproxx* (The Cajun Boy 2011a), a web culture and entertainment site, illustrates the spread best

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[175] It currently has been viewed over 2.5 million times.

[176] The photograph captured an important evolution in history, where Barack Obama, "a black man", is portrayed as a "'protector in chief", and the presence of secretary of state Hillary Clinton and Audrey Tomason, director of counterterrorism, "shows how far women have come", despite the more visibly emotional expression on Clinton (Blake 2011).

by linking to several pages containing photomanipulated images, which humorously includes "the entire freaking Internet". It can thus be argued that unlike the memes featured in Chapters 3 and 4, users were driven to participate without even being prompted by particular affinity spaces.

The Situation Room reveal users actively playing with political commonplace as an open text, here being the setting and story behind the photograph, by incorporating numerous cultural allusions that most viewers would be accustomed to. One of the more obvious photomanipulations was of a *Jersey Shore*[177] cast member, nicknamed 'The Situation' being edited into the blank space behind President Obama in the original photograph (Figure 5.45). Here, the buff, usually self-absorbed character from a youth-oriented television show is inserted into a serious atmosphere, purely because of his namesake. There is a further disconnection between him and the rest of the room– they are both staring into directions, perhaps insinuating that the raid-watchers are unaware of The Situation's presence, giving it a further comical effect. This image was allegedly created by Alexis Madrigal, who is currently a senior editor at *The Atlantic* (Watercutter 2011). It however, has been scattered across the web so frequently that the author is not often attributed to the text. Again, the anonymity or lack of specific authorship is a notable feature of the memes in his chapter.

Current events can also act as cultural allusions. Figure 5.46 brings one of a Royal Wedding-related references into the Situation Room. Princess Beatrice's hat from the event, which was outrageous enough to become one of the headlining topics of the day, is depicted as worn by all the staff members in the room. The result is a ridiculous-looking, playful image, featuring a nod to a popular news item. Cultural allusions are also used in Figure 5.47, where those involved in watching the raid here are dressed as popular superheroes from two major comic book publications. While the expressions remain unaltered, the colorful costumes diminish the tension-filled tone of the original image. While no explicit political statements can be drawn from these manipulations, they incorporate imagery common to ordinary people that are arguably outside the realm of the original Situation Room. This sense of 'ordinariness' The texts thus become a result of pure play, characterized by participation for its own sake.

The power of the original photograph becomes less politically compelling the more they are removed from their original contexts. With The Situation Room, the more removed a text

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[177] A currently popular reality television program broadcasted on *MTV* featuring eight youngsters who spent their summer in Jersey Shore, New Jersey. The program, sometimes considered to be somewhat of a cultural phenomenon, often indulges in portrayals of typical badly-behaved youth involving alcohol and sex, as well as Italian-American stereotypes.

becomes from the realm of politics, the more they become closer to citizens' culture. This is most prevalent in Figures 5.48 and 5.49. They may be described as 'crowded' with popular culture characters. The cultural allusions included span several genres and media, including television [178], film, [179] music, [180] Internet memes, [181] video games, [182] and more. [183] The occupiers of the actual Situation Room photograph become hardly visible in these examples that resembles a party with attendees spanning popular culture genres, more than a politically significant affair. The placement of these unexpected characters, literally take over and dominate the frames here, obscuring the original context. These examples are a creative reflection of the individuals' desire to participate in the historical scene. It is also true display of blending cultural allusions and political commonplaces on the Internet, a citizen-controlled space that allows popular culture and politics to converge.

The Situation Room memeplays on a politically important moment that demands the opposite– tension and seriousness. There is no real critique of anyone in the photograph, nor is there any directly political response, which is contrary to most political humor memes. Madrigal (cited in Watercutter 2011) notes that his creation, Figure 5.45, "was a visual joke that I couldn't pass up once I saw the Internet cranking out a bunch of them". Elements of pure visual elements without serious commentary, and more importantly, participation in a joke, become important. What is truly present here is play– individuals partaking in the creation and dissemination of photomanipulated imagery, just because they are provided with an image so popular, and because of the nature of online participation, something has to be done to it.

 Philip Kennicott (cited in Horowitz 2011), an art critic, believes the original Situation Room photograph contains two "basic metaphors of power"–

> Being in the room and at the table. Both metaphors expressively exclude us, the viewers of the photo, who are not there, not in the loop. The photograph fascinates because it represents the most basic aspects of political power: knowledge, access, influence and proximity.

He explains that the photograph leaves ordinary viewers "in a subordinate position", and images of anxiety expressed by the staff "shows the degree to which some of the most powerful people in

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[178] For example, Spongebob Squarepants, and Big Bird from *Sesame Street*, in Figure 5.48.

[179] Napoleon Dynamite, and Chewbacca from *Star Wars*, among others, in Figure 5.48.

[180] Michael Jackson is visible in the top-left corner of Figure 5.48.

[181] A photobombing dog, and 'Sad Keanu' are just two examples seen in Figure 5.49.

[182] Figure 5.49 contained several video game characters, including Master Chief from *Halo*, Gordeon Freeman from *Half-Life*, and Leon Kennedy from the *Resident Evil* franchise.

[183] William Shakespeare, Hitler, Ronald McDonald, the characters in the *American Gothic* painting by Grant Wood, Santa, and even bin Laden himself are among some of the random figures appearing in either of the two images.

the world can't control events", leading to the idea that "we have less power than they do, and they have less power than reality" (Ibid). Among other things, The Situation Room overall reminds audiences of their "more fundamental powerlessness" (Ibid). Those who actively create texts online however, are able to manipulate this reality in ways that do in some ways, alter these power relations. As Madrigal (2011) puts it, "the situation room has been colonized. It is part of our world". The original Situation Room image may not become less powerful, and the citizen-made texts perhaps become a subtly poignant acknowledgement of the seriousness and power connotated in the former. At the same time, the texts become less politicized, and simultaneously turn into products of everyday culture. There is no real sense of actively "dumbing down" or direct criticism of those involved in the original context, but an act of citizens bringing political moments down to earth. That, or Internet users are just unable to resist a good joke.

5.4.4 WHAT'S OSAMA BIN WATCHIN'?

Reports of the details surrounding bin Laden's death continued to escalate throughout the mainstream news media for weeks after the initial incident. On May 8, 2011, the US government has reportedly released among various other items of evidence, five videos discovered in Osama bin Laden's compound during the raid (Raddatz and Martinez 2011). In one of them, [184] bin Laden is visibly seen to be alone, watching satellite television as he "huddled in a blanket, his undyed beard obviously gray" (Ibid). He had a remote control in his hand, and was flipping through various news stations, including *Al-Jazeera*. Terrorism experts suggest that candid nature of the video reveals a side of bin Laden that he "would not have released himself"— it compromises "the larger-than-life image he tried to present" (Ibid). Here, the ordinarily image-obsessed figure is suddenly viewed as what may be just an ordinary man, watching television.

The video quickly became one of the more popular memes related to the death of bin Laden. It has been covered, like most of the images in this chapter, in both mainstream news publications, and Internet culture blogs and websites. Skarda (2011) cites Tom Scott as the creator of the meme, although the original author is largely unknown. Many sources claim that it began when somebody embedded Rebecca Black's *Friday*, a viral YouTube hit at the time, into an image of bin Laden watching television. Scott (2011) however, was instrumental in the spread of this meme, as he created a webpage dedicated solely to it. On the page, a screenshot of the video of

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[184] The other four were of recorded announcements featuring bin Laden, similar to ones broadcast in news reports over the past decade.

Osama bin Laden watching television. Users are then able to "paste a YouTube URL to change bin Laden's channel", allowing them to visually witness bin Laden viewing the YouTube videos of their choice (Scott 2011). Scott's suggestions were humorous and juvenile, including the likes of "Miley Cyrus" and "the Telletubies". Skarda (2011) considers the site as "a simple sort of brilliance", due to the power given to users to dictate what "the Internet" thinks bin Laden would enjoy watching. Like the bin Laden still image texts explored earlier in this chapter, the terrorist figure is turned into a joke, as users made fun of him by embedding videos such as Obama announcing his death (Ibid).

In addition to the video generator meme, the base image of Osama bin Laden sitting cozily in a blanket in front of his television set has also been exploited as a still image meme (Figure 5.50). Both function in a similar way. Figure 5.51 for example, is a still image version of the popular joke shows bin Laden viewing the *Friday* music video. The base image remains the same throughout this meme, with the television screen constantly changed to function as the prompt for the joke. Figures 5.52 and 5.53 offer slight variations in terms of format– the users include a screenshot of specific television programs into the bin Laden image, and also added a speech bubble to show him as commenting on the said program. Through this, cultural allusions can be utilized to formulate jokes related to among other subjects, celebrities, [185] and reality television. [186] The politics of the original image here are like with The Situation Room, overshadowed by citizens playing with cultural allusions. Bin Laden, already made ordinary by the candid video, is further humanized by turning him into a typical television viewer.

Another variation of this meme appears in the form of a basic image macro. 'The Cajun Boy' (2011b), a blogger for *Uproxx*, claimed to have started this text, purely because, it "is just begging to be turned into a meme". The texts are now found throughout various spaces, including Tumblr blogs, social networking sites, and more. The view that the image needed to be turned into a meme reflects the way news turns into popular culture and humor on the Internet. Rather than serious commentary, these texts often evolve out of users believing that an image needs to be exploited, and played with. The stock photograph of bin Laden again, is utilized as the base image for the meme, and captions, instead of television screenshots, communicate the jokes. As reflected in Figures 5.54-5.57, the captions reference cultural allusions, in particular, mainstream television culture. Bin Laden plays the role of the television fan, or ordinary

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[185] Figure 52 shows bin Laden watching a well-known television moment, Tom Cruise's 'freak out' incident on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, where the film star proceeded to hopping on the couch as he "professed his love for his then-new girlfriend, the actress Katie Holmes" (Waxman 2005).

[186] bin Laden comments on an episode of *Dancing with the Stars* in Figure 53.

television viewer. The captions are portrayed as if bin Laden himself is commenting on what he is watching in the same way that either ordinary people, or die-hard fans or critics of specific programs would. Figure 5.54 for example depicts bin Laden as a fan of the critically acclaimed drama series, *The Wire*, to the point where his expertise extends to the notion that he knows which season "was the best". This possibly aligns his views with that of a stereotypical serious television fan, also reflected in the caption on Figure 5.55. These two texts cast bin Laden as a knowledgeable television viewer, a stock character recognizable by most in everyday life.

Frank's (2004) argument that some of the post-9/11 citizen-created bin Laden texts display efforts to humiliate bin Laden by inserting "overt homosexual themes" may be witnessed in Figure 5.56 (646). This example exposes bin Laden's fondness of *CNN* anchor and journalist, Anderson Cooper. It applies homosexuality as a derogatory identity for bin Laden, and exploits it as an insult. Furthermore, the colloquial dialogue, relatively common in teenage lingo– "soooo" instead of 'so', adds to the infantalization of the character. This text, while exploiting mainstream culture, also can potentially be viewed as political criticism. As Frank (2004) notes, the application of any form of sexuality to bin Laden "shows disrespect for his religious beliefs" (646). Further criticism, though not directed at bin Laden, is portrayed in Figure 5.57's caption, 'poached' from the *Fox News* slogan, "fair and balanced". The caption shows bin Laden laughing at the ridiculous nature of the tagline. Viewers may read this in two ways, depending on the depth of their cultural knowledge. The real-life Bin Laden has been long known as an anti-capitalist who dislikes US culture, and *Fox News* may be regarded as a definitive example of that. At the same time, "fair and balanced" has been criticized by many of those who oppose *Fox*'s rhetoric.

Putting the deeper readings aside, Osama bin' Watchin' as a meme simply plays on the possibility that the well-known figure that the mainstream media has feared for a decade lives an ordinary life, just like everyone else. While some of the images can act as criticism, the meme itself began with people poking fun at bin Laden for watching silly YouTube videos. In some ways, it also acts as a criticism of the viewing and commentary habits of ordinary people, or more likely, it brings bin Laden to the level of an ordinary individual. He becomes no more powerful than the person creating and viewing the text, and here, unlike previously in the videos he was so notoriously distributed to mainstream news outlets, he certainly has no way of manipulating his image. Citizens here have control over the way they see bin Laden, and there is very little, if not any sign of the his mainstream media portrayal. Bin Laden, through these memes, have become a part of everyday culture, and like some ordinary people, literally consumes and comments on it.

5.5 CONCLUSION

Jenna Wortham (2011) asserts that there is an "urge [for ordinary users] to be a part of the bin Laden news" on the Internet. She notes that everything, from Twitter users waiting in anticipation for the President's address, to parody Twitter accounts, visual jokes, and uploaded photos of "Obama speaking, snapped from television and laptop screens" all reaffirm the collective voice of Internet users, and in some ways proclaim the message, "we are all a part of this" global phenomenon (Ibid). Furthermore, the memes emerged without being encouraged by affinity spaces as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, which reaffirms humor as an immediate and dominant form of citizen discourse.

The online political humor memes circulated in response to the death of bin Laden symbolize the fundamental distance between ordinary people, and those with political power. They can potentially disrupt this separation through participation and play, resulting in authority figures losing control of their power, at least temporarily. The memes become a carnivalesque celebration of the event, outside the confines of 'official' political discourse. The inclusion of popular culture that is recognizable across a broad spectrum of genres into the more 'closed' sphere of politics have enabled these texts to act as an inclusive way for citizens to respond to the event of bin Laden's death.

These memes, like the ones in Chapter 4, may lose their significance as soon as the event becomes less newsworthy. They do however reflect a point in time, just like any historical document. The cultural allusions utilize particularly specific references to Internet culture, also further provides references to cultural points in time. Evidence of genre blending are reflected in these memes– individuals actively and creatively 'poaching' from a wide variety of genres and texts, including news and popular culture. On the Internet, citizens are able to interpret events in ways that are meaningful to them. In this case, the tradition of remixing texts appears to be powerful to citizens; it relates the arguably distant culture of politics back to their personal spheres of everyday life.

The symbiotic relationship between online and mass culture too, is exemplified in this chapter. The most well-circulated visual jokes surrounding the death of bin Laden, such as The Situation Room and Osama bin Watchin' played on the most popular and pervasive images released by mainstream sources. Rather than suppressing genuine emotions, as noted by Frank (2004) in

regards to 9/11, the mainstream media noticed, and circulated citizen creations– the humorous Tweets, hoaxes, and memes that related to the death of bin Laden were featured in online news media, blogs, discussion boards, and websites. They were also distributed widely within an extensive variety of online spaces, leaving the origins of each of these texts to be lost. Furthermore, the strengths of digital media are successfully exploited to respond to the event. Individuals have certainly taken advantage of digital media's immediacy, as well as the manipulability of content. Online networks, further enhanced by Web 2.0 platforms, were also widely used to circulate and share texts.

Hartsell (2011) claims that responding to bin Laden's death with humor "was just normal; just one of the many ways our wired, social communities process and connect to a situation". The online responses disregard the moral consequences of celebrating the death of a human being as it being 'too soon' or too offensive– they often rise from gut reactions. Humor was part of the healing process after the tragic events of 9/11. This is apparent in both the citizen-created images online, and the way in which mainstream popular culture texts are eventually able to poke fun at the US's enemies and leaders. The fall of 9/11's main villain on May 2, 2011 provoked largely humorous reactions too, for as explored in Chapter 2, it is natural, and helps with coping with the disaster, as well as leaving room for political criticism. A decade of political tragedy and angst is ended with laughter, and this shows an acknowledgement of closure from ordinary individuals. To be able to laugh at a situation allows one to cope with the negativity of it, and at the same time, provides catharsis. As evidenced in this chapter, humor also becomes a result of what happens when people are given the opportunity to play with political events. This reveals humor as a dominant way of responding to politics within citizen discourse.

Chapter 5: Images

Figure 5.1: Osama bin Laden's first appearance in *South Park*, aired two months after the events of 9/11. The terrorist is portrayed as vain, as he prepares for a threatening video broadcast with his make-up crew.

Figure 5.2: Photomanipulated image of King Kong on the World Trade Center (Kuipers 2002:457).
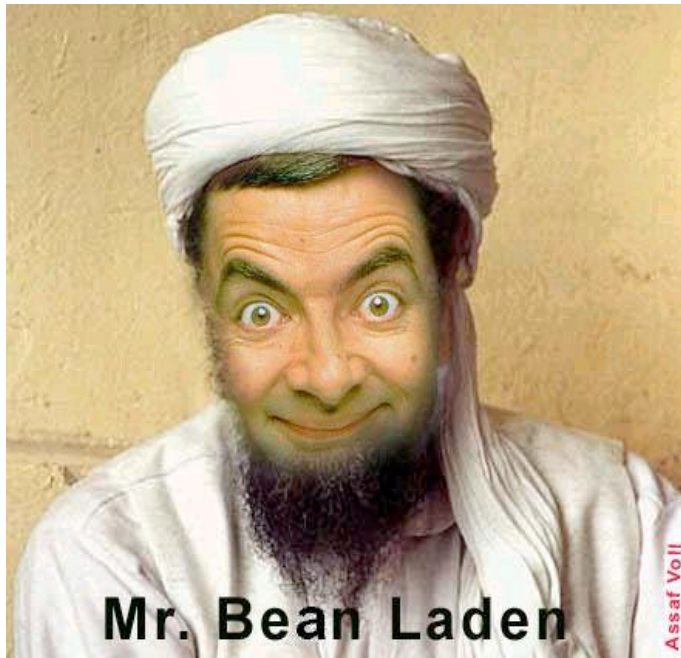
Figure 5.3 (Left): 'Mr Bean Laden', a well-known parody circulated via email.
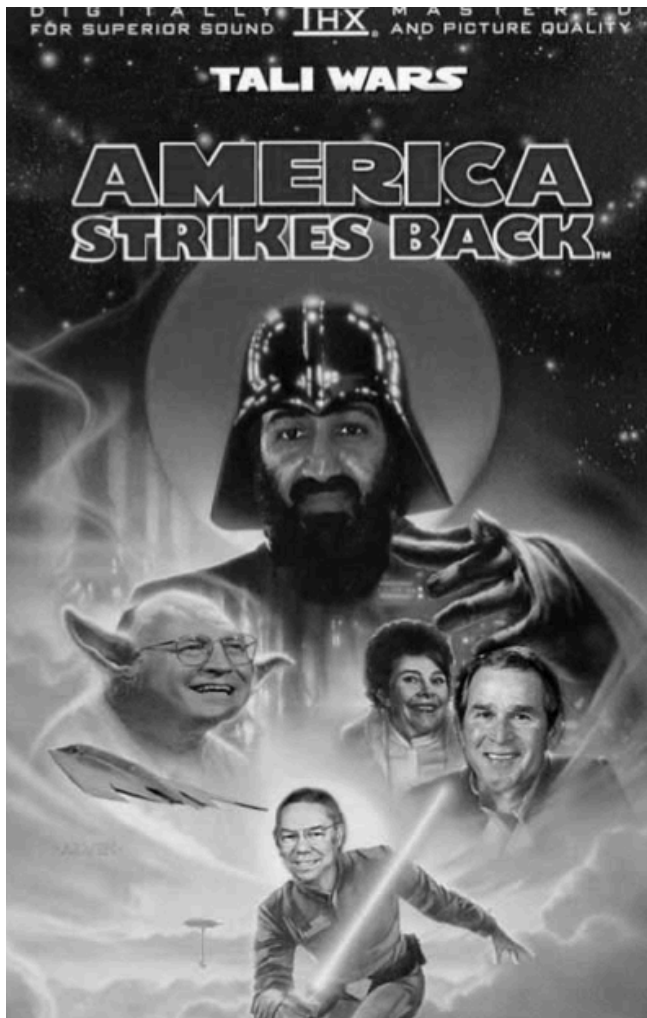
Figure 5.4 (Left): A *Star Wars* parody featuring members of the Bush administration as protagonists, a rare portrayal in popular culture (Kuipers 2005:76).

Figure 5.5 (Left): Bin Laden portrayed as feminized, as individuals humiliate the figure by creating texts depicting the US as powerful enough to defeat him (Frank 2004:649).

Figure 5.6 (Below): A portrayal of Bush/the US as victims (Kuipers 2005:70).

What will happen if the Taliban wins?
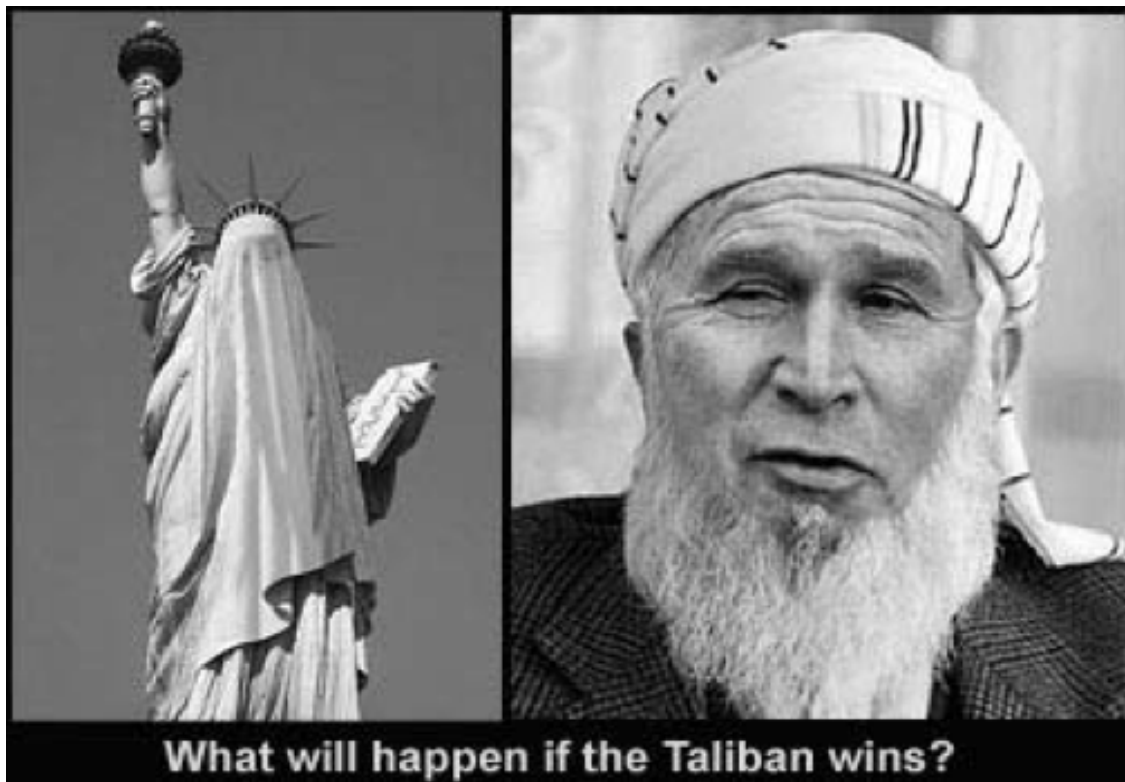
Figure 5.7: Tourist Guy.

Figure 5.8: Tourist Guy, present during the Kennedy assassination.
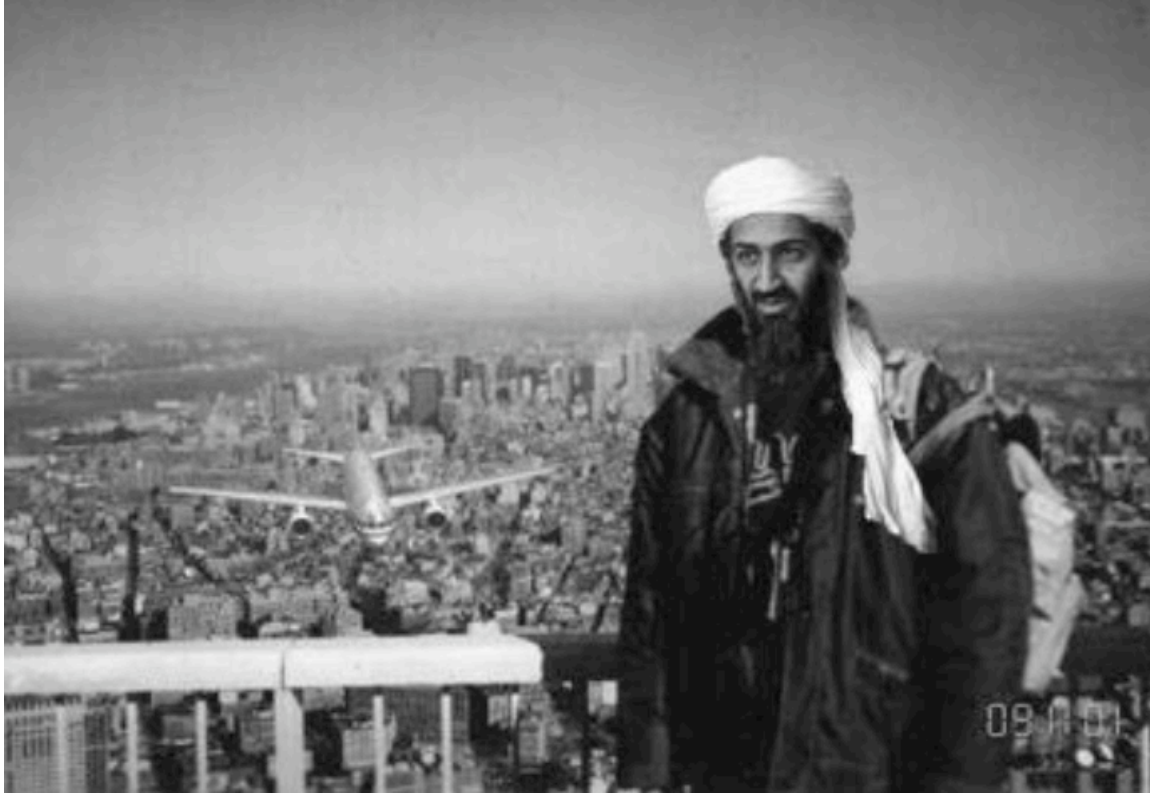
Figure 5.9: Bin Laden as Tourist Guy (Frank 2004).

Figure 5.10: Tourist Guy, unaware of the destruction the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man from *Ghostbusters* will cause as it heads towards his direction.

Figure 5.11: Titled 'strange', from *Tourist of Death*. Original author unknown.

Figure 5.12: Osama bin Laden's hideout on Google Maps.

Figure 5.13: A *FOX News* gaffe that was widely circulated across online social networking platforms and social bookmarking websites, including Facebook, Twitter, *Digg*, and *Reddit*.

OsamaInHell Osama bin Laden
Listening to orientation speech. Bedrooms are called "sleeper cells" here. #irony
2 May

OsamaInHell Osama bin Laden
Who's in hell now? RT @NewYorkObserver: And the vuvuzelas have come out! http://yfrog.com/h6ipbpsj
2 May

OsamaInHell Osama bin Laden
And still no one has come to collect my bags.
2 May

OsamaInHell Osama bin Laden
Oh good - turns out James Franco is teaching a class here next month.
2 May

OsamaInHell Osama bin Laden
First haunting? Russell Brand. He knows why.
2 May

OsamaInHell Osama bin Laden
Now really, which one of us belongs down here? RT @lindsaylohan: Go USA!
2 May

OsamaInHell Osama bin Laden
Barack's running through my greatest hits. I'm like the Mariah Carey of terrorism.
2 May

OsamaInHell Osama bin Laden
Take that back - worst part is CNN on every TV. Wolf makes me wish I was dead. Again.
2 May

OsamaInHell Osama bin Laden
Watching yourself on TV is soooo weird.
2 May

OsamaInHell Osama bin Laden
Worst part? I'll never star in a video again. I loved doing those. Tear.
2 May

OsamaInHell Osama bin Laden
Wait, what?
2 May

Figure 5.14: @OsamainHell's early Tweets.
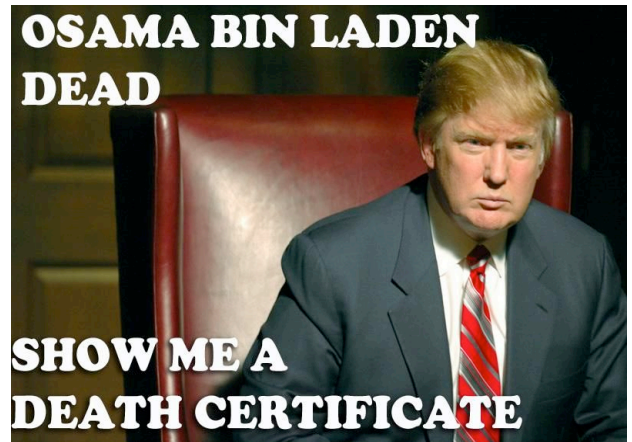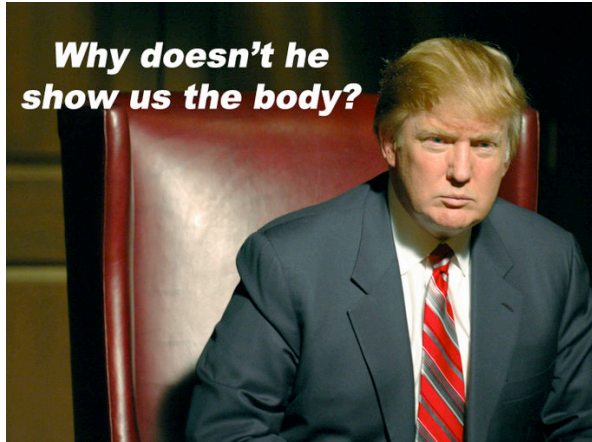
Figure 5.15 (Top-Left), Figure 5.16 (Top-Right), Figure 5.17 (Bottom-Left), and Figure 5.18 (Bottom-Right): Image macros featuring Donald Trump found on various blogs, Tumblr, and discussion forum. They were also widely spread throughout social networking platforms. Original sources unknown.

Figure 5.19 (Left): Darrell Hammond as Donald Trump on *Saturday Night Live*.

Figure 5.20: President Obama 'photobombs' George W. Bush's 'Mission Accomplished' event.

Figure 5.21 (Left): Obama 'trolls' Bush, a spin-off of the popular 'rageface' meme.
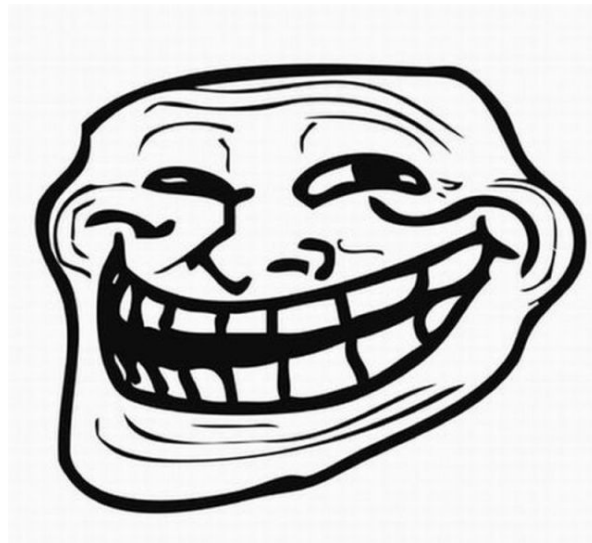
Figure 5.22 (Right): The 'U MAD, BRO?' rageface, which is widely-used across online discussion boards.

Figure 5.23: One of the most highly circulated image macros as the news broke.

Figure 5.24: Another widely circulated image, which also references Donald Trump's demand.

Figure 5.25: A play on hip hop lyrics, which associates President Obama with urban pop culture.

Figure 5.26: Obama 'swaggers' off after his national address.

Figure 5.27: An animated .gif sequence of Obama's national address.

Figure 5.28 (Top): Obama 'trolls' his opponents.
Figure 5.29 (Bottom): The Yao Ming 'trollface', which is like other 'rage/trollfaces', widely used on many online forums.
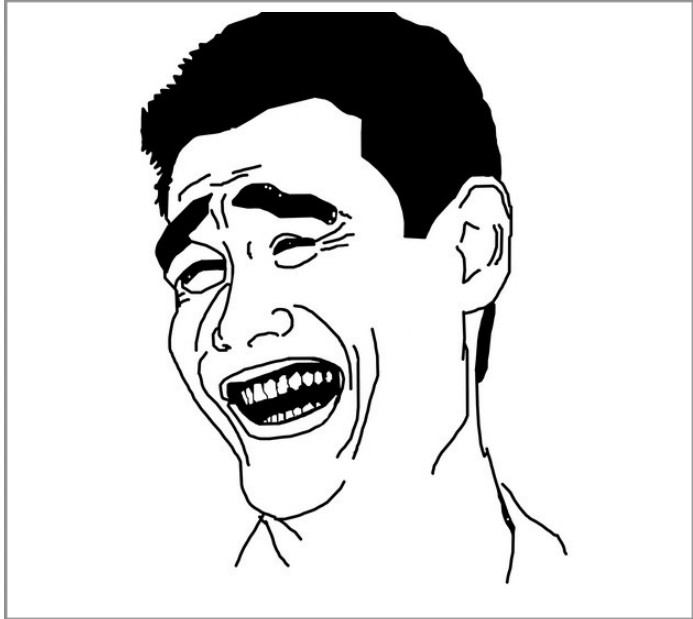
Figure 5.30: 3-Pane comic illustrating Obama's response to a bin Laden joke at the White House Correspondent's Dinner. This may have originated on *Reddit*, though there is no real indication of who the original author may be.

Figure 5.31: A derivative of the David Caruso meme.

Figure 5.32: A basic template for the original *CSI* 4-Pane meme, with an example containing captions on the right.

Figure 5.33 (Top) and Figure 5.34 (Bottom): 'Advice Animal'-style memes featuring Obama.
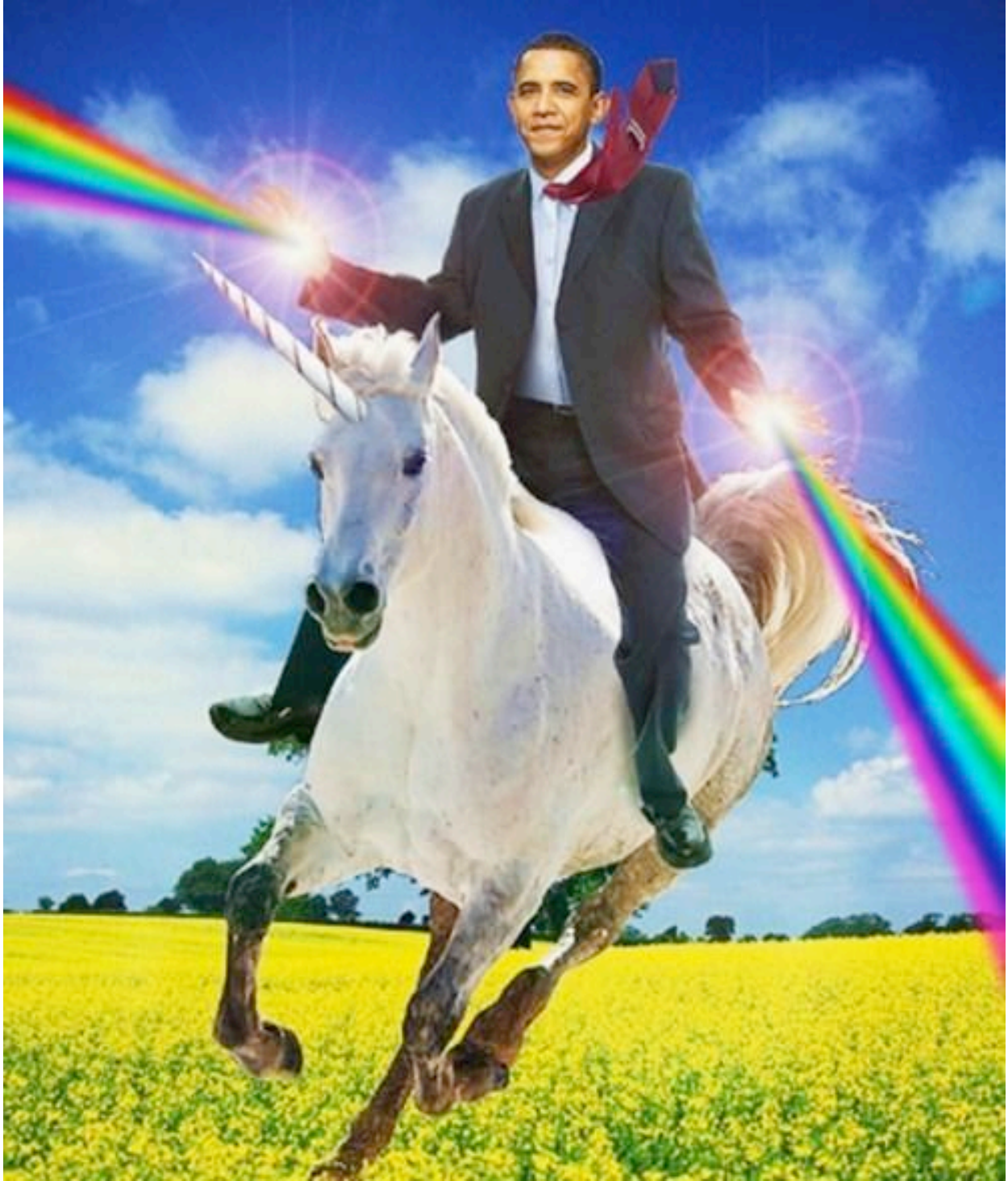
Figure 5.35: Obama on a unicorn, with rainbows shooting out of his palms.

Figure 5.36: Bin Laden in political history.
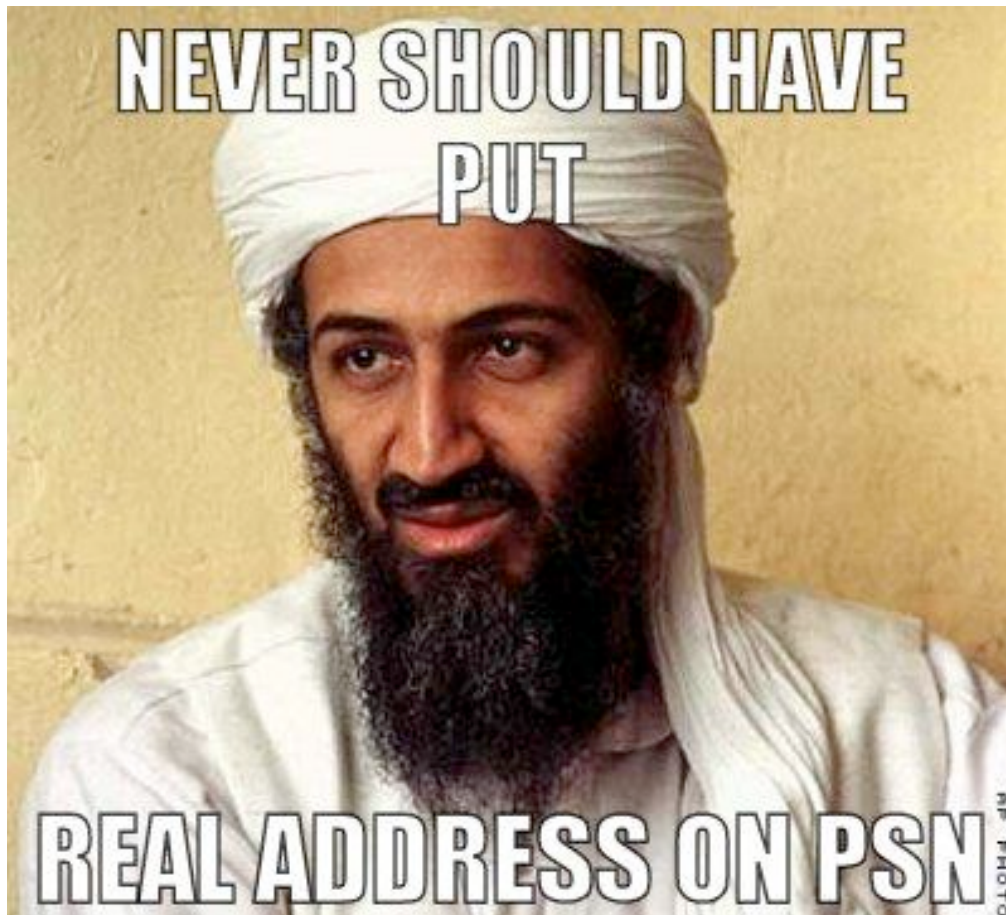
Figure 5.37: A popular culture reference communicating the simplicity behind how bin Laden was found.
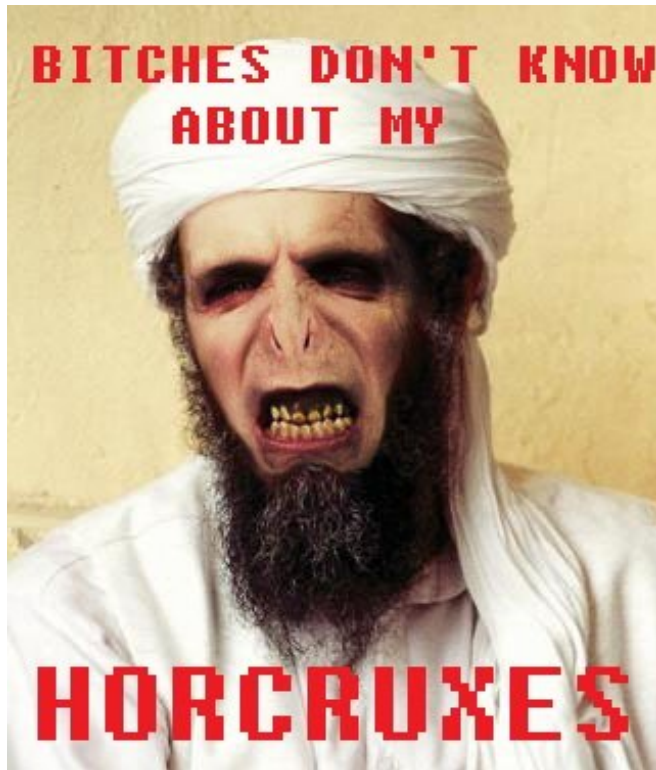
Figure 5.38 (Left): Osama bin Laden is casted as Voldemort.
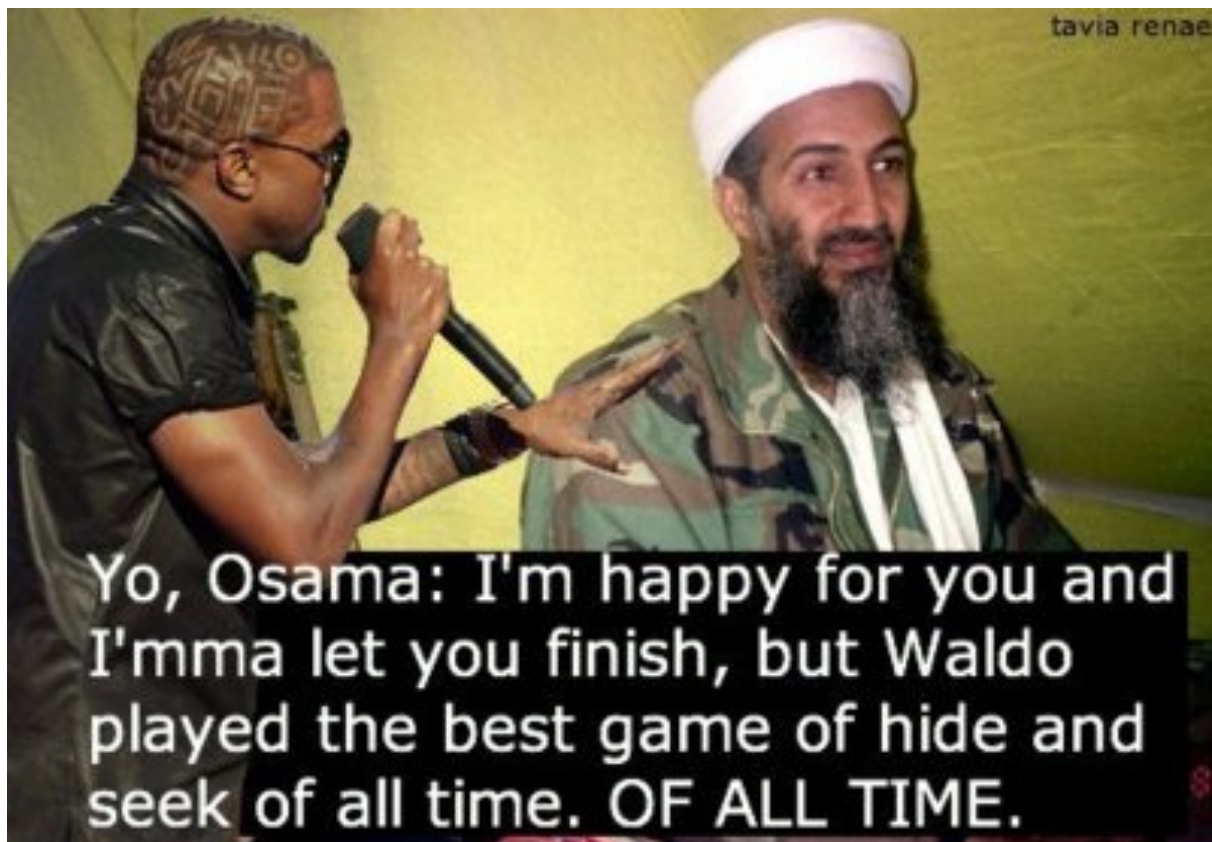
Figure 5.39: bin Laden gets heckled by Kanye West.

Figure 5.40: A version of *The Social Network* meme.

Figure 5.41 (Left): Similar to the hostile treatment of bin Laden in some post-9/11 texts.
Figure 5.42 (Right): Zombie bin Laden.

Figure 5.43 (Left): A succinct summary of bin Laden's presence in online citizen discourse.

Figure 5.44: The original 'Situation Room' photograph taken by Pete Souza–
"Seated, from left, are: Brigadier General Marshall B. "Brad" Webb, Assistant Commanding
General, Joint Special Operations Command; Deputy National Security Advisor Denis
McDonough; Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton; and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.
Standing, from left, are: Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; National
Security Advisor Tom Donilon; Chief of Staff Bill Daley; Tony Blinken, National Security Advisor
to the Vice President; Audrey Tomason Director for Counterterrorism; John Brennan, Assistant
to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism; and Director of National
Intelligence James Clapper" (Souza 2011).

Figure 5.45 (Left):
Jersey Shore's 'The
Situation', in The
Situation Room.

Figure 5.46: Everyone wears Princess Beatrice's hat from the 2011 Royal Wedding.

Figure 5.47: Superheroes from *Marvel* and *DC* comics work together in The Situation Room.

Figure 5.48 (Top), and Figure 5.49 (Bottom): Popular culture takes over The Situation Room.

Figure 5.50: Osama bin Laden watching himself on his television set, as seen in a video found in his compound.
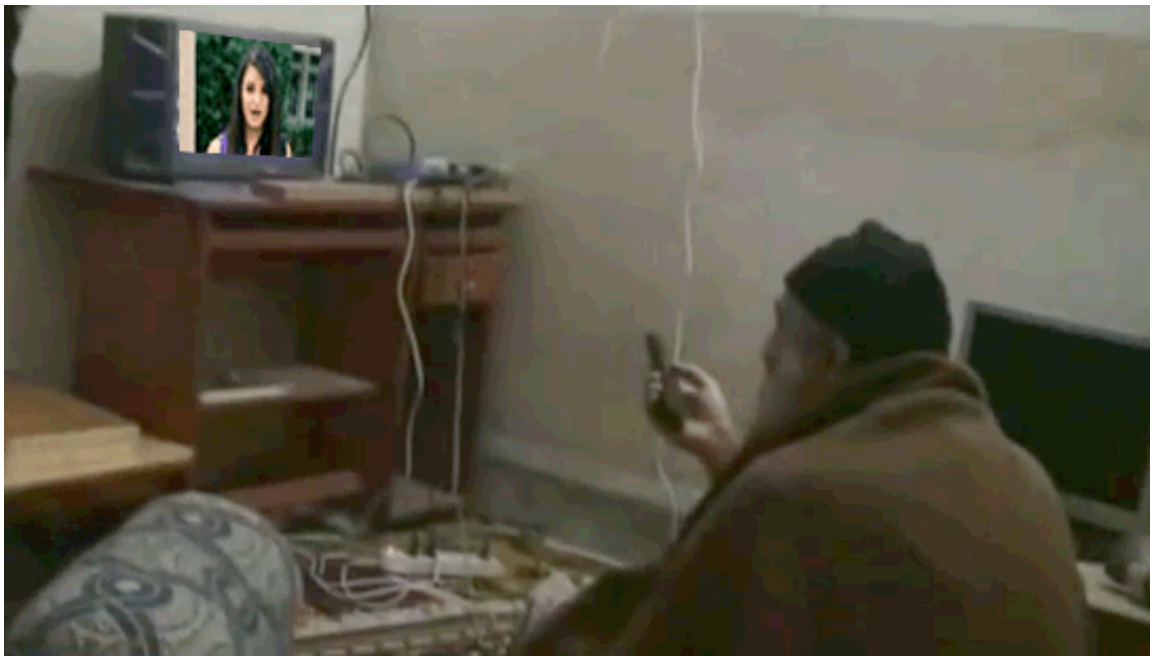
Figure 5.51: A widely circulated example of this meme, showing Osama bin Laden watching Rebecca Black's *Friday* video.

Figure 5.52 (Left) and Figure 5.53 (Right): Image macros depicting bin Laden watches Tom Cruise on *Oprah*, and *Dancing with the Stars*.
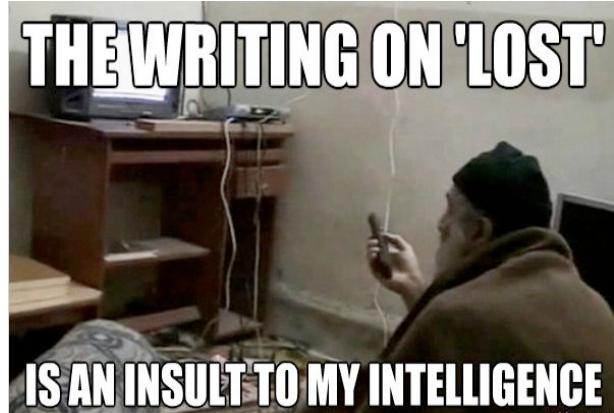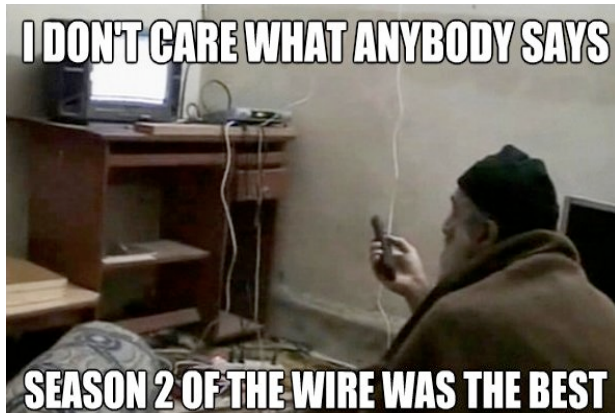
Figure 5.54 (Top-Left): Osama bin Laden enjoys *The Wire*.
Figure 5.55 (Top-Right): Unimpressed with *Lost*.
Figure 5.56 (Bottom-Left): Bin Laden infatuated with *CNN* anchor/journalist, Anderson Cooper.
Figure 5.57 (Bottom-Right): Bin Laden comments on *FOX News*' tagline.

Chapter 6
Conclusion

This thesis shows that ordinary individuals can engage with and respond to politics by participating in the creation and circulation of humorous online memes. It also confirms the importance of popular culture and humor as universal languages that allow meme creators to reveal various opinions and criticisms of particular political figures. Furthermore, it shows that affinity spaces can actively encourage individuals to create and disseminate texts, regardless of their technical capabilities. This thesis also considers the active participation in meme creation as an instance of a new literacy practice in political engagement.

The analysis in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 reveal that popular culture is particularly important to citizens as a 'common language', as shown with the example of *Star Wars* in Chapter 1. The familiar myths and references contained in popular culture texts allow meanings to be communicated quickly and effectively. As explored throughout the case studies and in various literature in Chapter 2.2, popular culture can link the 'official' culture of politics back to the personal interests and everyday lives of citizens. Additionally, according to Jenkins (2006), popular culture is valuable to participation, for "the stakes are so low"– because of its detachment from 'official' culture, it does not matter how 'polished' a particular text is, for it is the process of creating itself that matters (246). This is explicit in play theory, which emphasizes the importance of process, and giving oneself permission to participate. Passion too, is a large part of this, and "playing with popular culture is a lot more fun than playing with more serious matters" (Ibid). Politics can be approached not as an obligation, but with passion, during leisure time– they are open texts to be played with.

Popular culture and humor are important to online participatory culture, and especially for politics, for they demand audiences to be active. The memes in this thesis urge users to be competent in both popular culture and political knowledge to 'solve the puzzle' in order to understand or 'complete the joke' (Lloyd and Jewell 2009:66). The creator therefore needs to be actively connecting references from both cultures. Furthermore, active participation is also explored in Chapters 4 and 5, where fandom can be compared to the reception of some political figures. Fandom in turn, demands active play, and an inclusive sense of participation. As Jenkins (2006) claims, "fans envision a world where all of us can participate in the creation and circulation of central cultural myths" (257). Politics, when approached actively in modes similar

to popular culture activities such as fandom, can become more fun and inclusive through its connection to people's everyday lives. As seen throughout the case studies in this thesis and in mainstream entertaining political media, politics and popular culture should not be viewed as two separate realms. Instead, the two cultures are 'remixed' into a more complex form, where participants can actively negotiate and derive their own meanings from 'open' political texts through play.

Approaching politics in a playful manner is important, for it fosters environments where individuals can actively disrupt political power. This is evident in some examples analyzed throughout this thesis, where the recreated texts allow the cultural, rather than political elements to literally take over the frames, obscuring the original context. This results in a carnivalesque approach to the political world, undermining the control real life authorities have over their own image. While candid photographs and political gaffes can subvert purposefully polished 'performances', still image memes can further challenge particular political portrayals through play. By recreating and remixing candid photographs with popular culture such as in the case of Zombie McCain, new images, sometimes demonstrating critical commentary, can be generated. Humorous memes, as illustrated throughout this thesis, can therefore actively challenge highly-controlled political images through 'serious play' (Jones 2010:199).

The function of affinity spaces is also vital to the propagation of political humor memes on the Internet. As explored through *Pundit Kitchen* and *FARK* in Chapter 3, affinity spaces allow users to engage with politics by providing their own commentary by creating image macros, and sharing their opinions in comment threads within particular knowledge communities. They also share particular behavioral traits and vernaculars that represent ways of communicating particular to online culture. This is also evident in the way memes can be utilized as a linguistic shorthand. The still image memes analyzed in this thesis can communicate multiple meanings within a single frame because the codes and conventions, and associated references, are easily decipherable by individuals who belong to similar knowledge communities. Affinity spaces, analyzed in both Chapters 3 and 4, are also important because they actively encourage users to participate in political culture via play, regardless of technical skill. These spaces are not always specifically dedicated to politics, which reveal that blending politics and popular culture can be beneficial, for it encourages people to engage and play with politics.

Furthermore, the texts analyzed in this thesis are political versions of humorous memes, which are a widely-recognized online phenomena. *Pundit Kitchen* in particular, hosts images that are essentially LOLcats applied to politics, which immediately justifies its potential reach to a wide

audience. The primary focus on humor in the spaces discussed in this thesis also reveals their importance in wider citizen discourse. Rather than straightforwardly exposing 'serious' political opinions that may sound "preachy", the memes represent a middle ground where legitimate opinions can be communicated lightheartedly and 'safely' through humor (Heflin 2006:29). The spaces are also distinctive, for they characterize the purposeful actions of a sharing community. Memes are intentionally crafted and shared for the benefit of communities, therefore exemplifying the argument posed by Clay Shirky (2010) that participants are motivated by "a sense of connectedness", rather than economic benefits. The relationships people have with the culture of open participation and creation can therefore be valuable to political culture, for they represent modes of engagements that are driven by genuine passion and personal interests.

Online memes, including political humor memes, are often products of active play. Memes rely on active participation– their longevity is unpredictable, and their replicability depends highly on the audience's ability to continuously recontextualize viral ideas. The quantity of texts in each case study in the previous chapters reveal that constant, active play with compelling viral texts is essential to a meme's survival. A meme will be more likely to survive if more users participate in creating their own interpretations of a particular event or political figure. The sheer immediacy of humorous responses to the death of bin Laden, as reflected in Chapter 5, reflects a need from ordinary citizens to participate in a historical event, and the humorous responses seemingly appeared instinctively. The fact that the responses were also circulated across the Web without being prompted on particular affinity spaces shows an active, immediate treatment of news events as open texts.

This thesis also observes the creation of memes as "a new literacy practice", particularly in regards to politics (Knobel and Lankshear 2007:203). This can be adopted for future studies, and is especially relevant because of the way that humorous memes are increasingly becoming a prominent mode of citizen responses to news and political events. The rising popularity of image-driven spaces such as Tumblr [187] is fundamental to the creation and spread of political humor memes, especially in the still image format. Humorous memes are an increasingly dominant form of visual culture online, and their relevance should not be ignored. Their rising popularity shows that there is value in studying online practices such as humor creation, for they reveal that people are politically active, and may find politics more meaningful by engaging with it through initially 'frivolous' means.

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[187] Tumblr has become so significant to politics that even current President Barack Obama has started his own blog in late October 2011, mostly for campaigning purposes (which is similar to his use of Twitter and Facebook in the previous election).

The ever-expanding cultural spread of memes however, pose as a difficulty for this type of research– the constant addition of new memes, and disappearance of others, is difficult to keep track of. People have responded to minor situational themes, such as the opinions of Presidential candidates,[188] and also major events such as political movements,[189] and the deaths of political figures[190] in meme form. Responses in the form of humorous memes will constantly emerge, especially during crucial times such as Presidential campaigns, which is current at the time of writing. The 2012 Republican Primaries, for example, already revealed the prominence of political humor, both in the mainstream media,[191] and in online spaces.[192] This shows that humor can remain as important to discovering, critiquing, and coping with political life. The increasing variety and quantity of online responses reveal that ordinary people do actively engage with politics, and meme creation will become increasingly important as a literacy tool to communicate.

While the previous three chapters discussed the different ways users interact and memes develop, the elements of popular culture, humor, digitality, and play are closely connected. They are equally important in illustrating the way political humor memes function as a response by ordinary individuals to news and politics. This thesis has shown a level of engagement that is legitimate, and increasingly vital to political culture. Jones (2005) argues,

> For better or worse, the most common and frequent form of political activity– its actual practice– comes, for most people, through their choosing, attending to, processing, and engaging a myriad of media texts about the formal political process of government and political institutions as they conduct their daily routines (17).

As discussed throughout this thesis, ordinary citizens are active participants in political culture. While engaging with politics through humor and popular culture results in idiosyncratic texts

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[188] For example, 'Rick Perry's Unpopular Opinions', as discussed in Chapter 1. Statistics from the *Tumblr Staff Blog* (2012) later revealed that the parody blog's viral power was "impressive", and Rick Perry "easily became the most blogged candidate [on Tumblr] overnight".

[189] The Occupy Wall Street movement for example, has prompted a photomanipulation meme of a California police officer "offhandedly pepper spraying" a group of protestors at a university (*Know Your Meme* 2012). Another more recent example are the various humorous memes that appeared as responses to the online protests against SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act) in early January 2012.

[190] The death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il on December 17, 2011, sparked multiple parodies of the political figure on Tumblr, including *Kim Jong Il Dropping the Bass*, an entire blog devoted to photomanipulated photographs of Kim Jong-il as a disc jockey.

[191] Multiple parodies on *Saturday Night Live*, monologues from late night television hosts, fake news programs, and more recently, Stephen Colbert's decision to run for President for the second time since 2008.

[192] Several photomanipulations have appeared in response to Republican debates, candidate policies, and the political image of GOP candidates. Affinity spaces such as *Buzzfeed* in particular, are increasingly catering towards including politics as a main category in their pop culture-driven sites. *Buzzfeed* introduced a politics category on their website in early January 2012, with "original political reporting", with a current focus on the 2012 Presidential election (*Buzzfeed* 2012).

that appear 'silly', this thesis argues that through these texts individuals are in fact, actively participating in meaning-making and communicating political opinions in modes that are simple, relatable to, understandable, and almost effortless to them. Responses in the form of political humor memes are often constructed through 'serious play', and this will flourish in the ever-changing online landscape. The increasing popularity of this mode of communication can potentially create an online environment enabled by citizen discourse that will continuously seek to actively undermine political power through humorous means. Also, the constant emergence of new digital technologies will continue to encourage present and future users to embrace and enjoy engaging with media texts.

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