

Non-Lethal Farce: "Pepper Spray Cop" Photoshopping as Visual Rhetoric

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Abstract

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

Keywords

photoshop; play; social knowledge; vernacular; visual rhetoric

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In the late afternoon of November 18, 2011, a pair of police officers pepper sprayed a group of non-violent protesters occupying the University of California, Davis campus. The official story was that the protesters had encircled the officers, who, unable to get out and fearing for their safety, resorted to pepper spray as crowd control. However, bystander photographs of the event told a much different story.

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

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

These digitally altered images, or "photoshops," quickly became a popular internet meme. The dozens of variants that were created and circulated during the following week spawned hundreds of comments on sites such as Reddit, 4Chan, and SomethingAwful. Microblog Tumblr cataloged over 130 image variants with tags such as "Casually Pepper Spray Everything" and "Pepper Spraying Cop."

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

In order to address these questions, it is necessary to understand the communicative practice that is at the heart of this memetic phenomenon: “photoshopping,” the sharing of digitally altered images or “photoshops.” To examine the potential of photoshopping as a visual form of civic discourse, we can consider it from the perspective of rhetorical theory. As Robert Asen notes, citizenship is a mode of public engagement that extends beyond the voting booth and into everyday life. According to Asen, the civic potential of discourse “arises in important respects from its capacity to refashion social norms and beliefs and to recast nonpolitical activities as political” (2004: 207). These discourse practices “present potentially accessible and powerful everyday enactments of citizenship” and include not only verbal communication but also “other modes of symbolic expression” (2004: 207). Expanding on Asen's work, this article argues that photoshopping is an everyday enactment of citizenship that demonstrates a form of visual discourse. When viewed in this way, Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping suggests some of the possibilities for vernacular expression now afforded by networked communication. Enabled by networked communication and combined with easy reproduction, customization, and circulation, photoshopping represents a vernacular route to civic engagement via increasingly accessible visual media. As a powerful new location for personal expression, scholars of visual culture must seek to understand photoshopping as a vernacular enactment of political expression, civic engagement, and visual rhetoric.

Since photoshopping has a necessarily visual component, I will first consider digitally altered images in light of recent theories of visual rhetoric. From this perspective, these images are understood as contextual in the sense that they work by rhetorically playing on the shared expectations and social knowledge of a community. Since images are contextually situated, the next section considers recent scholarship on photoshops and explores how they become meaningful through a process of social interaction. This interaction recognizes the “alteredness” of these images, the ways in which they diverge from reality and suggest perceived incongruities. This social process of recognizing alteredness emphasizes understanding these communicative events not as discrete images (photoshops) but instead as a set of discursive practices (photoshopping). As an ongoing, iterative process, photoshopping's meanings become emergent from the continuous interaction between image and discourse across networked groups. With this reconfigured understanding, I return to the case of the Pepper Spray Cop meme to demonstrate how photoshopping can constitute an everyday route toward communal engagement and visual argument.

Ultimately, I argue that since new media technologies are becoming progressively integrated into everyday life, scholars must endeavor to better understand the innovative ways in which individuals perform political, personal, and group identity on the Web. By creating, sharing, and discussing politically engaged photoshops, individuals perform a novel category of discursive action that merits such attention from scholars of visual media, digital culture, and civic discourse. Therefore, recognizing the potential for internet memes—such as Pepper Spray Cop photoshopping—to function as everyday visual rhetoric is imperative because it allows for a better understanding of an emergent mode of public engagement in the digital age.

References

Asen, Robert. (2004). “A Discourse Theory of Citizenship.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90(2), 189–211.