INTERNET MEMES AS CATALYSTS FOR POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Internet memes have become a significant part of today's culture, often combining humour and satire to criticize political, social, or cultural issues. In the context of China, where the government heavily censors online content, memes have emerged as a tool for citizens to engage in criticism and activism while avoiding government surveillance. This paper aims to understand how internet users in China engage in political criticism and activism through memes in the face of strict government censorship. The study is based on existing literature, online sources, and examples of specific memes related to Chinaand found that internet memes, such as the "Grass Mud Horse" and memes related to activist figures like Ai Weiwei and Chen Guangcheng, have been used as tools for political criticism and activism in China. Memes have enabled Chinese citizens to express dissent, evade censorship, and engage in political discourse in creative and impactful ways.

Keywords: activism, authoritarian, censorship, China, meme.

Information and communication technologies have changed the way individuals connect and interact with each other. New modes and mediums are adopted to express thoughts and opinions, and it is done not only through textual writings but also through other audio-visual content. One such popular tool for digital communication is memes which have gained a significant position in new media platforms. Davison (2012, p.122) definesan internet meme as 'a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission'.It is a combination of text and/or images that can be expressed in various formats. (Börzei, 2013) memes can attract individual attention with humorous phrases and funny pictures and have become a significant part of today's culture as a powerful and 'self-expressive medium' (Raj A, 2021, p. 30). Kulkarni (2017, p.14) states that humour and satire are the main part of a meme and humour has been used to criticize oppression since the rise of media and dates back to the time of anti-Nazi comics.Althoughmemes are often regarded as jokes or ineffectual content they are created about some event or issue that has an intense meaning(Gal, 2018). It is used as a tool to criticize and comment on the exploitations and repressions in society.

Memes have become an important part of the political discourse as they can attract both active and passive participants to take part in political discussions on new media platforms(Raj A, 2021).Shifman (2014, p. 122-123) in the book, 'Memes in Digital Culture' highlighted three functions of memes in politics, political advocacy, grassroots action and mode of public expression.It is often assumed that memes are used with a humorous motive but they include social, political or cultural issues and are mostly, directed at a government or organization when used for critical purposes. According to Wiggins (2019, p.59), memes offer a way to discuss how politics function when discussions and criticism are viewed as "unfavourable" by the ruling party or administration. Such cases can be mentioned from countries like China, and Russia.

In 2018 the Communist Party of China announced that it wanted to remove the presidential term limits of President Xi Jinping which resulted in the circulation of Winnie the Pooh memes on social media that compared the cartoon character with Jinping as a symbol of criticism (Clark, 2018). This led to banned

of the Hollywood movie, Christopher Robin which featured Winnie the Pooh and also led to the arrest of numerous social media users, such as a student who tweeted about Winnie the Pooh'scharacter resemblance with President Xi Jinping while studying in the United States. The student was jailed for six months upon his arrival in China (Radio Free Asia, 2020).

In Russia, a woman was charged with extremism and placed under arrest in 2018 after she posted memes with religious themes. Another user was charged with extremism due to memes ridiculing priests and the Russian Orthodox Church's Patriarch Kirill. A human rights expert committee reports that approximately 5,000 people have been detained for disseminating "extremist" content online (Germ, 2018).

A global human rights organization called Agora reports that 411 criminal cases against internet users were filed in Russia in 2017. Because the official definition of "extremism" is so broad police can add almost anything within its ambit(BBC, 2018). It led to several other memes that questioned the Russian authorities.An image from the Japanese anime TV show "The Brave Fighter of Sun Fighbird" shows a humanoid character asking, "Is this a pigeon?" in a scene where the character misidentifies a butterfly as one. This scene was modified and a meme was created where the butterfly is represented as a 'meme' and the man asked, 'Is this a criminal charge?'

Memes are also used as a weapon against the opponents of the political parties. In recent years, it has been observed that after any political issue, event or debate memes are circulated to target the opponents mostly during elections. Ross and Rivers (2017) in their study of the 2016 US Presidential campaign involving Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton found that meme producers disseminated their creations not only in an attempt to influence others but also to delegitimize the opponent to gain political advantage. They conclude from their study that intoday's digital environment, anyone with a rudimentary understanding of the technologies needed for online involvement can voice their opinions on any topic that they were previously unable to.

They are useful tools for educating people about current events and societal challenges. Memes are an effective instrument for activists in social movements as it allows the activists to target opponents in ways that evade official surveillance. It is preferable to verbal and written criticism due to its ability to transcend the control of the state. In the era of Web 2.0, memes act as a vital tool for activism in the online space. According to the '2014 Cone Communications Digital Activism Study' conducted in the United States, getting the opportunity to like or follow someone online beforehand made nearly 64 percent of Americans more likely to take the initiative in areas that were important to them and there is also a positive response to the question, 'Are memes an effective form of media activism?'.

Memes are thus an effective way to make humorous and parodic comments about politics and humour is frequently a useful tool for criticising the mistakes and hypocrisies of those in positions of authority. However, not all nations welcome political humour and some take it very seriously that may result in severe repercussions such as the example of Winnie the Pooh meme in China, the arrest of activists that create and disseminate digital humour in Azerbaijan, the ban on the use of high-profile figures in memes in Russia (Rothrock, 2015).But despite the restrictions, online users manage to use a variety of strategies to get their voices heard. This paper intends to analyse the use of memes as a tool of criticism and activism against the authorities in the context of the People's Republic of China.

PublicParticipation and Meme

Political humour is an important part of a society's political discourse as it can attract the public to take part in everyday politics (Peifer, 2012; Baum, 2003).The technological development along with a plethora of social networking sites has resulted in the creation and dissemination of content easily and quickly. Political humour can be strong and significant especially for activists for a variety of reasons such as a tool for recruitment by attracting attention and can also help in building solidarity. Memes as humorous contentcan result in challenges to the state authorities. Ferrari (2018) argued that in nations with low levels of political participation, memes could be one of the many informal modes available for the

common people to get involved in politics. Chovanec (2023, p.310) mentioned two types of 'humorous participation'–Active participation involves more participatory engagement such as memes. Although the creators of the memes do not ask for any reaction from the public it may result in some form of positive response such as a like, upvote comment or sharing of other similar humorous content and this may result in some form of interaction, not necessarily political (Chovanec, 2023, p. 311).While in passive participation, the public is only a receiver of humorous content and does not interact but their appreciation such as laughter at the criticisms through humour makes it valid and plausible.

Regardingthe effects of humorous shows on public participation in politics, Cao and Brewer (2008, p.91) opined that humorous content such as political comedy shows can have a positive impact on political involvement as it can promote building an 'imagined community' (p. 91) and also facilitate in 'attending a campaign event and joining an organization' (Cao and Brewer, 2008, p. 96).The nature of memes to spread rapidly helps online users especially activists to utilise it as a tool for spreading awareness on any societal issue. It results in users interacting with others or enquiring about the details of the ongoing issues that they otherwise may not consider useful. The exposure to memes may also result in immediate reaction by the users. Memes, therefore, can be regarded as an informal source of information to others on societal issues memes related to any protest can inform the online users about that matter and can result in mobilization and engagement. Moreno-Almeida (2021) states that the functions of the online meme pages can be called 'nonmovements' (Bayat, 2010, p. 14) i.e., 'collective actions of non-collective actors.'

The use of social media to resist can be regarded as a first step into activism for people living in authoritarian regimes. The growth of online creative dissent contributes to the strengthening of the resistance movement by increasing public awareness and adds to the hegemonic discourse with additional information and analysis that may be excluded from the state-controlled media (Denisova, 2016, p.83). Memes are used as a tool 'to shape meaningful ideas in an entertaining format'. The online users utilize the memes as "mind bombs"[i] to escape state surveillance and censorship, oppose propaganda and expose the

malpractices of the authorities. However,infrastructural changes like algorithm modifications, restrictions on internet service providers, and the implementation of tracking and surveillance systems can all reduce the potency of memes and the internet as a whole as a tool for activists to gain social influence (Mina, 2019). But the online users find other techniques to escape from the control and supervision of the authorities.

In contemporary China, new media has grown to be a significant and revolutionary force. China's legal system, politics, foreign policy and civil society have all changed as a result of new media. Cyberspace has almost completely taken over every aspect of public life. The growth of civil society and citizen engagement through the Internet has been one of the key components of China's information revolution. The internet helped a nascent civil society through improved civic organization, public debate and communication, while civil society provided the necessary social foundation. However, in response to the emergence of online protests, state authorities implemented internet censorship measures.In the last decade, the online public participation spaces for citizen activism have grown in many ways but they have also narrowed in other ways. While the state found methods to suppress internet users, activists also discovered techniques to demonstrate their discontent by dodging state monitoring.

The following section discusses how Chinese internet users have used memes to criticize and act politically while avoiding government surveillance.

Memeand Citizen Engagementin China

Chinese authorities maintain people's ignorance and ensure that they only hear one point of view—often from state media—by suppressing public expression. China's Golden Shield Project, also called as 'Great Firewall of China' was created to protect the public from the influence of false information originating from sources outside of China by filtering and censoring it.It gave the government enormous discretion in blocking certain types of content from the internet while allowing other types of content to be accessed. The users got habituated to the situation that certain sites being inaccessible or content being removed that was deemed inappropriate like the most widely used social media

websites and apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, X (formerly called Twitter)are blocked in the country. The Chinese government aims to enable the Internet to flourish for business and entertainment while restricting its use for political organising or expression. It does this by ensuring legislative and technical control over all servers situated within its borders and by closely monitoring the data pipelines that allow information to enter and exit the nation.Every Chinese social media platform uses a keyword-search algorithm of some kind to filter terms the government considers sensitive. Moreover, prominent platforms such as Sina Weibo are said to employ thousands of human censors who monitor all content and fill in the gaps left by the algorithms (Mina, 2019, p. 44). Furthermore, the government pays individuals with expertise and skill to promote pro-government narratives on social media generally referred to as 'Fifty Cents Party' because of the rumours that they receive fifty cents in Chinese money for every comment they make.In the event an individual crosses a certain point, their entire account may be frozen or their messages may be removed. Serious infractions may result in the complete deletion of an account or, in more severe situations, an unpleasant police visit, also referred to as "*hecha*" or drinking tea(Mina, 2014).

The question of how the general public engaged in activism and criticism of the Chinese government emerges in this scenario.

The explanation of the internet meme known as "Grass Mud Horse" helps to make this clear. The Grass Mud Horse is a Chinese Internet meme based on a pun that has been utilised by Internet users in the nation as a political parody of a peaceful society since the beginning of 2009.Internet users in China have created a mythology about Grass Mud Horse known as the '*Cǎonímǎ*' in the Mandarian language which battles the "River Crab" and lives in the Gobi Desert. Mina (2019) states that Mandarin is a tonal language with few phonemes and puns, especially those that alter meaning through tone are quite common. Therefore, *Cǎonímǎ*signifies 'mud grass horse' written in a single set of characters and tones but when written using somewhat different characters (*Càon-mā*) and spoken in a slightly different tone changing its meaning to phrases that disparage women as does the Gobi Desert whenpronounced as '*MǎlèGebì*'.[ii] The River Crab also known as '*Héxiè*' sounds similar to 'harmony' in Mandarin, a reference

to the Communist Party of China's designation of the censored internet as the 'harmonised internet' (Miltner, 2018, p. 417).This was a reaction to their government's drive to remove any pornographic or other content that contained 'vulgar and unhealthy information' (Lagerkvist, 2008, p. 123) that was thought to be detrimental to the youth of the nation from the Internet. In China, campaigns are frequently launched against online pornography; however, the Chinese government uses these campaigns mainly to suppress dissenting political viewpoints.

The unlawful disappearance of Ai Weiwei in 2011 was another instance of memes being used as a tool for activism.He was taken into custody and confined for 81 daysduring a security check at the airport. The term "Ai Weiwei" was banned by the government, and anyone who typed it disappeared because of this, people on the internet tend to use different versions of the term, such as "Ai Weilai" which means "Love the future" and "Tiger Cub Ai" which in Chinese means "Bearded Ai" and refers to Ai Weiwei's facial features. This made it less difficult for users to avoid both human censors and keyword search algorithms (Mina, 2019, p. 09).Additionally, users on the internet are using pictures of sunflower seeds, a hidden connection to his installation at Tate Modern, which consisted of a field of a hundred million porcelain sunflower seeds. Thus, even though the activists are unable to directly use the term "Ai Weiwei" they effectively protest using other forms of expression.

Another instance of meme being used as a tool for protest was the 2006 arrest of blind lawyer and human rights activist Chen Guangcheng, who was already well-known in activist circles.While the internet was still in its infancy when he was imprisoned, Chinese social media platforms such as Sina Weibo and WeChat had already gained popularity in the nation by the time he was released.Any online reference to Chen or words associated with him was blocked by the government. As people encountered outright censorship when they attempted to discuss extremely sensitive subjects in China, therefore they used memes that indirectly contributed to the continuation of stories about him and his public persona and were also able to attract attention from around the world as they told fascinating and even humorous stories in a visually interesting manner.

Online users were invited to participate in an online campaign in October 2011 by Crazy Crab, an anonymous Chinese comic artist, by sending photos of themselves sporting sunglasses for him to upload to a central website. The meme quickly made its way from mainland China to others living abroad and even moved from cyberspace to the streets. Hashtags like #FreeCGC and #CGC brought activists together. They coined expressions such as "yaoguangyaocheng," which translates to "I seek light, I seek truth" and refers to the two characters in Chen's given name (Mina, 2014, p. 365). However, due to its increasing popularity, the hashtag #FreeCGC was also censored. Since Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) and its replicators are widely recognised eateries in China, the activists used stickers that said "Free CGC" and featured a picture of Chen designed to resemble the Colonel from KFC to escape the government censors. As each meme grew and was removed, a new one appeared, suggesting that the creativity and memes surrounding Chen were part of an intentional strategy to avoid the active censorship of his name and likeness. Further, memes and related funny content made the conversation participatory thus allowing anyone to join in and add to the lively exchange of ideas.

Mina (2019) opined that the level of censorship is vast in China and employs thousands of people operating continuously with advanced algorithms and it is rarely beneficial to spread a simple activist message in this setting. The online users thus rather than addressing the difficulties caused by internet censorship directly, utilize memes such as the grass mud horse to show their dissatisfaction with the regime because even a trained human censor cannot easily determine if an image is 'politically subversive' (Mina, 2019, p. 45) or just an ordinary photo of an animal. The clever use of vocabulary along with coded language helps images and puns escape both human and machine censors in China. The main motive behind censorship is to generate a sense of 'fear and uncertainty' (Mina, 2019, p. 46) among the masses so that they refrain from indulging in any anti-regime activity. But memes, with their satirical power help to create the feeling of 'we' by relating one's condition to that of others and breaking 'the silence of self-censorship' (Mina, 2019, p. 46) through participation and engagement.

Meng (2011, p. 40) states in the context of China that the relationship between 'author and reader' or 'storyteller and audience' has been changed and in the digital media, it has resulted in a more flexible and changeable environment. This holds important implications for people who live in an environment where only state-sponsored media can be consumed as they now can challenge the government discourse through internet memes, blogs and other creative social media content (Mina, 2014, p. 370). Thus, the digital space provides a platform for individuals and communities to express on the issues that matter most to them, especially those living under strict control and supervision like in China.

Conclusions

New media platforms create opportunities for civic engagement and collaborative action in an authoritarian regime like China, where offline activism is difficult, dangerous, and strictly regulated. The ability of Chinese citizens to use images and videos to record social issues and expose abuses and violations of power has been strengthened by new technologies. They create and post funny images on the internet as acts of resistance. Even though the memes are removed from the new media platforms quickly, people can repost them as an inexpensive way to express their resistance and show support for a cause. However, this type of activism is often considered clicktivism, but in the case of China, from the mentioned cases of Ai Weiwei and Cheng Guangcheng, it can be well concluded that it is one of the most effective ways for the masses to voice their opinions and show support by evading the regime's surveillance and control.

Notes :

[i] Mind-bomb is defined as using images to raise awareness and alter people's perceptions of reality. It is a strategy adopted by former Greenpeace director, Robert Hunter.

[ii] See Mina, X. A. (2014). Batman, Pandaman and the Blind Man: A Case Study in Social Change Memes and Internet Censorship in China, 13 (3), doi: https://doi.org/10.1177 1470412914546576.

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