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Political Communication, Social Media and Popular Culture: The *Adisucks* Facebook Protest Case Study

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the question of how new (social) media work as tools of political messages' distribution within converged media systems. Using a case study of the *adisucks* Facebook protest organized in Polish social media in March 2011, the author demonstrates how the internet may work as a space of symbolic and participatory engagement in the collaborative creation and dissemination of grassroots political messages. The analysis is framed by a theoretical consideration of recent transformations in political communication patterns caused by changes within the sphere of civic engagement and the transformations of 21-century digital media. The author discusses: narrative or mythical and performative levels of users' contribution to the protest profile and considers possible changes in the status of modern online activism by recalling the concept of "communicative capitalism".

Key words: political communication, citizen engagement, social media, popular culture, social semiotics

Introduction

Theoretical explorations of the changes in political communication in the 21st century emphasize shifts in two areas: 1) the sphere of (post)modern civic engagement and 2) the changing patterns of political messages' circulation enabled by the development of new (increasingly social) media. This perspective helps to describe postmodern politics by focusing on the shifts in political participation towards more informal and more popular culture-oriented activities. Such a shift can be perceived as related to changes in patterns of the circulation of political messages. Because social media quickly gained an important political role, they have become a system of densely connected semi-public communication spheres in which political symbols are being (re)defined.

This paper focuses on the *adisucks* Facebook protest organized in Polish social media in March 2011. Drawing upon the analysis of the collective input to the profile, I demonstrate how the internet (especially social media) may work as a space of symbolic and participatory engagement in the collaborative creation and dissemination of grassroots political messages. I set my theoretical consideration in the context of the recent transformations in political communication patterns: 1) changes within the sphere of civic engagement and 2) the development of new media in the 21st century. In the *Discussion* section I

analyze narrative or mythical and performative levels of users' contribution to the protest profile. I also discuss possible changes in the status of modern online activism by recalling the concept of "communicative capitalism".

Theoretical context

Shifts in citizen engagement

The last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the third millennium are perceived as a time of important shifts in citizen engagement in liberal (often called "late modern") democracies (Giddens, 1991, 2006; Bennett, 2003; Dahlgren, 2001, 2003; Axford, 2001; Beck 1998, 2005). The transformations consist of a broad array of interwoven phenomena including shifts in citizen roles, new modalities of political communication, weakening social and political affinities, increasing choice concerning social (lifestyle) identities, the development of new and increasingly popular sets of citizen actions' repertoires labeled by Ulrich Beck as sub- and (in his latter works; see: 2005) transnational politics.

In these new conditions one can observe an additional status in the very nature of citizenship: the citizen has been more and more often perceived as a political consumer. As Rose (1999, p. 166) points out, citizenship at the close of the 20th century has been primarily realized not by relations with the state within the uniform public sphere, but through active engagement in variety of private, corporate and quasi-public practices like labor or consumption. In other words, the power of individuals who constitute the society shifts from strictly electoral roles to new non-institutional forms of new political culture. The real (*actual* and *actually used*) power of individuals, as Bennett (2003, p. 145) argues, transfers from the electoral roles to the capacity of consumers to discipline the centers of corporate power in the economic realm. Whereas these new citizen engagement modalities are obviously not the *only* sphere of actions by which modern citizens can formulate and accomplish their goals, this market-driven domain of consumer engagement has been important enough to gain analytical attention.

These fresh hybrid forms of political-economic engagement are increasingly based on symbolic and representational activities; the mediated visibility of particular sets of actions increases their performative potential. Symbolic power (understood as the *power of symbols*), the ability to effectively construct and proliferate symbolic representations of particular meaning(s), is one of the most important resources for such "citizen-consumers" and is conducive to growing the status of media (perceived here as technological and social systems of messages' dissemination).

The new media ecosystem

Digital media have been traditionally perceived as an important factor in the process of symbolic empowerment and activation of media audiences. New media modalities, in contrast with traditional mass-media communication, make the act of contributing through symbolic representations in (at least initially) digital communication spaces profoundly easier. Moreover, the 21st-century internet is very different from the late 20th-century web. It is more participatory (hence strongly based on user-generated content) and more oriented toward social networks. These two mutually related features are the most important constituents of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), web applications that play the key role in communication flows in today's digital media. Social media—blogs, collaborative projects (Wikipedia), social network sites (Facebook), content communities (YouTube), and virtual game worlds—create and consist of spheres of different forms of both symbolic and performative representation¹.

Several internet attributes gain importance in an era of increasingly mediated and consumer-oriented politics: multimodality of communication, visualization of social networks, and immense users' horizontal connection and content diffusion (Rheingold, 2002; Shirky, 2008), all of which lead to the formation of a more and more dense media network consisting of mainstream and non-mainstream, traditional and new, media. Such a highly complicated entity is sometimes called “the new media ecosystem” (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004) and has become a technological and symbolic environment for *all* messages published offline and online by both non-professional and established media operators.

General research questions

For the reasons listed above, one cannot miss the questions of new citizen engagement modalities and of the social media impact on the process when analyzing 21st-century political messages' flows. Therefore, the main question here is this: what are the changes of political message flows enabled by the recent development of new media (social media in particular)?

This is a very broad field of transformation, encompassing a wide range of changes in the social practices of all kinds of political actors and media audiences. In this paper I focus on a more detailed aspect of these systemic changes. The question above can be addressed differently: how new (social)

¹ Such performative potential of the internet cannot be, however, mistaken with its potential for becoming a new digital public sphere (in terms of the Habermasian normative point of view)—see Papacharissi 2002.

media work as tools for political messages’ production and distribution within the 21st century media system (Q1)?

To answer it the *adisucks* Facebook protest case study is examined. Drawing upon the findings thereof, I demonstrate how the internet may work as a space of symbolic and participatory engagement in the collaborative creation and dissemination of grassroots political messages (Q2).

The *adisucks* protest case study

In late March 2011 the Adidas company started painting over the wall that surrounds a horse racing track in Warsaw, Poland. The nearly 1.5 km-long wall is covered with graffiti and has been considered a legendary space for Polish graffiti artists. Adidas intended to paint over the graffiti with a huge advertisement. On Friday, the 25th of March, the wall was surrounded with barriers and began to be painted black.

On the same day a grassroots boycott group was set up on Facebook. The *adisucks* profile was created in order to “announce a general boycott of Adidas products” and to make Adidas “know they are doing wrong”². During the following weekend it quickly gained popularity among Facebook users and the attention of the mainstream Polish media. Soon Adidas decided to publish a statement in which it announced a decision to “withdraw the project”.

Table 1. Protest timeline

	25th of March (Friday)	26th of March (Saturday)	27th of March (Sunday)	28th of March (Monday)
The Służewiec Wall	The wall is surrounded with barriers, the graffiti is being painted over with black paint	The wall is still being painted over	Painting is stopped	Adidas company publishes statement of withdrawal from the project
The <i>adisucks</i> profile	evening: the profile is created	morning: 300 likes; 11.30pm: 10.000 likes	2pm: 13.000 likes	12pm: 21.000 likes

² Taken from the boycott profile (*Adisucks*, 2011).

Mainstream media coverage	none	Online publications on several Polish news websites: - citizen journalism website Alert24.pl, - regional mainstream media websites: zyciewarszawy.pl, warszawa.gazeta.pl	The information about the protest is published online on the main page of one of the largest mainstream media websites gazeta.pl (it is repeated a few times with the latest news)	The news about the protest is published on a two-page of <i>Gazeta Wyborcza</i> (second largest Polish daily newspaper)
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Source: author's elaboration (the analysis of media content and screenshots and links posted within *adisucks* profile)

The issue of the *adisucks* protest can be explored through several theoretical approaches. This analysis is set in the context of Facebook usage as a communication space for expressing opinions and reinforcing attitudes towards a particular (political) case. From this point of view the profile works as a tool for organizing a media protest by which political messages are published and distributed in order to accomplish particular goals:

- express objection towards actions of the Adidas company;
- mobilize support and organize advocacy on an informal, grassroots level;
- mobilize mainstream media interest in order to...
- ... “win” the case and force the corporation to stop painting over the wall.

This perspective emphasizes users' social practices within the profile. It also takes under consideration mainstream media interest in the case, but the case study mainly involves users' activity within the *adisucks* profile. The first important variable is the number of people *liking* the *adisucks* profile. When one clicks the *like* button to express that he or she *likes* the *adisucks* profile (or any content published within it) not only does he or she express support for “the cause” but also contributes to the dissemination of information about the protest. This is because one of the most important features of modern social media systems is that the simplest act of evaluating web content (like the act of “liking” something in Facebook) is also the act of distributing the content within a sub-network of particular social medium users: clicking the *like* button makes this act visible on other users' Facebook walls³.

³ The Facebook wall is a part of the user's profile visible to anyone who is permitted by the profile user. The wall works as a space for posting messages, links, and other content. This mechanism raises an interesting methodological problem: the exact rules of such content distribution within the Facebook site are restricted by the Facebook corporation.

The second and most important subject of the study is one kind of users' activity within the profile: the act of publishing images.

I also take into consideration media coverage of the protest, which can be perceived as a partial outcome of the users' activities within the profile. While this provides important background to the research (how does mainstream media framing copy the narratives collectively created within the profile?), it is not the main research focus in the article. While the *adisucks* case study could be examined from the point of view of agenda setting and building and media framing theories, this article will not do so due to volume limitations.

Method

As stressed above, the most important part of this research is the analysis of images posted in the protest profile. There are several reasons to analyze images:

Firstly, I assume they are popular content on the Facebook website and its users are more likely to view one's galleries in full than to read all the posts on one's wall. I base my assumption on one of the general statements of the uses and gratifications theory (Katz & Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973), according to which media users want to minimize the effort and time spent on the medium and maximize the particular outcome they seek (here: information about the issue). Moreover, in this case people could prefer viewing images because the images offered specific gratifications (the pleasure of decoding culture texts and the reinforcement of citizen-consumer identities—as analyzed below).

Secondly, images can be perceived as multimodal communicative acts. User-generated images (created and posted online) can have a very specific form and content that combine various possible readings—in short: they can potentially connote much.

Thirdly, an image (containing graphic and verbal elements) is a natural form of communication for members of the graffiti culture. Graffiti art has a high level of symbolization for those who have specific communicative competencies.

For these reasons, I set the subject of the analysis as all images posted within the *adisucks* profile between 25 and 31 March (I extended the analyzed period until the end of March because I perceive the profile as a communication

Therefore, when analyzing content distribution within the Facebook site, the researcher knows that the range of content distribution is directly proportional to the number of *likes*, but he or she cannot get precise data of the process.

space that reinforces the users' shared identities—from this perspective the profile *worked* also after the Adidas' withdrawal)⁴.

I assume that the best method to analyze the graphic content of the profile are social semiotic tools for image analysis (van Leeuwen, 2005; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Barthes, 1973, 1977). From this perspective the analyzed images are perceived as multimodal communicative acts—multimodal compositions combining verbal or typographical and pictorial elements. Therefore, three key questions of the analysis drawn from the social semiotics theoretical tradition are:

- 1) What people, places and things are represented in the images?
- 2) What kind of connotative or symbolic meanings are associated with these representations?
- 3) What was the role (function) of these images as messages used to distribute information about the boycott?

While the last question is about the performative aspect of images posted online, the first two represent two layers of meanings associated with particular communicative acts: denotation and connotation (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 37-39). Barthes (1977, p. 23) perceives visual denotation as referring to concrete people, places and things, and visual connotation as referring to abstract concepts, culturally shared meanings, or “culturally accepted inducers of ideas”. Simply put, denotation is literal and concrete; connotation is an abstract mixture of concepts.

More than one hundred images were posted on the *adisucks* profile in the period from 25-31 March: 33 images posted by the founder of the profile (the user's name is Adisucks) and 77 images posted by the other 64 users (N=110 of total objects analyzed). The images were divided into three basic categories:

- *screenshots* (21 images) that capture parts of several websites, mainly to evince online content (like the number of people supporting *adisucks* profile, Adidas company statements, and mainstream media coverage of the issue).
- *photographs* (59) functioning in their most basic meaning as visual representations of reality (mostly pictures of the wall).
- *graphic projects* (40)—multimodal acts (some of them combining different visual and textual modalities) with a relatively high level of symbolization (this category includes the protest logo shown in Fig. 1, visual remixes of the Adidas logo, and desktop wallpaper projects).

⁴ In fact, the profile was active in this role to the end of September 2012: it worked as a communication space for people interested in graffiti culture.

As the figures show, several images were put into two categories because some of the graphic projects (like desktop wallpapers) are strongly based on photographs (of graffiti walls). Moreover, a few photographs capture new graphic projects painted on the Służewiec wall (see Fig. 2); their function is to introduce both a particular piece of reality (the re-painted Służewiec wall) and a new graffiti project, so they are assigned to both categories.

Findings and discussion

The narrative or mythical level of users' contribution

The analysis has shown that almost all contributions to the *adisucks* profile utilize visual symbolism to promote the concept of general yet fundamental division on two sides of the conflict. While the denotations of the graphical contribution—understood as the list of people, places and things represented in the images—are easy to recall⁵, connotative and symbolic meanings associated with analyzed representations are wide and multilayered.

The photographs of the Służewiec wall compose the narrative of *winning* the fight with the Adidas company; the Facebook profile worked as communication space to which people contributed to make Adidas stop covering the wall with advertisements.

The narrative contains strong normative evaluations. The pejorative ones are focused around the Adidas company, the obvious villain in the story. The negative connotations can be decoded from the objects graphically connected to Adidas logos and products in the *graphic projects* category: e.g. a toilet, urine, feces, mercenary-looking soldiers, male genitals, a middle finger raised in an offensive gesture, and unattractive women (according to the media-driven aesthetic canon). Even some *screenshots* connote the cynicism and hypocrisy of the Adidas company that seeks to be perceived as supporting street-art culture.

Some of the images posted are graphic remixes of the Adidas logo. They refer to the tradition of culture jamming and subverting, anti-consumerist tactics of subverting meanings imposed by mainstream corporate, media or political institutions in order to, as Lasn (2000, xi) argues in a bombastic yet straightforward manner, “topple existing [symbolic] power structures (...) and change the way in which meaning is produced in the society”. In this tradition the symbolic attack on the Adidas logo reinforces the wider goal of reclaiming the street-art tradition endangered by company’s corporate purposes. The protest

⁵ Most of denotations can be divided into several groups: various representations of the Służewiec wall, particular Adidas products, screenshots denoting information on the protest published online, graffiti works, various remixes of the Adidas company logo, and more complicated digitally altered images. See: *Adisucks*, 2011.

symbol (Fig. 1) is a meaningful example: the Adidas logo is subverted not only by being filled with pieces of graffiti art but also by the horizontal rotation of the brand symbol. This transformation can be seen as degrading for the rotated object (as it is, for example, with horizontally reversed football scarves according to football fan culture).

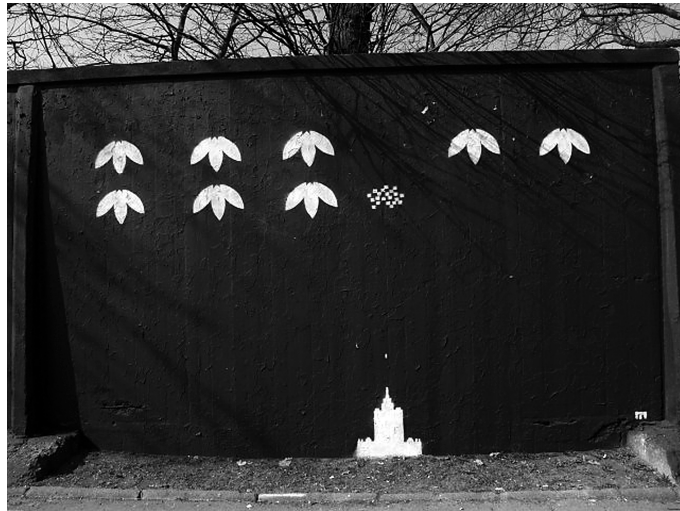
Figure 1. The adisucks protest logo



Source: *Adisucks*, 2011.

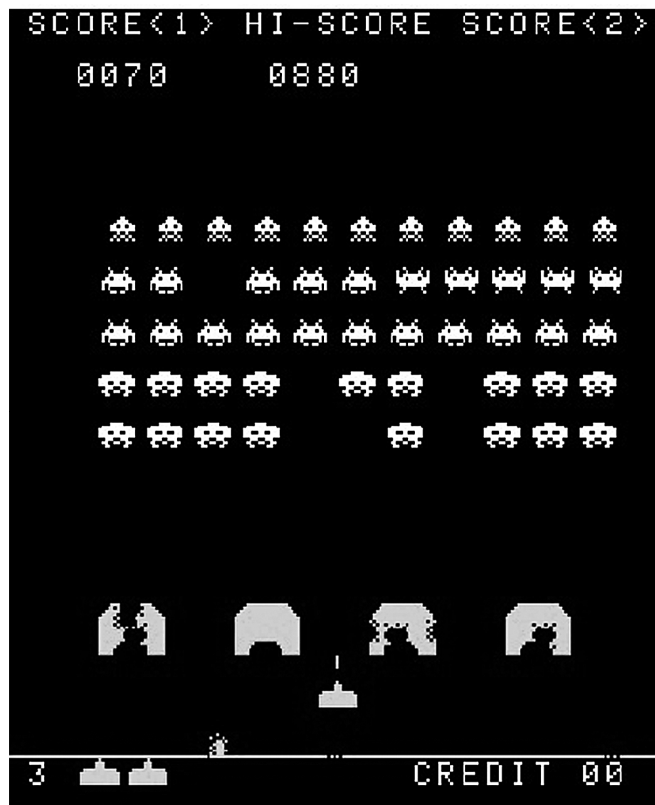
The connotations present in the images are based on symbols from the most fundamental (post) modern symbols' repository: media-driven popular culture—as Barthes (1977, p. 22) states, “there is unwritten dictionary of poses which is known to everyone who is at all exposed to the mass media”. Some of them are more or less obvious poses and objects (a smiling boy urinating on the Adidas logo; an offensive gesture of a middle finger). Some of them, though, are less straightforward, like the image in Figure 2. It shows a segment of the Służewiec wall with the new artwork placed on a segment freshly painted black and is an interesting example of a highly symbolic communicative act deeply rooted in popular culture. The image contains graphical elements referring to Adidas logos and the Palace of Culture and Science (one of the strongest symbols of the city of Warsaw). The overall graffiti composition refers to *Space Invaders*, a classic arcade video game from the late 70s and the 80s. The general aim of the game is to defeat waves of aliens with a laser cannon: the player is shooting the aliens in order not to let them reach the bottom of the screen. When it happens, the alien invasion is successful and the game ends.

Picture 2. Image posted in the profile on 31 of March



Source: Adisucks, 2011.

Picture 3. The screenshot from the original Space Invaders video game



Source: Space Invaders, 2013.

The graphical reference to the video game reinforces the division into two sides of the conflict and the company's logos in place of cohorts of aliens, transforming the Adidas company into the invading aliens: Adidas is trying to invade the city, they are from the outside and they are numerous (countless aliens that keep on and keep on appearing). But Warsaw is fighting back (The Palace at the bottom as the shooting laser canon), therefore the message can be decoded as: *We, the people of the streets of Warsaw, are the good guys; they—*

the people from Adidas—are villains who invade our territory. We are winning and are not going to let Adidas take over our city (because the wall is covered with graffiti again). This metaphor, though, if taken consistently, cannot connote a happy ending: the player cannot *win* (finish) the Space Invaders video game because shooting down all the aliens brings another wave of them, more and more difficult to defeat.

This last interpretation takes the image to a more universal, complex and (therefore) elusive level in which the users' contributions to the *adisucks* profile signify a much broader set of meanings that can be described in terms of myth, understood as a broad and diffuse concept which condenses everything associated with the represented people, places and things into a single entity (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 37-40) and which, according to Barthes (1973, p. 124), is defined by its intention much more than by its literal sense.

From this perspective, the overall online contribution has two separate yet mutually connected functions: the analyzed contribution reveals and simultaneously supports the myth of a great fight between street-art culture and the market-driven profit-oriented corporation. In other words, the *adisucks* imagery adds another story into this mythical narrative, in which harmful corporate activity is stopped by the spontaneous rising of those who express their outrage towards cynical commercial plans.

A broad set of connotations has been used to create this system of coherent meanings and evaluations. Some of the images (barriers surrounding the wall, the car of a private security company) contain negative connotations not only in this issue's particular context but also from a wider perspective in the tradition of the graffiti culture in which they represent the system's (understood as the power of the state or corporations) unauthorized hegemonic resistance to free artistic transformations of the city's objects and places.

On the other hand, many of the online pictorial contributions connote the general apotheosis of street art or graffiti culture. On the obvious level pictures with graffiti art are posted to express respect to the Służewiec wall as one of the most important symbols of the street-art culture in Poland. The other art works posted within the profile (like Banksy's iconic remix of the image from the movie *Pulp Fiction*⁶) and spray cans serve the same function. Of course, *all* users' activities within the profile (images, commentaries, links, *likes*) connote on a more general level the strength and vitality of Polish street art culture (*We're active and visible*). Even the *screenshots* connote this message: the

⁶ The image, depicting two men dressed in suits with bananas in their hands, is a remix of the *Pulp Fiction* movie scene. Banksy, the author of the remix, is a pseudonym of a legendary street-art artist, one of the most important icons of the street-art culture as a whole.

images with the number of protest supporters and screenshots with mainstream media websites signify the power of the protest and the community gathered around the *adisucks* profile.

Moreover, the general point of view (the myth about the spontaneous versus a harmful corporation, “rage against the machine”) seems to be even more important after analysis of both mainstream and non-mainstream media coverage of the protest⁷. One of the most important framings of the news on the *adisucks* case was in fact the repetition of this binary division made collectively by profile visitors. This repetition of evaluations, firstly, comes from the fact that mainstream media tend to picture activism in frames that help win audiences’ attention, and the mythical narrative described here is one such example. Secondly, it is caused by journalistic routines, like the simple copying of sentences from the description of the protest posted by its founder without marking them as quotes (creating the impression that such sentences are parts of the narrative produced by a professional news medium, and incidentally providing it with credibility). In other words, the mainstream media not only effectively disseminated information about the protest but also involuntarily legitimated discourses in opposition to the protest (Nowak, 2013).

On the other hand, it has to be acknowledged that the collaborative input is strongly based on multiplication of the imagery produced by neoliberal culture industries. The main goal of the protest was to stop the devastation of the Służewiec wall. Though it was successful, the *adisucks* protest has also resulted in a very high media visibility (in all, traditional and new, mainstream and grassroots media) for the Adidas company. The problem was reflected also in the conversations between the profile’s Facebook users. In the comments below one of the images (Figure 2) one of the users wrote: “It’s bad that such things appear on the wall. People don’t understand anything. [...] Duplicating the logo is always duplicating the logo, no matter if it is reversed or not”.

The performative level of users’ contribution

Connotation can be an effect of the style of artwork or techniques used in creating visual images, a feature described by Barthes (1977) as “photogenia”. This strongly connotative combination of form and content is an attribute of digital images in 2.0 internet, in which images posted online comprise an important performative aspect: the natural possibility of their remixing and (re)distribution by other users. Of course this has been one of the features of digital media in general (Lister & colleagues, 2003, p. 14-23), but social media

⁷ The mainstream media framing is included in the forthcoming article about media agenda and mediatized public agenda aspect of the case—see footnote 4.

and applications based on user-generated content have made this kind of contribution easier than ever before.

This effect is evident when considering connotations embedded in an image posted on 26 March (see Fig. 4). The image is deeply rooted in popular culture as it is a graphical remix of two images: the head is one of King Leonidas (played by Gerald Butler), a character of the fantasy action movie *300*, the cartoon corpse is from the Japanese TV anime series *Dragon Ball Z*. Yet the sentence “It’s over nine thousaaaand!!!” most likely refers to the number of *likes* of the *adisucks* profile, creating another level of connotation from the image.

The form refers to the new popular culture tradition of the meme, understood here as culture object (an image that combines pictorial and verbal elements), that has become *popular* in Fiske’s (1989, p. 99-121) terms and that spreads via the internet mainly by horizontal distribution outside the culture industries⁸. This image *is* in fact a meme: the combination of the *This is Sparta* meme (based on *300*) and *It’s over 9000* (referring to the *Dragon Ball Z* series). Its usage within the profile also refers to the culture of online cultural participation: it is the message encoded by the digital form of the image (meme) itself and is connected to its performative function of possible distribution (every digital image connotes its easy copying and online dissemination).

⁸ The primary meaning of the term “meme” refers to the unit of cultural evolution and the field of study called “memetics”—see: Dawkins (1989); Blackmore (1999).

Picture 4. Image posted on the 26th of March



Source: *Adisucks*, 2011.

Clay Shirky (2010, p. 15), writing on ‘lolcats’ (a popular kind of internet memes having cats in visual denotation), calls the process of making a lolcat (meme) the stupidest possible creative act, but these nevertheless connote a very important message: *You can play this game too*. This message is embedded in digital modality and the simple form of a meme offers a crucial change in patterns of traditional (mass) media usage, for two reasons. Firstly, it is creative (“The stupidest possible creative act is still a creative act”). Secondly, it is social:

“The pleasure in *You can play this game too* isn’t just in the making, it’s also in the sharing. The phrase ‘user-generated content’, the current label for creative acts by amateurs, really describes not just personal but also social acts. [...] The sharing, in fact, is what makes the making fun—no one would create a lolcat to keep for themselves.” (Shirky, 2010, p. 15)

And this increasingly collective nature of participation in popular culture is perceived as an important feature of today’s popular culture in general (Jenkins, 2006).

Returning to the performative aspect of the images analyzed, some of them are in fact designed to be *used* in a literal sense, e.g. as wallpapers or as graphic projects to be placed on do-it-yourself T-shirts. But from the performative point of view, all images published online (like those within the profile) connote the opportunity (therefore also the possibility) of their further online use due to the ease of copying or remixing and distributing them across the media (notably, *not* only across the internet). This high level of images’ potential transformation and distribution intensifies their status as components of messages covering the issue of *adisucks* protest. This status of digital images is tightly connected to technological and market transformations of 21st-century media: the

development and evolution of the new media ecosystem is conducive to spreading information about events and issues like *adisucks*.

Of course one cannot assume that all members of the *adisucks* profile audience can decode the full connotation of the *It's over 9000* image, but they do not have to. Many of the messages published within the profile, especially those from the *graphic projects* category—in their performative role—are created, published and distributed in order to have an effect on various audiences. For people interested in street-art culture, *adisucks* users' contribution most likely works as another tool that reinforces their lifestyle identities (shared languages and meanings have a community-building function) and their cultural status is an important factor that influences their reading of profile contents; they can be perceived as Fish's (1982) interpretative community. Accidental users get a less developed version of the narrative collaboratively created in the profile. Of course they are also an active part of the protest, simply by clicking the *like* button by which they distribute information about the boycott.

Symbolic (consumer) activism in “communicative capitalism”

Moreover, all the contribution within the *adisucks* profile in fact has additional meaning: collectively elaborated output is a political message (self-aimed firstly to those who produce it) because the sum of all contributions can be described in Tatarchevskiy's (2011) term as visual labor. The internet as a site for visual representation utilizes easily accessed visual symbolism to promote the image of community and to help the protest gain legitimacy, public recognition, and support. When *liking* the profile and posting online content, the users operate within the infrastructure of symbolic exchange that enables them to easily reinforce shared identities and legitimate particular choices that are both lifestyle- and consumer-related in their nature. Visual labor, as Tatarchevskiy (2011, p. 306) argues, is something one can easily do—the pleasure of posting, remixing, commenting and redistributing the images (and fantasies behind them) makes this kind of contribution fun and entertaining—even though it is done *for the cause*.

This raises questions about the reformulation of online activism. One of the most important features of the users' online engagement in modern online activism is such engagement's higher possible visibility. Tatarchevskiy (2011, p. 307), in her analysis of the online ONE campaign, argues that “lay activists are summoned to participate in the performative labor” within “organizational culture that equates success in activism to the extent that it is *visualized*. In other words, one is ‘active’ if her actions are visible through certain collective symbolic representations”.

Such skepticism is not, however, new. The question whether activist engagement online counts as *real* activism has been raised since the very beginning of digital media (McCaughy & Ayers, 2003, p. 5). Here, the more important question seems to be whether the diagnosis made by Tatarchevskiy can be applied to users' involvement in the *adisucks* protest. The symbolic and performative contribution to the Adidas boycott in fact *was* visual labor from this perspective. More importantly, the protest could not have been organized in any other manner, the media strategy of *adisucks* supporters (though often elaborated and performed unconsciously) seems to be the best possible method of managing (and participating in) political-consumer boycotts like this.

This is because of another, more systemic, reason for the protest's success. Advocacy was performed in ways that perfectly match postmodern politics and market driven media logic. Jodi Dean (2009) labels such systems as "communicative capitalism" and argues that in democratic, consumer societies, political goals cannot be achieved without the employment of systems of media and entertainment, so communication becomes the main commodity to be exchanged to accomplish political goals. In such a political-economic formation, Dean (2009, p. 24-26) argues, under conditions of extensive proliferation of media, the intense circulation of media content divides political antagonism into a myriad of irrelevant issues and events; the messages' success is defined by their longevity because their exchange value overtakes their use value. The only relevant thing about media content is its circulation and recognizability. In such conditions social media turn out to be effective tools of symbolic politics within "communicative capitalism": the visual collective output of *adisucks* supporters perfectly matched the media (and market) environment conditions. We can therefore perceive the protest as an example of effective adaptation of political-consumer protest to changing economic and media conditions.

It can be, however, perceived also as both elaborated by and reinforcing the structure described by Dean. The online symbolic exchange is realized within a system designed to generate profits from all kinds of social engagement. Moreover, the crucial part of the system (Facebook as the social networking service) is an online communication sphere that cannot be perceived as democratic or public from a normative point of view (its users are allowed to perform only within a closed and strictly guarded set of activities; the algorithms that regulate all the interactions within the system are not open to the public; the system's architecture is designed according to profit-oriented motivations).

Conclusion

The *adisucks* protest profile on the Facebook website turned out to be an effective space for collective (communicative) action and, at the same time,

representation. These strictly connected functions contributed to reinforcing the identities of profile users who performed at several levels of online engagement: expressing approval (by *liking* the profile); contributing to its content (posting comments and images); and, what was the immediate effect of those activities, disseminating information about the protest within sub-networks of their Facebook *friends*.

Therefore, the 2.0 internet can work as a space of engagement in the collaborative creation of grassroots (political or consumer) messages (this is the answer to Q2): it provides tools for easy, comfortable and enjoyable contribution, a contribution that is by definition social (collective) and based on symbols from the popular culture repository. In other words, the engagement in the online protest was, among other things, the act of participation in popular culture: the intersection of sets (spheres) of popular culture, citizen engagement, consumer action and politics is becoming larger and the borders between them are blurring.

Moreover, the Facebook website worked as an effective tool for the messages' distribution within a converged media system (answer to Q1). The main prerequisites of success were fulfilled: new media were a natural communication environment for the protesters and the story of the conflict was attractive for mainstream media (the "rage against the machine" narrative told by the protesters' online contribution was copied in media coverage). From this perspective, social media are symbolic spaces full of multimodal communicative acts which can be, in particular conditions, easily incorporated into mainstream media agendas (yet under conditions set by the mainstream media operators).

While this issue fits the optimistic scenario well from a critical political economy approach, optimism should be tempered. The collaborative engagement in the protest against the market-oriented corporation has been performed within a communicative environment manufactured by another market-oriented corporate agent and with the usage of digitally altered culture industries' products. And while the *adisucks* protest was effective (the Adidas corporation stopped and withdrew their efforts to deface the Służewiec wall), it is difficult to tell to what extent such online collective contribution is *real* social engagement: whether it is simply a formal adjustment to changing (media and market) conditions, or whether it should be labeled with the lowering term "visual labor", in which, as Tatarchevskiy (2011, p. 310) argues, "passivity is (...) celebrated through the symbols that interpret it as active involvement". Perhaps it is both, in which case this kind of engagement becomes one of most natural forms of political and consumer modalities of today.

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