Creative Confrontations: Exploring Activism, Surveillance, and Censorship in China and the United States

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Abstract

Extensive surveillance networks, or the Internet-enabled global surveillance societies (GSS), know no political borders. This paper turns to a country well acquainted with surveillance and censorship as well as a country engaged in frequent protest – China – to discuss what rhetorical devices citizens imbricated in the GSS can deploy to create practices of resistance. We ask the following question herein: what rhetorical devices are citizens imbricated in the GSS deploying to create practices of resistance and how can a networked approach to activism aid in thwarting surveillance? We think through these examples using Deleuze’s concept of the assemblage and propose that creativity in the form of collective authorship, working under the cover of the commonplace, and organizing rhizomatically across wild public screens all prove to be useful tools for protestors surrounded by surveillance.

Keywords: activism, global surveillance, assemblages, U.S., China
In downtown Chengdu, statues wearing air masks stood silently as pedestrians walked through the smog-saturated air that permeated the city in the early weeks of December 2016. These numerous immobile figures being used to protest air pollution were exempt from arrest. Images of the statues traveled quickly across the globe, appearing on social media feeds and news outlets alike. They often accompanied stories about the persistent and severe smog that was plaguing the country. The force of the images can be found in their circulation far beyond the streets of Chengdu where massive demonstrations were planned but quashed when the government deployed police officers and barricades to prevent any organized unrest.

Thus, creative forms of protest such as the masked statues were integral to activists. Images of the statues were easily recognized as a form of protest because fellow activists in other cities had also used masks in their protests. Chengdu’s creative protests quickly spread. Hundreds of miles away in the home of the world-famous terra cotta warriors, 800 stone lions on the Xi’an Academy of Fine Arts campus were fitted with the same masks. They, too, functioned as stalwart protestor’s cleverly evading arrest. Though they remained stationary, images of the masked lions spread rapidly across social media, appearing alongside the statues and detained artists in Chengdu. Shortly thereafter, images of masked zodiac sculptures in Beijing began appearing in social media feeds and international news media. These images appeared alongside a growing number of people posting selfies immersed in smog. Despite restrictions, censorship, barricades, and police presence, protestors were able to deploy creative tactics to persistently demonstrate.

The pollution in December 2016 was particularly bad and spread across much of China’s northern region. Many people wore coverings over their faces each day to protect their lungs from the dangerous PM 2.5 (the particulate matter known to cause cancer) that hung in the air. Passers-by snapped photos of outdoor installations across the country and shared them with friends and followers on social media. Before long, they appeared on news and culture websites from *China Daily* and *The Shanghaiist* to the U.K.’s *Daily Mail*, prompting conversations, increasing awareness, and putting authorities charged with doing something about it in the public spotlight.

These innovative protests occurred, in part, as a response to the contemporary media environment in China. Since President Xi Jinping took office in 2013, he has instituted strategic censorship and surveillance programs that have become progressively difficult to circumvent and avoid, though users continue to find ways around the perpetually shifting restrictions. These censorship programs, however, have prompted some users to create new methods and tactics of protest that change along with the constantly shifting media environment. As De Kloet and Fung (2017) argue, “Censorship in China is also a creative force” (p. 86).

China’s Internet restrictions and surveillance receive consistent international attention in news outlets (Borggreen, 2016; Flood, 2013; Kan, 2014) and academic studies (Ng, 2013; Tong, 2009). China is not, however, alone. Most countries, including the United States, carry out extensive surveillance programs (Gorman, 2005). The 2013 Snowden leaks and the more recent 2017 WikiLeaks document dump reveal that though U.S. citizens may not be overtly censored, they are under constant surveillance, as are many of their Western democratic counterparts. Extensive surveillance networks, or more specifically what DeLuca, Brunner, and Sun (2016) term the *Internet-enabled global surveillance society, or GSS*, knows no political borders and can record people’s every email, social media post, and conversation that occurs wherever smartphones are present. Recent leaks have drawn global attention and raised awareness, but this issue is much older than 2013. Reports as early as 2007 generated by the U.S.-based
Electronic Privacy Information Center coded the United States and United Kingdom as under “endemic surveillance”. According to the report, there was an increasing trend amongst governments to archive data on the geographic, communications and financial records of all their citizens and residents. This trend led to the conclusion that all citizens, regardless of legal status, are under suspicion (Zetter, 2007).

Ten years later, NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed additional information that demonstrated the massive growth of surveillance in the United States, often in collusion with other countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Greenwald, 2014b, pp. 23, 47). The information Snowden leaked made evident this vast breach of privacy is part of a larger international network.

The 2017 WikiLeaks documents reveal that the United States’ CIA had been honing its spying capabilities since the 2013 Snowden scandal. Their eyes and ears now extend into people’s pockets. The devices that people carry with them everywhere to communicate, get directions, take and share photos, remind them of appointments, and act as an alarm clock can be hacked and used to record the most intimate of conversations and communications.

In the face of the GSS, all citizens must develop new tools and practices to preserve freedoms, which leads us to ask: how are citizens imbricated in the GSS deploying rhetorical devices to engage in creative practices of resistance? Further, how can creative activisms aid in thwarting surveillance? This question is of particular importance during a period of time when social unrest is growing across the globe and the right to protest is being increasingly constricted. To answer this, we turn to a country that has long dealt with surveillance – China – and various forms of creative environmental protests that have erupted therein. We think through these examples using Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of the assemblage and propose that creativity in the form of collective authorship, working under cover of the commonplace, and organizing rhizomatically across wild public screens – screens from smartphones to billboards that capture attention but do not guarantee rational conversation, safe spaces for dialogue, or the transmission of accurate information – all prove to be useful tools for protestors immersed in surveillance.

**Censorship, Creative Proliferations, and Movement**

What can users do to circumvent censorship if movement across platforms is being surveilled and stopped? Censorship practices cannot be considered in isolation, for they are always operationalized within a web of relations and associations, and their impacts beg a more complicated portrait that recognizes the sophistication of certain practices alongside the utter chaos of communication. As Foucault (1990) argued in the *History of Sexuality*, censorship often has a function opposite its intended one. Rather than reducing conversations, censorship creates more communication, or what Foucault (1990) would consider discursive explosions. When one word is blocked, multiple new words are invented. When images are forbidden, a simple addition to the composition transforms it enough to elude automatic censors. Users have also found that substituting ultra-common words such as stroll (*sanbu*) in the place of ones likely to draw attention like protest (*kangyi*) or demonstration (*youxing*) can help to evade detection and deletion. This works with images as well. Using selfies in facemasks to protest against air pollution cannot be differentiated from images of people wearing them for protection, and thus travel largely unobstructed across social media platforms.
In examining the creative methods that prove powerful in combating censorship and surveillance in China, what becomes apparent is that they often run contradictory to classic Western definitions of creativity, which stress individualism, uniqueness, and originality. Creative measures in China employ dramatically different tactics that rely on the collective, the commonplace, and networked dispersed movement. These different manifestations of creativity provide methods essential to activism in a surveilled and pan mediated world. When deploying tactics over *wild public screens*, moving ideas via the mundane proves to be a powerful method of concealment (Brunner & DeLuca, 2016; DeLuca, Sun, & Peeples, 2011). Camouflaging calls to protest by substituting the word *protest* for *stroll* over China’s wild networks, which link millions of users, creates cover for those channeling outrage into awareness, protest, and action. Similarly, cultivating creativity that moves and morphs via the masses is a potent means to decentralize activism – a tactic essential to avoid attention, arrest, or silencing in a hyper-surveilled society. The problems are 1) the censorship of sensitive content and 2) the censorship of that which incites movement. Yet, if calls to activism can be freed of attachments that may draw increased surveillance by implicating a collective rather than an individual, then activist efforts have a better chance of spreading. Second, embracing creativity as a collective process in a constant state of change is important to the survival of any given message because it allows it to dodge censors and circulate more widely.

One can witness this in the example of Zhou Yongkang. When Zhou, China’s former security czar, was arrested in 2015, social media users knew that posts that included his name would likely be censored (and they were) so netizens used the nickname Master Kang to refer to Zhou. Master Kang is a very popular brand of noodles across China, so to camouflage this reference is to give the pseudonym a longer life span and greater travel. Netizens used the cover of the commonplace to camouflage their critiques. Other users inspired by this nickname creatively shortened Master Kang to *fangbianmian* (instant noodles), a word far too common to be automatically censored. This allowed it to spread further and complicated measures to erase or trace discourses. Then, others who joined in on the conversation turned the words into a discourse of images, and pictures of instant noodle cups popped up on social media platforms to stand in for the censored name. Some users created critiques of Zhou that mimicked instant noodle advertisements. Here, the mundane ran wild across networks and the persistent creativity of the masses allowed conversations to continue and spread quickly in a pan-mediated environment despite rules designed to prevent mass online mobilizations. Movement, change, and creativity among the masses made looking for inflammatory posts increasingly more difficult as they tumbled and spread across platforms.

**Pan Mediation, Assemblages, and Opportunities for Activism**

This form of creativity is enabled by the very same systems that enable surveillance. As the Internet becomes the central organizing principle of post-human societies, social theorists have reimagined society literally and metaphorically as a network (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2000; DeLanda, 2006).[^1]

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Benkler compellingly demonstrated how the Internet has enabled the transformation of the industrial economy into a “networked information economy” that “has made human creativity and the economics of information itself the core structuring facts” (2006, p. 3). Technology is central. Internet platforms enable individuals to reach millions of others and to engage in “effective, large-scale cooperative efforts—peer production of information, knowledge, and culture” (p. 3). As Benkler, Castells, and others note, this radical decentralization puts individuals outside of easy institutional control, enabling efforts that bypass political and corporate authorities.

In the face of the GSS, these theories would benefit from amendments and elaborations. Thus, we turn to Deleuze (with Guattari, 1987, 1990) and his concept of assemblage to augment existing scholarship, especially as it relates to activism. Assemblages emphasize connections and relationships between and among things, not simply among human actors, but among books, language, action, bodies, machines, and so forth. Assemblages are always in a state of change, or becoming, in that they are always growing, extending, shrinking, moving, and transforming. Thus, people can become part of human-mechanic assemblages with smartphones and social media networks to become activists. People can also enter theses assemblages as government employees, human censors, and surveillance camera installers. The man-machine systems enable surveillance at the same time they enable activism. These technologies are not inherently democratic.

As the world’s largest Internet nation, China’s networks are denser, move faster, and change more rapidly, which impacts activism. According to data, “China has been at the forefront of internet access for almost a decade” (Robson, 2017, para. 7). Chinese Internet users grew from 22.5 million in 2000 to over 720 million in 2016, while the U.S. grew from 121 million to 286 million in the same period. As of 2016, China had more Internet users than the next three largest countries combined – the United States, India, and Japan (Internet Live Statistics, 2016). Of these, 313 million are monthly active users on Weibo and 800 million on Weixin. According to anthropologist Tom McDonald, “It is easy for us to assume that ‘the Chinese Internet’ ought to be a very drab and boring and constraining place, whereas actually, Chinese internet users are incredibly creative and the internet is incredibly lively” (quoted in Robson, 2017, para. 3). Citizens along with smartphones and social media platforms have new potentials to become what DeLuca, Lawson, and Sun (2012) term decentered knots of world-making capable of powerful activist practices who can disseminate information, stoke dissent, and sway both national and international conversations. Though Chinese censorship technology (largely produced by Western companies for surveillance purposes) thwarts open communication, it does not silence it. Social media platforms like Weibo and Weixin are wild enough to offer both possibilities for surveillance and activism via persistent creative methods. The concept of assemblages more accurately mirrors the contemporary social media environment and therefore can help scholars to trace creative tactics.

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), an assemblage is a multiplicity, a rhizome, and a body without organs. An assemblage is never singular and is marked by becoming, by movement. The movement of the assemblage is integral to understanding the concept. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) draw attention to movement, or “Flows of intensity” (p. 162). Activism in China moves wildly across networked across public screens, connecting people in the process of becoming-activists, who create, spread, and transform messages about air pollution or proposed chemical plants using images, memes, and wordplay. Movement, described by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as becoming, or lines of flight is integral to the assemblage. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), movement begets movement: and “freeing lines of
flight” causes “conjugated flows to pass and escape and [bring] forth continuous intensities” (p. 161). Movement is an asset for activists and, thus, deserves scholarly attention. People must engage on platforms, look, transform, and share critiques. Memes, images, gifs and puns, as they tumble across the Internet, can take on new iterations, lose traceable parts, and masquerade as the mundane while doing potent political work, which is why activists engage them. Their erratic flight paths as they bounce between users offer temporary spaces where information can travel unhindered and below the radar. Movement begets movement on social media platforms, which constantly experience bursts of activity, expansion, and retraction. As this movement is occurring, activists can disseminate their messages covertly. For example, as was the case with the previous example of the arrest of China’s security czar, Zhou Yongkang, people anticipated a surge of movement and, thus, developed ways to move their messages during this eruption undetected by using commonplace terms like instant noodles and references to brand name products that, prior to this, had no connection with Zhou.

Movement characterizes becomings and multiplicities, which Deleuze and Guattari (1987) stated, “is continually transforming itself into a string of other multiplicities, according to its thresholds and doors” (p. 249, italics in original). New becomings, new polyvocalities, multiplicities, and movement can be asset to activists seeking cover from the GSS. The massive amounts of data always in transit can provide pathways for those seeking to raise awareness, organize without detection, and spread information under the cover of chaos. Brunton & Nissenbaum (2015) described such tactics in their book, Obfusaction, which outlines ways to deluge surveillance measures using tactics like DDoS, bots, and other smoke screens in order to offer moments of unmonitored movement. Chinese users have learned these lessons out of necessity.

Finally, both deploying and studying activism via assemblages is productive because doing so takes into consideration the flatness of pan-mediated environments. Social media is an ever-changing space where information moves via multitudes of moving pathways in all directions. The assemblage, which extends and connects rhizomatically and where movement occurs in many directions simultaneously, “has neither base nor superstructure, neither deep structure nor superficial structure; it flattens all of its dimensions onto a single plane of consistency upon which reciprocal presuppositions and mutual insertions play themselves out” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 90). Though the GSS attempts to exert a hierarchy through the practice of surveillance, social media are flat, connecting users laterally. If the GSS attempts to stand above and monitor the situation, activist efforts can remain undetected if they travel in the guise of everyday words, common phrases, and advertisements. Langlois et al. (2009) used Deleuze and Guattari to argue that networks are articulated in a rhizomatic way that link, assemble, connect, “thus hybridizing diverse code (platform, software, networks, informational dynamics, et cetera) and politics (political discourses, political movements, political cultures, politicians, citizens, et cetera) elements and actors” (p. 416). These moving, shifting, morphing, hybridizing networks create tangles of becomings over which information can move and transform.

The force of creativity over wild public screens feeds off the movement inherent in assemblages, the masses, the ability to channel flows of intensity and conjunctions of affects. As politically charged messages move over the variegated terrain of social media platforms, their constant state of becoming as they pass through the hands of creative users eager to transform them, connect to other discourses, and embrace multiplicity leads to a proliferation of spin-offs, reinterpretations, and appropriations that, too, are caught up in movements and flows. The concept of assemblages and multiplicities can help to understand how creativity
works within networks to circumvent surveillance. In the remainder of this essay, we will describe practices of resistance through case studies to illustrate how a networked approach to activism can be used to thwart surveillance.

**Deploying Creative Measures across Pan mediated Networks**

In making the argument that deploying creative measures over pan-mediated networks is important, we are not saying that measures that are more overt should be abandoned. Creative measures of all sorts must be deployed to monkey wrench the system, raise awareness, and organize resistance. For example, in Beijing, designer Wang Zhijun drew attention to Beijing’s persistent air pollution problem by transforming a pair of sneakers into a functioning air mask (China Daily, 2016). Another artist by the name of “Nut Brother” vacuumed the air around Beijing for 10 days and pressed the particulate matter he collected into a brick. Kong Ning created a dress out of facemasks and paraded her piece around the streets of Beijing, petitioning people to use mass transit instead of driving. These more overt creative measures are also important in helping people to think differently about environmental issues. What we are arguing here is that varieties of measures are necessary to cultivate citizen engagement within the oppressive surveillance regime known as the GSS. Social media has offered both the networks for surveillance and resistance.

**Anonymity and the Creative Collective**

Collective creators and anonymous actors are vital and a powerful force in a pan mediated hyper-surveilled world. Anonymous actors can leverage critiques most users registered with their real name would likely avoid. Activist authors, artists, and bloggers in China who seek to raise awareness about environmental issues have long used pseudonyms, including Lian Yue (the penname of Zhong Xiaoyong), who played an important role in disseminating information about a proposed para-Xylene (PX) plant in Xiamen, China in 2007. The outrage that ensued culminated in mass protest and, in the end, the people won. Officials scrapped plans for the project. Other cities, inspired by Xiamen’s success, protested against similar projects, and anonymized users played an important role in organizing outrage online that often led to demonstrations in the streets.

The Chinese government has come to understand the power of anonymity, especially collective anonymity, and has waged a war against it online. In 2010, the Chinese government began requiring that people use their real names when registering cellphone numbers. Prior to that (and even after it), buying a SIM card was as easy as stopping by almost any Chinese-style bodega. Each year, the government tightened restrictions and from 2016 on, anyone who buys a SIM card must show a valid ID or passport regardless of their residency status in China. Still though, over “100 million SIM cards have not been registered with real names” (Shu, 2016, para. 2).

In 2012, the government extended this law to social media by requiring users on Sina Weibo – the most popular microblogging site at the time – to link their account to an ID or mobile phone number. The government did not, however, extend it beyond Weibo, so when Weixin (or WeChat) quickly supplanted Weibo as the most popular social media platform, it offered users less stringent registration policies. Realizing the need to extend their policy, in 2014 the government mandated that all apps use real name registration. The glitch was that the policies were originally implemented in such a way that typing in any ID number could easily circumvent it. As one “Sina Tech commenter put it: ‘I’m real-name registered, but it’s
somebody else’s real name”’ (quoted in Custer, 2016, para. 6). Furthermore, registering users is not cost-effective for tech companies who have to pay for expensive software and, thus, implement only the bare minimum (Shu, 2016). Thus, while the registration process did hamper the rampant use of pseudonyms and made remaining anonymous more difficult, it has not made it impossible.

Despite all of these restrictions and rules, anonymity can still be deployed. During the December 2016 air pollution protests that spread across the nation, those involved in covering public statues in Chengdu, Xi’an, and the Beijing zoo with facemasks did so in the cover of darkness, at night. The installations were connected by the uniformity of the act as well as their rhizomatic spread over QQ, Weixin, and Weibo. Before long local news and international press outlets began covering the story and this coverage popped up on people’s Facebook and Twitter feeds (which are not accessible without a VPN in China) pulsating through moving assemblages. Anonymous protests subvert the individual to become activist assemblages that take advantage of the “flows of intensity” and “conjunctions of affect” that create temporary relationships between users motivated by concern, anxieties, fear, and anger over air pollution.

As anonymity on platforms is increasingly restricted, activists find new means of remaining anonymous. They deploy creative interventions in the form of image events and installations and depend upon fellow citizens to snap and share photos and, in doing so, their activist message.

Moving Amidst the Mundane

Creative iterations, as they move through assemblages, can avoid drawing the attention of the GSS via the cover of the commonplace. As was previously discussed, many protestors avoided censorship while organizing marches by substituting the word “stroll” (散步) for “protest” (抗议). By using a common word – stroll – they largely avoided detection. This is but one example of the ways in which Chinese users employ coded language to avoid drawing attention. The Chinese language, because it depends on tone for meaning, is rife with homonyms. When selecting a homonym for censored words, users are quick to adopt common words to replace the sensitive ones. One such example is “brickspert”. The word is a play on the word expert (专家 zhuānjìā), but replaces the first character with a homonym meaning “brick” (砖). Bricksperts are defined as “Experts who are beholden to government or corporate interests.... Bricksperts often downplay health and safety risks and justify difficult economic conditions” (China Digital Times, 2017a). When used, the term is calling attention to government corruption and the ways in which money can influence permitting processes, including permits for companies that will bring tax revenue and leave the town with toxic pollutants. Another popular homonym – medicine-wicked-chrysanthemum (药奸菊 yào jiān jú) – is a nonsensical phrase that “refers to the shortened name of the similar-sounding State Food and Drug Administration (药监局, or 国家食品药品监督管理局)” (China Digital Times, 2017b). This homonym allowed users to analyze the Food and Drug Administration without drawing attention when it was found that infant formula tainted with melamine had been widely distributed in China, causing infants to fall sick. The scandal created panic among new mothers, who had to battle the censors to communicate over social media networks. Therefore, this homonym, which was camouflaged by its use of common characters, allowed people to continue communicating.²

² China Digital Times’ “grass-mud horse” lexicon has been cataloguing such terms for several years. The name of the database itself is one of the more popular homonyms to sweep across the nation.
Memes, too, are a useful means of working within the mundane to sidestep detection by the GSS. We can see this in a number of instances, including the rhizomatic protests against air pollution in Beijing. People have begun the practice of taking pictures of famous vistas across the city when the smog is too dense to see much of anything. Users then employ simple apps to draw the buildings – whether they be the entrance to the Forbidden City, the CCTV building, or the Bird’s Nest – and post them to their social media accounts, drawing attention to the density of the pollution and its ability to render the architecture, historical icons, and cultural artifacts of a city as big and important as Beijing invisible. The images move largely undetected because they are essentially images of grayness, which are difficult to search for or auto-censor. Furthermore, when many users engage in activism via the commonplace and mundane simultaneously, the message has the ability to spread everywhere without drawing attention to any single user. Sifting through the millions of posts uploaded every second to find these images is an almost impossible task.3

Another example of utilizing the mundane as cover comes from the protests that erupted in Shifang, China in 2012 against a planned molybdenum copper plant. As the crowds grew, police officers were deployed to quash the protests. Of course, images documenting the events were uploaded onto social media. An image featuring a police officer by the name of Liu Bo charging at a small crowd with his baton raised and a riot shield strapped to his forearm garnered a great deal of attention (Levine, 2012). It was widely shared in its original format, but attempts to eradicate it from the Internet were thwarted when people used simple apps to cut out images of his body and insert it into famous fight scenes with superstars such as Jackie Chan and Mark Wahlberg. These fight scenes functioned as cover for a political statement because they are widely shared and innocuous. Liu Bo, who came to be known as “fat police officer”, traveled quickly and far, creating “a powerful, albeit brief, cultural wave across the Web” (Levine, 2012, para. 12). As An Xiao Mina, artist, meme expert, and blogger has argued, “[These images by themselves can’t do anything; but when you look at past social movements, often it is images or graphics that keep a message alive]” (quoted in Levine, 2012, para. 16). They do so by employing the commonplace as shelter and transforming as they move. Liu Bo makes appearances in different scenes. Viewers recognize Liu Bo, they associate it with the Shifang protests, with a government that suppresses dissent, with an economy that takes precedent over the environment, and Liu Bo can travel under the cover of the commonplace – action adventure movie stills from popular films that would likely not ever draw the attention of censors or surveillance systems.

Emojis, too, can help users elide censors, as was the case with feminist groups who, after the Weibo and Weixin accounts for Feminist Voices were shut down on International Women’s Day in 2018, shared two emoji’s – one of a bowl of rice and another of a bunny, which together form mi tu (米兔), a homophone for #metoo (Andersen, 2018). Creativity thrives in restricted environments.

**Hierarchies Flattened**

Scholars have discussed memes in terms of culture jamming and activism (Harold, 2004), materialist rhetoric (Johnson, 2007), and even the Ebola virus (Marcus & Singer, 2017) but

Grass mud horse (cao ni ma / 草泥马) is a homonym for (肏你妈) or motherfucker and was taken up as a moniker by Netizens bucking the system.

3 See also the cases of the river crabs wearing Rolex watches, grass mud horse, and “fart people” (Link & Qiang, 2013).
little attention has been paid to how they can function as a rhetorical tool to subvert the GSS across political boundaries. Memes such as the ones discussed above create fleeting connections between users that splinter out rhizomatically as they are reposted, shared, saved, and deleted. When memes are shared via social media, they move quickly, connecting people who otherwise have no relationship, at least for a moment. As people share images, transform them, and repost them, they become widely distributed in various iterations. Since the inception of social media, scholars have highlighted users’ ability to create and share information, thereby challenging the more hierarchical dissemination of information that occurs with traditional media outlets. The flattened structure of the Internet aids those seeking to avoid attention while living in the GSS.

Memes, which travel across social media networks, link one semiotic chain to another—one set of memes of the “fat police officer” link with memes of the cultural icon, Jackie Chan. They link smoggy shots of Tiananmen Square with smoggy portraits of the CCTV building. The appearance of masked statues takes on a different meaning when users find that they occurred not just across one city, but also across the nation. Memes use artistic creativity, the science of computer programming, the network of the Internet, and weave in social struggles. They do not emphasize the individual creative genius.

Memes are a form of postmodern conversation where “[t]here is no ideal speaker-listener” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7). No one person stands out and becomes the star. Rather, conversations proliferate because they are linked via chains, not hierarchies.

In protests or social movements, never is a one meme singled out as the meme that raised awareness across the country about air pollution or caused officials to acquiesce to the people’s demands after a protest erupted. Rather, memes work in concert with one another and are dependent upon the larger system within which they reside.

**Conclusion: Deploying Creativity amidst the GSS**

As a country with frequent protests and high social engagement, especially over online networks, China is a particularly useful case study. Whereas U.S. citizens only more recently definitively learned about these massive surveillance systems that house millions of terabytes of data in places like Bluffdale, Utah, Chinese citizens have long been aware of the fact that they are being surveilled. Travel under the GSS is dangerous, and Chinese activists are well aware of this, which is why they have turned to the aforementioned tactics. Environmental NGOs (ENGOs) in China cannot lead protests the way 360.org or the Sierra Club can against the Keystone XL pipeline in the U.S. or they would be shut down immediately. International ENGOs such as Greenpeace are well aware of these repercussions, and thus deploy creative interventions. For example, rather than stage a mass demonstration where thousands gather to demand that a dyeing plant that is polluting the local water supply be shut down, they deploy a multi-faceted campaign where they collect data from the waterways under the cover of night to prove the plant is polluting. They also stage image events, including one in which they invited fashion models to the factories dumping chemicals into streams and have them pose next to the blackened water or near barrels of toxic chemicals. These images are then used in a series of ads aimed at customers of the brands using such dyes who are engaged on social media (Brunner & DeLuca, 2016). They connect their message by hijacking hashtags used to promote the brand, which allows them to infiltrate their target audiences without having to forge new networks. There is no doubt that Greenpeace is being surveilled, but networked tactics,
anonymous actors, the cover of darkness and the mundane, help to evade censorship and shutdown.

The practices of Chinese citizens in the age of the GSS can show activists worldwide how to play these protean platforms to elide, elude, and defy ubiquitous surveillance systems. This scholarship adds to the existing scholarship on memes an Internet intervention by illustrating their importance in activism under the GSS. Awareness of the GSS should motivate activists everywhere contesting corporate and governmental domination to take surveillance and the dark side of the Internet seriously (Deibert, 2013) in addition to exercising the creativity and joy of play. As the example of Chinese activism demonstrates, in the GSS tools and tactics of evasion and insurgency, creativity and networking, become imperatives for making changes and imagining alternative worlds.

Data can be collected and information can be censored, but wildness still exists within the crisscrossing pathways that carry language in creative iterations and images as they transform information into nonverbal resistances and awareness-raising movements. As Shirky (2008) stated, “Revolution doesn’t happen when society adopts new technologies—it happens when society adopts new behaviors” (p. 160). Creativity that embraces collective authorship and movement amidst the cover of the mundane can provide an antidote to the architecture of the GSS by way of invention. The case study of China provides a productive model for the rest of the world, in part due to cultural differences that privilege the collective over the individual, that view creativity as a constant collaborative process that builds on and recognizes the work of others, and which has embraced the very same platform over which they are being surveilled.
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