“You Can’t Run Your SUV on Cute. Let’s Go!”: Internet Memes as Delegitimizing Discourse

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In an effort to explore the role of new media technologies in environmental protest rhetoric, this paper examines Greenpeace’s Let’s Go! Arctic campaign, which opposed Shell’s Arctic oil-drilling plans. The campaign produced a body of Internet memes designed to look like Shell’s own corporate advertising. Moreover, the viral campaign used various rhetorical techniques that challenged Shell’s goals and identity. Greenpeace-generated and user-generated memes cleverly use irony, corporate voice and humor to delegitimize Shell’s Arctic efforts. The memes offered messages that mocked corporate practices and corporate messaging while also providing direct protest messages and accessible humor that invited identification against Shell. Thus, the memes collectively encouraged identification with Greenpeace’s antiddrilling, pro-environment discourse.

Keywords: legitimacy; delegitimize; Internet; memes; Greenpeace; Shell oil

On 27 February 2013, Royal Dutch Shell (Shell) announced “a pause in their Alaska drilling program” (Shell, 2013, np). Despite starting their Arctic drilling plan in 2012, “a series of costly and embarrassing accidents in its efforts to drill exploratory wells” (Broder, 2013, np) caused Shell to suspend their Arctic drilling activities for 2013. However, according to a spokesperson Shell “remains committed to building an Arctic exploration program that provides confidence to stakeholders and regulators, and meets the high standards the company applies to its operations around the world” (Shell, 2013, np). Drilling into the untapped Arctic oil reserves remains a
Harold (2004) demonstrated the importance and potency of cultural pranking, but the rhetorical and material implications of culture jamming and social protest media have remained relatively unexplored. More specifically, since Harold’s essay, there are new popular trends in social media and online social protest, particularly memes. Arguably, we can trace these contemporary pranksters back to the work of Adbusters and others. Kalle Lasn (2000), the founder and publisher of Adbusters magazine and website, and an architect of culture jamming claims jammers:

are a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators, and entrepreneurs who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information age. Our aim is to topple existing power structures and forge a major shift in the way we will live in the 21st century. We believe culture jamming can be to our era what civil rights was to the ’60s, what feminism was to the ’70s, what environmental activism was to the ’80s. It will alter the way we live and think. It will change the way information flows, the way institutions wield power, the way TV stations are run, the way the food, fashion, automobile, sports, music, and culture industries set their agendas. Above all, it will change the way meaning is produced in our society. (p. 64)

Given the widespread presence of online pranking and increasingly easy online interactivity, Internet-based protest and disruption campaigns bear further examination. In this case, we argue that Greenpeace and corporate pranksters The Yes Men employed irony, mock corporate speak, and humor to delegitimize not only Shell’s Arctic drilling efforts but also their corporate messaging about the viability of Arctic drilling.

The Let's Go! Arctic campaign was launched in June 2012 by Greenpeace, an environmental advocacy organization in association with The Yes Men, an organization that is part public relations, part consultancy, and part social pranksters. The hoax advertising campaign was launched during a staged press conference at Seattle’s Space Needle. Initially, the campaign’s planners succeeded in attracting media attention and public ridicule, directed at Shell, from news outlets such as Gawker.com’s Gizmodo blog (Holiday, 2012) and International Business Times News (Parades, 2012), who reported on the Arctic Ready website as well as the “failed” PR stunt, under the assumption that Shell was the originator. Twitter users and influential journalists were similarly fooled (Hill, 2012). As observers caught on to the prank, reporters and bloggers, such as Mondaq Business Briefing (Heenan Blaikie, 2012), lauded Greenpeace and The Yes Men as having “struck oil” (np). Melbourne newspaper, The Age, described the prank as “a social media oil spill” (Moses, 2012, p. 3). Hill (2012), writing for Forbes, observed, “Greenpeace has apparently discovered that it’s far more effective to ram Shell online than it is to send Greenpeace boats out to protest or to handcuff themselves to drilling equipment in the snow” (np).
Perhaps more impressive than the popular press attention that the campaign garnered was the level at which Greenpeace and The Yes Men successfully motivated stakeholders to participate. Less than two weeks after the campaign began, on 8 June 2012, visitors to the Arctic Ready site (www.arcticready.com) had created over 8800 images. Just as pranksters such as the Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO) and the Truth campaign mobilized their publics to engage in pranks (Harold, 2004), the Let’s Go! Arctic campaign got its audiences to participate, and as a result, protest Shell through meme creation. However, social media allowed Greenpeace’s Let’s Go! Arctic campaign to spread more quickly, more expansively, and at a lower cost than BLO or Truth could ever have dreamed, even a decade ago. Further, the Internet affords antagonists like Greenpeace the capacity to convincingly create an online presence in the guise of their targets. Such e-campaigns are revolutionizing the ways activist groups engage in protest movements.

In the following sections of this essay, we review literature on legitimacy and memes that are relevant to our analysis of the Let’s Go! Arctic campaign. Next, we detail the case and the memes under scrutiny. Following that, we proceed with our analysis of 10 organization-generated and 16 user-generated memes related to the Let’s Go! Arctic campaign.

Literature Review

What makes an organization a “legitimate” social entity? What counts as “legitimate” and “illegitimate”? How does legitimacy get negotiated, uprooted, and questioned? An examination of the literature on legitimacy helps us answer some of these questions and to understand the nuances of where and how online environmental protest fits into these broader questions of social legitimacy. Multiple disciplines, including sociology, organization science, and management, have applied various approaches in the study of legitimacy. The subsequent review focuses on the approaches to legitimacy research that best inform our current application.

The development of legitimacy theory is rooted in the context of politics (Boyd, 2000). Who gets to participate in public debate? Who does not? What issues are up for debate, and what arguments are fair game in deciding those issues? For example, much of Habermas’ work considers the means by which political actors gain legitimacy in the public sphere. For Habermas, justification is an important element of legitimacy (Goodnight, 2008). To justify their actions, organizations, political or otherwise, must provide evidence that their actions are warranted and have merit. Organizations that stray from providing justifications for their actions are likely to lose legitimacy (Goodnight, 2008) with many potential consequences.

Legitimacy theory has been applied in many different contexts: for example, corporate contexts (e.g., Carl, 2004; Grolin, 1998; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001) and even the intersection of political and corporate contexts, as in the case of state-owned enterprises (Roper & Schoenberger-Orgad, 2011). Such research concludes that modern corporations are increasingly accountable to more stakeholders, requiring innovative commitments to maintaining a reputation of legitimacy. A body of work
on impression management also informs the study of legitimacy. Schlenker (1980), building on earlier work by Scott and Lyman (1968) and Goffman (1971), provided important early contributions, offering different varieties of "accounts" as a way to lessen the "apparent severity of [a] predicament" (p. 136). More specific and contemporary studies of impression management and issues management have intersected with legitimacy in corporate contexts (e.g., Coombs, 1992; Heath, 2001, 2006). Coombs argued that organizations that fail to gain legitimacy are likely to fail to effectively manage their issues. Heath (2001) tied legitimacy to the very meaning of public relations, declaring: "Regardless of how we define public relations, it is useful only to the extent that it helps organizations, regardless of their type, to achieve and maintain legitimacy" (p. 186). Further, Heath (2006) found that organizations that fail to effectively manage issues with their publics can suffer a "legitimacy gap" (p. 65). Metzler (2001) also argued that organizational legitimacy was central to public relations, but took it a step further, asserting that organizational legitimacy is simply "an organization’s right to exist and conduct operations" (p. 321).

Such themes of corporate legitimacy as survival are similarly prevalent in the vast body of research focused on corporate apology (e.g., Benoit, 1995, 2000; Coombs, 2006; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Hearit, 1995, 2001). For example, a core assumption of Benoit’s (1995) theory of image repair is that humans (and corporations) have the central goal of maintaining a positive reputation among their publics and that they will engage in apology to restore a tarnished image. Similarly, Hearit (1995) found that organizations in crisis attempt to separate themselves from accusations and strive to reestablish institutional legitimacy. Coombs (2006) warned, “crisis managers need to meet the expectations of stakeholders, reflecting the legitimacy concerns found in corporate apology and corporate impression management” (p. 183). As Boyd (2000) generalized, “Institutions, whether government, corporate, or otherwise, gain or lose legitimacy based on the perceptions of their stakeholders” (p. 351).

Boyd (2000) differentiated between institutional legitimacy and actional legitimacy. Institutional legitimacy seeks to establish and maintain the legitimacy of the organization as a whole. For Boyd, corporate apology would fall under the umbrella of institutional legitimacy. Actional legitimacy, however, describes efforts aimed at arguing the legitimacy “of specific policies or actions” (Boyd, 2000, p. 342). For example, Shell’s official website does not seek to justify its existence (institutional legitimacy), but Shell does use the website as a forum to rationalize its proposed action of energy exploration in the Arctic (actional legitimacy). Both institutional and actional legitimacy are evaluated in terms of utility (i.e., Does this policy or action advance the goals of the organization?) and responsibility (i.e., Is this policy or action consistent with the organization’s commitments to its internal publics, consumer publics, community publics, government publics, and other stakeholder groups?).

Despite the extensive research on how political and corporate actors earn and retain legitimacy, there is limited research on how organizational legitimacy is attacked, undermined, debated, and questioned. Metzler (2001) offered four questions that must be addressed when examining a dispute: (1) “What is the root issue of the
dispute?” (p. 322); (2) “How does the communicative context affect the dispute?” (p. 323); (3) “How are communication strategies used in organizational disputes?” (p. 324); and (4) “How are legitimacy disputes resolved?” (p. 325). Metzler’s third question comes closest to the current investigation, but her question merely acknowledges that there must be some delegitimizing strategies at play. The answers that she supplies are further examples of strategies used by the organization in attempts to preserve or reestablish legitimacy. Metzler’s (2001) work stopped short of identifying strategies used by those who undermine legitimacy.

Central to this study are the questions: once an organization or policy is deemed legitimate in the public sphere, how is that legitimacy called into question? By what means can that legitimacy be undermined? Ultimately, the extent of illegitimacy may still be evaluated on the basis of how useful the organization or its policies are perceived and how responsible the firm and its actions are. However, less clear are the specific strategies by which activists, competitors, regulators, and other limiter publics (Smith, 2005) delegitimize institutions, their actions, and their policies. Our current investigation will attempt to explore one attempt at delegitimizing by examining how Greenpeace protested Shell’s planned Arctic drilling actions. Next, we review memes, as they are the means by which Greenpeace responded to Shell’s Arctic drilling efforts.

Memes

The meme’s origins within the scientific community are evident even in the dictionary definition of the term: “a cultural element or behavioural [sic] trait whose transmission and consequent persistence in a population, although occurring by non-genetic means (esp. imitation), is considered as analogous to the inheritance of a gene” (“memes, n,” 2013). Although there is value in acknowledging that the language of memetics originated with Dawkins (1976) and a community of evolutionary biologists, it is just as necessary to recognize the term’s more recent, common usage. Typically, the word “meme” is now used to refer to ideas and images as they spread throughout new media environments. It is this latter meaning of the term that is most useful for illuminating Greenpeace’s anti-Shell communication tactics.

Numerous studies have examined the role of new media in shaping and disseminating messages about the environment (Adams & Gynnld, 2013; Bosch, 2012; Champ, Williams, & Lundy, 2013; Cooper, Green, Burningham, Evans, & Jackson, 2012; Slawter, 2008; Thorsen, 2013; Wolfe, 2009). This paper extends previous research by focusing specifically on Internet memes. They constitute not only an important cultural phenomenon worthy of study, but also a potential tool for rhetorical analysis (Johnson, 2007; Owens, 2012). The notion of the meme arose from a desire among scholars to use the basic language and theory of evolutionary biology to describe how elements of culture are passed from one person to another. Just as evolutionary biologists need a language for describing how genetic material is passed from generation to generation, cultural scholars need a language for describing how ideas spread throughout culture. Dawkins (1976) argued that theorists “need a name
for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (p. 192). He labeled this unit of cultural transmission the “meme” and, in doing so, provided the terminology for discussing the spread and popularity of quick-replicating cultural units. Successful memes share at least three characteristics. First, a meme must exhibit fidelity. It must make sense to people before it can be adopted and spread. Second, a meme must spread quickly. This quality is referred to as fecundity. Finally, longevity refers to a meme’s power to survive over time (Dawkins, 1976). Although Dawkins’ (1976) discussion of memes is foundational to understanding memetics in the broadest possible sense, it does not necessarily provide the best language for studying the sort of memes that prevail on the Internet.

Concerning social media, memes are typically understood in relation to viral videos, photographs, phrasings, language, and strategic communication campaigns. However, memes do not necessarily depend on dissemination for their definition or character. To this end, Blackmore (2000) wrote, “indeed the vast majority of memes (like the vast majority of genes) cannot be considered viral at all – they are the very stuff of our minds. Our memes is [sic] who we are” (p. 22). In an effort to apply the language of the meme to the Internet, it is worth noting that memes also constitute “the very stuff” of our social media networks. A meme, according to common usage, is a “faddish joke or practice (like a humorous way of captioning cat pictures) that become[s] widely imitated” and “appear[s] to spread and mutate via distributed networks in ways that the original producers cannot determine and control” (Burgess, 2008, p. 101). Importantly, just because the dissemination of memes can be uncontrollable and unpredictable, that does not mean they cannot be studied fruitfully.

Most Internet meme studies have focused on the content of one or more specific memes. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) examined 19 popular memes from 2001 to 2005. The study revealed that most successful memes incorporated humor, were intertextual, and featured anomalous juxtapositions. The study also produced a typology of Internet memes that identified social commentary purposes, absurdist humor purposes, Otaku or Manga fan purposes, and hoax purposes as the impetuses for the genesis and spread of memes. Burgess (2008) examined viral videos such as Tay Zonday’s “Chocolate Rain,” earnestly and enthusiastically singing the phrase “chocolate rain” and narrating his singing techniques. Burgess noted that the video’s dissemination appears to have begun as an inside joke, but that the participatory culture that surrounded it, in which users parodied and riffed on the original video, is the video’s most important legacy. Wolfe’s (2009) study of viral videos is of particular interest because it examined the Meatrix, an animated video that sharply criticizes the practice of factory farming. Of course, static images such as those produced by Let’s Go! Arctic can be just as memetic as videos. Hahner (2013) studied a single photograph to understand how a single meme image can function as multiple arguments.

Although there are numerous studies to build upon, the research on Internet memes, particularly those with climate change themes, is relatively sparse considering
their cultural impact. Clearly, more research on the content of memes and the communities that produce and circulate them is warranted. In the following section, we summarize the staged media event that served as the launch point for the Let’s Go! Arctic campaign and the broader elements of this strategy. We will then explore the various memes deployed by Greenpeace and The Yes Men and users of the Let’s Go! Arctic website.

The Let’s Go! Arctic Campaign Begins

The Arctic Ready campaign launched on 7 June 2012 with help from a viral video that purported to show a Shell-sponsored PR event at which a model oilrig malfunctioned and uncontrollably spewed oil at a group of posh corporate executives. The YouTube video, titled “#ShellFAIL: Private Arctic Launch Party Goes Wrong,” was seen over 500,000 times in just 24 hours and despite being revealed as a hoax (Patterson, 2012, np; Steel, 2012, np), earned the attention of Gizmodo, Salon, Boing Boing, Huffington Post and the news aggregator site, Reddit. The elaborate prank set the stage for the launch of ArcticReady.com, which, just like the video, aimed to delegitimize Shell and its drilling plans.

ArcticReady.com

The ArcticReady.com website has multiple features. The homepage, labeled Shell.com but bearing arcticready.com as its URL, includes a summary of news about Shell’s Arctic oil exploration. The “About Shell” tab describes the strategy behind the website, including the market research finding “that people like straight talk about oil.” A “Let’s Go! Mercy Poll” allows users to vote for one of seven different sea mammal species, which will purportedly receive extra protection “that will make their harassment significantly less likely.” The “Just for Kids” tab, after explaining to children all the great advantages of oil, features a retro-style video game called Angry Bergs that allows users to destroy icebergs before they sink the player’s oil rig. When the icebergs get to the rig, the user is informed that her or his well ruptured and that “Angry Bergs have defeated your off-shore oil rig and deprived the world of much needed resources.” The site also has tabs for “Environment & Society,” “Innovation,” and “Projects & Locations.” However, these pages are reportedly undergoing “temporary site maintenance,” and the user is automatically redirected to the centerpieces of the ArcticReady.com website: the “Let’s Go! Arctic” and “Let’s Go! Social” features. These two features are discussed in detail below and serve as the central focus of this study.

The Arctic Ready website provides users with simple tools for generating unique parodies of Shell Advertisements. The “Let’s Go! Social” portion of the site features an “Ad Generator” that lets users easily create an image file that can be shared via any social media platform. First, users select from 12 photographic images of the Arctic. Seven of these images, such as that of a sleeping adult polar bear and cub, feature wild Arctic animals. Three other images include images of oilrigs in the Arctic and two more images present views of ice or icebergs. An empty box at the bottom of each
photo defines the area to which a user’s caption will be added. Users enter their message into a simple text field (with a 92-character limit), which is then automatically transferred onto the selected image. Users are asked to provide their first name, their city and state, and their email address. None of this information appears on the parody ad they generate. Upon clicking the “Create Ad” button, the website displays the finished product and provides links for sharing the image on Facebook, Google+, and Twitter. Once created, the image is cataloged as a thumbnail in the Gallery section of “Let’s Go! Social.” The images can then be sorted by “most popular” or “recently added.” Visitors can view thumbnails and full-size images and can share any meme on social networks. Importantly, this page also lets users vote “up” for an image they like and “down” for an image they dislike which determines which memes are more or less popular. Individual memes from Arcticready.com earned between 1 and 15,212 positive votes on the site itself. In addition, they garnered between 0 and 390 tweets and between 0 and 203 “+1s” on Google+.

A final notable area of the “Let’s Go! Social” section of Arctic Ready allows users to share their ideas on “ways to make this site better to ideas for further reducing our impact on the marine environment.” Though we do not focus on this “Tell Us What You Think” section, this highlights an additional attempt to solicit user feedback and participation via the Arctic Ready site.

**Memes and Analytic Procedures**

In order to understand how users of the Arctic Ready site take up, play with, and build off of the memetic ideas of the Let’s Go! Campaign, we selected both memes that were created by Greenpeace and user-generated memes. At its launch, Greenpeace primed the Arctic Ready site with 10 photo memes with accompanying text. But one of the main purposes of the Arctic Ready site was to allow users to create, upload, and share their own memes. As of 28 October 2013, visitors to the site had generated over 33,000 memes. This analysis considered all 10 of the Greenpeace memes. Also, 16 different user-generated ads were selected from the “Let’s Go Public! Ad Contest Gallery,” available at <arcticready.com/social/gallery>.¹ These 16 memes represent the first page of the “Most popular” gallery. Eighteen thumbnails appeared on the first page of results, but two memes appeared twice each, so 16 original memes are considered here. As these memes were the most popular on the site, these memes were likely the most widely viewed, as minimal clicking and navigating were needed to locate them. As our analysis took place approximately six months after the campaign’s launch, the memes rated as “most popular” have been vetted many times by site visitors. Representative and compelling example memes are featured in our analysis.

**Delegitimizing Shell**

In the section that follows, we unpack three means by which Greenpeace, and the users of ArcticReady.com, work to undermine Shell’s drilling efforts and delegitimize
the corporation’s Arctic drilling plans and policies. We begin with a discussion of irony.

Ironic: multiple meanings, multiple perspectives

Greenpeace’s Arctic Ready memes generate much of their rhetorical force through the use of irony. The most important feature of irony is that it expresses more than one meaning—more than one perspective—at a time (Burke 1969, 1984). Typically, one of these perspectives is expressed, while an entirely different perspective is actually intended. This is why Oesterreich (2001) notes that irony’s “general characteristic is to make something understood by expressing its opposite (p. 404) and D’Angelo (1987) recognizes that irony “deals with incongruities” (p. 35). This means that Greenpeace’s Arctic Ready memes, like all ironic discourse, require auditors to reconstruct utterances “with meanings different from those on the surface” (Booth, 1974, p. 6). On the surface, Greenpeace’s memes express a corporate pro-drilling agenda, but ultimately reveal an environmentally conscious, antidrilling sentiment that begs for Internet users’ attention and credence.

Let’s Go! Arctic ads generated irony simply by using a word with multiple cultural connotations. For instance, Greenpeace tagged a photograph of crumbling glaciers with the caption “ENERGY INDEPENDENCE? WE’RE GETTING WARMER.” The unfolding play with the word “warmer” opens up multiple, simultaneous, and conflicting meanings as well as innumerable users’ reinterpretations. In one context, “warmer” implies “closer” and suggests that Shell’s work can help create energy independence. Of course, the term “energy independence,” which refers generally to the goal of reducing US oil imports, is a political buzzword with almost exclusively positive connotations. The second meaning of the term “warmer” relates to rising global temperatures. This second meaning reminds audiences that Shell’s efforts contribute to global warming and ultimately destroy the environment. The visual here (see Figure 1)—a pristine glacier crashing into the water that surrounds it—complements this second meaning of the term “warmer.”

Greenpeace’s presentation of multiple meanings and multiple voices is also evident in its “HARD CHOICES–WE’RE MAKING THEM” advertisement. Visually, the meme features a polar bear, behind the glass of a human-crafted enclosure. The bear is underwater and reaching its paw toward a young boy on the other side of the glass. The boy’s hand is also outstretched. The ad seems to anthropomorphize the animal as it reaches out for human contact. The bear’s face and emotions are not ferocious, instead seeming to communicate a sense of need and trust. The image’s caption reads, “HARD CHOICES–WE’RE MAKING THEM. LET’S GO.” Having two contradictory meanings, the meme also functions via irony (see Figure 2).

The first available interpretation of “HARD CHOICES” encourages readers to identify, in part, with Shell’s corporate voice as the message source. Shell is making difficult choices and tough decisions to provide the world with energy. Although wrought with ambiguity, making difficult decisions and taking decisive actions are generally regarded as laudable behaviors. A cursory reading of the caption leads to an
interrogation that Shell is proud of its resolve, its vision, its strength, and even its consistency of principles. Such statements, which are essentially vacuous but still rather pleasant-sounding, are characteristic of modern corporate advertising and would fit well alongside other large-scale corporate image campaigns.

But “HARD CHOICES” is also ironic. The ironic interpretation of the HARD CHOICES text requires that readers recognize the difference between making hard choices and making right choices. The ambiguity of the written message, coupled with the image of a vulnerable-looking polar bear reaching toward a young boy for help, suggests that Shell may not be making choices in the polar bear’s interest. In fact, Shell’s actions may be putting the polar bear further out of the boy’s reach. This message proposes that Shell has chosen the pursuit of profit over the well-being of the polar bear, and more generally the environment. Ultimately, this second meaning completely contradicts the first. Here, Shell is no longer the corporate hero, but the corporate villain. Consequently, Shell’s actional legitimacy is called into question, as the audience challenges the soundness of Shell’s decision-making ability.

Greenpeace, specifically, but irony more generally, calls for readers to recognize both available interpretations, but accept only the latter. In order to completely appreciate the irony, the reader must also realize that the message source (which, perhaps unbeknownst to them, is Greenpeace) sets out to create a polysemic text. At

![Energy Independence? We’re Getting Warmer. Let’s Go.](image1)

**Figure 1.** We’re Getting Warmer (Greenpeace).
some point, the reader will also note that HARD CHOICES is not, in fact, Shell’s own ad, but a clever imitation designed to both challenge and undermine Shell’s actional legitimacy. Furthermore, it gives the reader reason to more critically examine any subsequent messages that claim to originate with Shell.

**Speaking like Shell: Mocking corporate speak**

Routinely lampooned in television series’ such as *The Office* and films such as *Office Space*, corporate speak is emblematic of elements of work life that Western society workers dislike. Catch phrases such as “Somebody’s got a case of the Mondays” represent efforts to satirize the corporate speak that thrives in contemporary office environments. These sayings frequently poach sports clichés, e.g., “when the rubber meets the road” or “hitting a home run” with a sales pitch. Holborow (2007) documented the resentment and disgust bred among call center employees forced to employ the corporate speak of customer service. More broadly, we use corporate speak to describe the trite corporate boilerplate language that is infested, not just in customer service scripts, but in every aspect of the corporate voice.

Greenpeace emulates corporate speak in several Arctic Ready memes. By assigning this voice to Shell, the ads seem genuine because of the vacuous but
vaguely pleasant-sounding sloganeering people have come to expect from corpora-
tions. The corporate speak is identifiable by the numerous clichés familiar to most
who have worked in the English-speaking corporate world. However, Greenpeace’s
coop-ting of Shell’s corporate speak ultimately serves to undermine the actional
legitimacy of Shell’s Go Arctic Campaign. Two of the more notable examples are
“OCEAN OF POSSIBILITY” and “PUSHING OUR LIMITS.”

One of the memes leads with the headline, “Some see a frozen wasteland. We see
an ocean of possibility. Let’s go.” (Figure 3). When audiences read this, the voice of a
hiring manager may echo in their ears. The phrase “ocean of possibility” is literally
speaking, nonsensical. Figuratively, it is meant to suggest that, just as the view of an
ocean stretches out into the horizon, seemingly endlessly, a person or a company can
have endless possibility. However, these possibilities may sometimes be hidden, vis-a-
vis other clichés such as “looks may be deceiving” or “don’t judge a book by its
cover.” In this case, the frozen wasteland (which, like the ocean stretches out into the
horizon) conceals the possibility beneath. Of course, in the case of Shell, the
possibility that the company can see is the potential for millions of gallons of crude
oil beneath the ocean floor. The rest of the text in this meme states:

\[\text{Figure 3. Ocean of Possibility (Greenpeace).}\]
Where others see thousands of miles of pristine Arctic terrain, we at Shell see a wealth of opportunity just below the surface—the future of the world’s energy resources. We’re burning the candle at both ends to look below the surface for the things that matter most—natural resources needed to maintain our way of life.

In this message, additional corporate speak clichés are evident. “A wealth of opportunity just below the surface” elaborates on the concealed possibilities described in the headline. Here though, the possibilities are more clearly elucidated as “wealth,” specifically, economic wealth gained from the mining of fossil fuels. Further, the picture in the meme is of two polar bears, crouched on an outcropping of snow-covered ice. Thus, the opportunity (oil) is literally below the “wasteland” of ice and wildlife. Another cliché in this portion of the message, “burning the candle at both ends” is typically an expression used to describe people who are working so hard they are running out of time or are risking their health. Fittingly, Greenpeace assigns this personae to Shell because although “Shell” may be working hard to take advantage of these opportunities or possibilities, their fuel (the candle, or in reality the oil) is a finite resource that the energy exploration industry will soon burn through, putting their actional legitimacy at doubt.

PUSHING OUR LIMITS is another meme that employs corporate speak (Figure 4). The full headline states, “Survival is all about pushing our limits.
Let’s go.” As with OCEAN OF POSSIBILITY, the suggestion here is that we must try our best or make the most of our resources. Here, we might hear the voice of an athletic coach, trying to get the best effort out of a player, or a CEO, imploring employees to surpass the competition. However, the stakes, whether in the sports or corporate world, are rarely literal survival. In the case of the PUSHING OUR LIMITS meme, though, which includes a picture of a polar bear swimming underwater, Greenpeace alludes to a fight for survival with Shell (and likely other similar companies) on one side and polar bears and endangered wildlife on the opposing side. Below the headline, “Shell” elaborates on the importance of pushing our limits:

With Arctic ice dwindling away, polar bears today can swim hundreds of miles in search of food. We’re betting they can go even further. And so can we. At Shell, we’re going the distance to provide for the future, betting on precious resources formerly trapped beneath an impenetrable layer of ice, now freed for the good of humanity. Polar bears were made to swim, and Shell was made to power our way of life. We can all go further.

“Going the distance” and being “made to” do something are also examples of corporate speak clichés. Borrowing from the sports expression for finishing the race or finishing the game, the polar bears are urged to go the distance. Not lost on Greenpeace is that the reason polar bears must swim farther for food is that global warming has depleted the Arctic ice that the predators depend on for habitat and hunting. Although polar bears evolved for arctic swimming, they were not made to swim the distances dictated by climate change. Thus, “Shell” takes faux inspiration from the polar bears, and the oil company will go the distance to allow humanity to go further (in habitat destruction).

A number of the user-generated memes posted to Let’s Go! Arctic Social used a mocking corporate voice to delegitimize Shell (see Figure 5). One user tagged a picture of a sheet of melting arctic ice with the caption, “SOME SAY CATASTROPHE, WE SAY OPPORTUNITY. LET’S GO.” This meme adopts a corporate voice similar to the one in the Greenpeace-generated advertisements.

Cheney (1983) first recognized the use of “the assumed ‘we’ in his analysis of corporate magazines distributed to employees, noting that the practice permits ‘a corporation to present similarity or commonality among organizational members as a taken-for-granted assumption’” (p. 154). Companies not only use this corporate persona in internal communications, but also in external messages. Regardless of the context, the result is that “many messages appear to be from wholly impersonal collective sources” (Cheney & McMillan, 1990, p. 96). Notably, all 10 of the memes produced by Greenpeace employ the assumed “we.” One of the ads bears the headline, “Some see a frozen wasteland. We see an ocean of possibility.” “Shell” is portrayed as a collective identity of persons who see the world more innovatively. Similarly, in ENERGY INDEPENDENCE (analyzed above), recall that the tagline reads “Energy independence? We’re getting warmer.” Shell is portrayed as making progress as a collective.
Still, the most emblematic use of the corporate voice through the assumed “we” is in the tagline of every meme: “Let’s go” or, literally, “Let us go (together).” It is unclear who the “us” is, but there is an assumed collective, a group that is allied with Shell in the cause of Arctic energy exploration. Most cleverly, of course, the “Let’s go” slogan is lifted directly from Shell’s actual campaign to “broaden the world’s energy mix” (see http://www.shell.com/global/aboutshell/lets-go-tpkg.html). Predictably, Shell’s real website is also rife with use of the corporate voice, making Greenpeace’s attempt at delegitimizing all the more potent.

At least one user-generated meme also employed the assumed “we” in an image of a fox with the text “YOU CAN’T RUN YOUR SUV ON CUTE: LET’S GO” (see Figure 6). The meme is loaded with multiple meanings and perspectives. One can imagine this utterance constituting a pointed and appealing argument among the pro-corporate, pro-drilling crowd that would support Shell’s agenda. However, when the text is placed over a photograph of a cute, furry fox that is not altogether different in appearance than one of America’s favorite house pets, the statement seems excessively cruel and callous. The strategy is akin to the humor of Stephen Colbert, who has perfected the art of making comments similar to, or co-opting the language of, opposing rhetoric but wryly altering the context of his delivery to execute the argumentative attack. This sort of incongruity is capable of more than just generating
a humorous reaction—by drawing audiences’ attention to the costs and consequences of Arctic drilling, the meme also crafts a compelling argument against such destructive, profit-driven practices.

Each example of memetic corporate speak tritely and mockingly pranks Shell, using corporate culture and language—prevalent at companies like Shell—to delegitimize official Shell corporate messaging. By adopting the language and look of Shell, Greenpeace undermines the legitimacy of Shell’s corporate communications. Greenpeace hijacks the language and imagery of Shell off to a virtual discursive space free from copyright laws and away from the micro-managed efforts of corporate public relations, advertising, and marketing. It uses the language of Shell itself, as well as language and images that could be easily mistaken for Shell to create an online playground where users can, in essence, taunt Shell, encourage others to do so, and cause confusion about Shell itself and their messages.

Using humor

A number of the user-generated memes feature far less complicated messages despite being far more diverse in content. Many of these memes rely on humor that is not necessarily ironic or mocking of Shell’s corporate voice. While these memes may appear to not function as well because they do not take on Shell’s persona, they are important to understand how the Let’s Go! campaign does and does not work to delegitimize Shell. For instance, a user named Donna placed the caption “ONCE UPON A TIME, OUR HOME WAS CLEAN AND BEAUTIFUL. THEN SHELL SAID LET’S GO.” The accompanying image is of three baby birds cuddling up next to their mother. This meme does not adopt the voice of international corporations but instead adopts the perspective of the, now anthropomorphized, animals in the photograph. The meme does not use the same sense of irony that the
Greenpeace-generated ads do, but can be read as humorous and direct. And like so many other popular memes, it features cute baby animals (see Figure 7).

Another example of a direct, but not ironic, user-generated Let’s Go! Arctic meme used the same photograph of birds, but the language is anything but cuddly. The caption reads, "WE’D DRILL A CRIPPLED ORPHAN’S SPINE IF THERE WAS SOME OIL IN IT," (see Figure 8). In this instance, the “we” does not refer to the birds—but rather Shell itself. The tone here is acerbic and confrontational but the jarringly incongruent mental image of Shell drilling a crippled orphan’s spine for oil may invoke laughter in some audiences. There is little chance that an even moderately savvy reader will conceive that Shell would put such an advertisement in public.

Figure 7. Birds (user-generated).

Figure 8. Crippled Orphan (user-generated).
Some of the user-generated texts had little or no environmental message at all. For instance, some used the meme generator simply to tell jokes about arctic animals. The caption, “WHAT [sic] DO ARCTIC CREATURES SHAVE? THEY DON’T WANT POLAR BEARDS. LET’S GO,” (see Figure 9) was placed beneath an image of sleeping polar bears.

This user-generated meme contains text that is neither an anti-Shell nor a pro-environment message. While this particular creation holds little value in the broader environmental debate, it may function to draw audiences to the meme generator and ultimately be exposed to the other messages on the site. The variety of rhetorical tones and techniques present in those user-generated memes may also help reach audiences who are unimpressed or disengaged with the careful irony present in Greenpeace-generated texts. This meme and other similar memes also serve to exemplify that user-driven campaigns such as this are subject to the whims, interests, and humor of those it attracts. In that sense, campaigns such as Greenpeace’s Let’s Go! Arctic campaign may be subject to going off message when content is user-generated. This, in our view, is not a weakness of the campaign, but rather a means by which people can engage the broader goals of Greenpeace at their own comfort level. Such memes also provide evidence that the user-generated memes are authentic, rather than planted by Greenpeace personnel. Allowing for unfettered play with the
structures of a campaign such as this generates multiple types of engagement, as well as Internet traffic, despite the fact that it does not reflect the Greenpeace themes of irony and corporate speak.

**Conclusion: Delegitimizing Shell through Memetic Irony and the Corporate Personae**

Building on the work of Habermas, scholars have developed a body of legitimacy research over the preceding decades that has revealed legitimacy as a potential rhetorical strategy through which organizations justify both their existence and their actions. However, legitimacy does not go unquestioned. Social media, memes, online cultural play, and the ease of sharing have all made quick responses to corporate actions and policy easier with a higher potential for potency and resonance. We think that memes have the potential to be a potent challenge to corporate legitimacy. The Let’s Go! Arctic campaign empowered ordinary citizens by providing them with tools to create and disseminate their own anti-Shell messages. The campaign’s meme generator helped users express themselves in opposition to Shell’s Arctic drilling plans. The meme generator gave Greenpeace’s supporters the opportunity to merge image and text in such a polished way that the memes briefly but successfully masqueraded as actual Shell advertisements, in a way, hijacking Shell’s legitimacy to benefit Greenpeace and its supporters.

Hill (2012) commented in *Forbes*, that it is “more effective to ram Shell online than it is to send Greenpeace boats out to protest or to handcuff themselves to drilling equipment in the snow” (np). The ramming perpetrated on Shell’s legitimacy via the Let’s Go! campaign was, from a rhetorical standpoint, powerful in attracting media attention and grassroots support. The online campaign succeeded in both the attention it drew in the online world as well as in the physical world. Shell was forced to abandon its plan for drilling in the Arctic and the architect of the plan, and Executive Vice President Dave Lawrence was forced to resign (Shell, 2013; Webb, 2013). The e-campaign described here played an important role in stopping Shell and preserving the Arctic, at least temporarily. Greenpeace’s protest strikes at the very heart of Shell’s perceived legitimacy. Metzler (2001) stated that organizational legitimacy is simply “an organization’s right to exist and conduct operations” (p. 321). The co-opting and ironic usages of Shell’s own words “Let’s Go” call into question Shell’s raison d’être function to delegitimize Shell’s desire and plan for Arctic drilling.

Beyond exploring the apparent utility of the Let’s Go! Arctic campaign, this essay suggests a number of worthwhile implications. In some instances, the Internet can indeed act as a great equalizer. The nature of online campaigns can simultaneously legitimize organizations with relatively few financial resources and marginal influence and delegitimize those with plentiful resources. Greenpeace’s phony advertisements resonate partially because they targeted corporatism in general. These messages posed as corporate discourse, then pointed to, exploited, and intensified audiences’ distrust of corporate rhetoric and corporate activity, ultimately undermining the legitimacy of
corporate action. We are also not naive enough to believe that the rhetorical and material battle over Arctic drilling and the Arctic oil supply is over or can be finalized by images of polar bears and jokes. While the Let’s Go! campaign did, in part, make Shell halt their 2013 drilling plans, indications are that, at some point in the future, Shell will continue their efforts. Whether or not Greenpeace can continue to maintain mobilization against Shell on this issue remains to be seen.

Note

1. We have noted for all memes whether they were created by Greenpeace or were user-generated.

References


