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## DISRUPTIVE HUMOR: A CITIZEN PERSPECTIVE IN SOCIAL MEDIA IMAGES FROM MASS PROTESTS

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### Introduction

A humorous photograph of a man holding up a sign and walking through the protests against the G20 summit in Hamburg is one of the most shared tweets posted during the anti-capitalist Welcome to Hell demonstration taking place on 6 July 2017. Instead of a protest slogan, however, the handwritten sign says: “I am a local resident, and I am just going to Edeka [German supermarket chain]”. Various photographs of the man taken in different places are shared prominently in social media feeding into the narrative of the G20 protests. This is only one of the various images and videos from the protests that humorously juxtapose everyday activities with protest scenes such as burning barricades as well as police in full gear.

While previous research has shown that activists, police and institutional media alike share their perspectives from political protests in social media (Neumayer, Rossi & Karlsson 2016; Neumayer & Rossi 2018), these seemingly neutral perspectives on the actual conflict have received relatively little attention. Humorous images from conflict in social media have mainly been studied as memes (e.g., Bayerl & Stoykov, 2015; Jensen, Neumayer & Rossi 2020). In this research we ask which role such images play for the representation of political protest in social media.

### Data collection and methods

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To do so, we collected tweets (n=678.946) based on protest hashtags #NoG20, #BlockG20, #NoG20HH, #WelcomeToHell, #W2H, #G20Ham17, #G20ProtestWelle, #G20HH17, #G20HH2017 and #SmashG20 from the G20 demonstrations in Hamburg in the time period 6 (18.00) to 8 July 2017 (18.00). We extracted a retweet network and we performed a community detection observing how the main cluster where either connected with media actors, the police or activists. Furthermore, we coded the tweets that received 80 or more retweets for the presence of visual content and, in case of visual content, for its humorous or non-humorous nature. We also identify narratives in relation to the protests in these images and including contextual material linked to the images (such as articles from news media), we further analyzed 20 humorous image tweets.

### Disruptive humor in Twitter images from protest

Out of 198 tweets that received more that 80 retweets, 128 had a visual content. The majority of those with a visual content had a non-humorous content (97 vs 31). Nevertheless, as visible from Figure 1, humorous content receives more retweets.

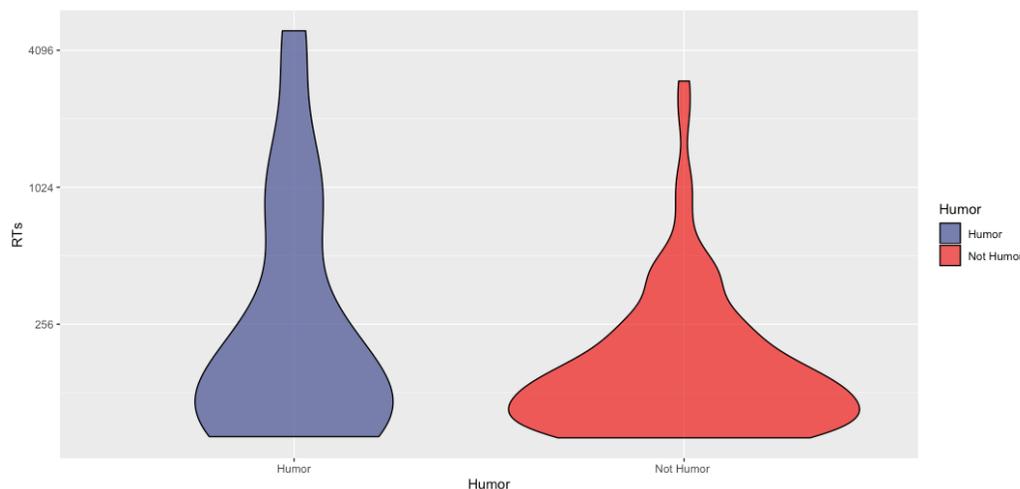


Figure 1: Retweets received from humorous and non humorous visual content. (Tweets with > 80 retweets).

We find that while we can detect communities around user accounts of activist collectives, media institutions, and authorities (such as the Hamburg police), we cannot observe a network centered around user accounts of residents of Hamburg. This suggests that as seemingly neutral humorous perspectives these images do neither take the side of the activists or the authorities. Rather, they seem to be shared across various communities in the network. Yet, some of the images coded as humorous are among the most frequently shared tweets based on number of retweets and mentions.

Through a narrative analysis of the most frequently shared humorous image tweets, we find that the humor in the images was mainly achieved through the juxtaposition between the everyday life of citizens (such as shopping or cooking) being disrupted by the mass protests and particularly conflicts between protesters and authorities (such as burning barricades, riots, police in full gear). These images gain a high level of visibility within the social media logic (Poell & van Dijck, 2015), as they do not take sides in the conflictual situation between protesters and authorities and use humor combined with

strong visuals. They represent a form of connective witnessing (Mortensen, 2015) from the perspective of residents of the city of Hamburg. Yet, unlike images that bear witness of violent police action, they do not take sides in the conflict but are seemingly neutral. They represent the ambiguity of digital media culture (Phillips & Milner, 2018) of these images produced by residents of Hamburg to make visible how their everyday life is disrupted by the conflictual protests. Yet, they also convey the narrative of being *just for the lulz* (fun, laughter, or amusement), while they at the same time become part of the representation of conflictual events. This is amplified by news media such as *Der Stern* magazine (Wachter, 2017) taking up the social media images and investigating and reporting about the story behind the comedian holding up the sign (see introduction).

While these images might be posted and shared as a humorous dealing with the conflicting situation by residents in Hamburg (see Jensen et al. 2020, for similar observations), we argue that these seemingly apolitical images and videos shared across communities, still play a disruptive role in the narrative about political protest. Users are perhaps more inclined to share these humorous juxtapositions in social media than political messages, as they do not actively take sides and cater the ambiguous humor in internet culture. The privileging of humorous content over political action or violent imagery, however, might push activists' grievances in the background and make activists' actions appear as disruptive to the everyday life of residents of Hamburg. Doing so, they delegitimize the actions and grievances of the activists by pushing the disruption of their everyday lives in the foreground and the burning barricades seemingly in the background. The juxtaposition stresses the barricades as an important element of the visual narrative of disruption but detached from the political grievances that they should express.

With these findings, this research contributes to our understanding of how the logics of social media might influence narratives of contemporary protests. It also contributes by focusing on the role seemingly apolitical humorous images might play in the representation of protest in social media and turns our attention towards the seemingly apolitical sharing of these images by citizens.

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