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**“Brussels will land on its feet like a cat”:
Motivations for memefying #Brusselslockdown**

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Abstract

This article explores user motivations for sharing and creating internet memes in a crisis situation. For this purpose, we investigate the kitten memes in #Brusselslockdown on Twitter, following the Brussels security lockdown in November 2015 that resulted from information about potential terrorist attacks. We use a social network analysis to identify three user groups: content producers, content sharers, and conversationalists. On the basis of interviews with users from these three groups, we argue that the motivations for sharing and creating memes range from personal involvement in the crisis situation to acts of resistance to creative self-realization. We conclude by arguing that a combination of motifs and activities employ the visuality of internet memes to express popular internet culture, resistance, and solidarity as well as a humorous means of coping with the crisis situation. **As a form of solidarity beyond the political, internet memes create tension between a crisis event, the mundane, terror, resistance, and humour.**

Keywords: Brussels, lockdown, social media, Twitter, memes, crises.

Introduction

I feel much can be learned from cats' behavior. They tend not to hold grudges. They bounce back quickly and move forward from whatever situation they face. In essence, they don't carry much of the baggage that humans tend to bring to the table. In some ways, it was a way of telling low life terrorists that Brussels will land on its feet like a cat. (Interview 2)

On 21 November 2015, the Belgian government declared a citywide lockdown of the capital city, Brussels, due to the suspected presence of terrorists responsible for the attacks in Paris a week earlier. The severity of the situation, which developed into a level-four security alert, became apparent during the numerous police and military raids conducted throughout Brussels. These strenuous efforts to find prominent actors in the terrorist network affected the lives of many Brussels residents. As has been observed during other intense offline events (Bruns & Burgess, 2014), the citizens of Brussels took to social media to broadcast the lockdown, which in turn led to the online platforms being filled with information on what was occurring in Brussels. Twitter featured particularly active discussion of the lockdown, making #Brusselslockdown hashtag a trending topic for a number of days. The activities of Twitter users, who disclosed the whereabouts of the police and military, created concern that terrorists would be able to anticipate raids and thereby avoid capture. On 22 November, Belgian police asked Twitter users not to reveal any further information about the operations in Brussels during the ongoing lockdown with the tweet: "For security, please respect the radio silence on social media concerning the police operations underway in #Brussels. Thank you" (translated from French). Other government officials followed this example, with the Belgian defense minister tweeting: "Police are asking the public not to report their movements on social media, please support & rt #Brusselslockdown." Twitter users obliged, though not by refraining from using the hashtag or from tweeting in general. #Brusselslockdown was instead flooded with image tweets of kittens, as Twitter users deployed humor to cope with the crisis as well as to resist both the police (by continuing to tweet) and the terrorists (by flooding the information with 'noise'). Over several days, users from around the world tweeted kittens in #Brusselslockdown. International news media reacted with headlines such as "These cats are

fighting terrorism” (CBS News, 2015), “Belgium’s surreal #Brusselslockdown dancing cats” (Day, 2015), and “Twitter flooded with photos of kittens in support of manhunt for terror suspect” (Noack, 2015). A number of news media organizations furthermore reported that the tweets were an ironic reference to the newly raised security level four, which in French (*quatre*) is pronounced the same as *cat* (Sims, 2015).

While several studies have investigated memes in situations of conflict and crisis (Wiggins, 2016), limited attention has been paid to the motivations of the users who produce and disseminate these memes. This study uses a mixed methods approach to investigate the propagation of #Brusselslockdown and the reasons why users posted kittens on Twitter as a response to the lockdown. A social network analysis is employed to identify different categories of user profiles and to sample from all the user profiles that were active in producing and sharing lolcat memes in #Brusselslockdown. Interviews with users who produced, shared, and discussed these memes were then conducted to learn about the motivations for posting kittens on Twitter. Comparison of the interview findings from across the user categories reveals that motivations for participating in #Brusselslockdown by sharing kitten memes on Twitter as well as users’ awareness of the crisis situation in Brussels varied across different user types. On the basis of these findings, we argue that, in socially complex situations such as the Brussels lockdown, memes are a product not just of their creators but also of meme distributors, social media networks, and a media spectacle that triggers attention by a large audience. This combination of motivations turns meme production into a humorous way of subverting police orders as well as of countering terrorists. Producing noise by retweeting kitten memes creates a form of sociality beyond the political, transforming the spectacle into an ephemeral form of participation and engagement.

Lolcats, memes, and crises

Lolcats and memes are deeply rooted in internet culture, with symbolic and cultural technological functionalities allowing for replicability and remixing (Shifman, 2014). Reacting to the Brussels lockdown with lolcats on Twitter expresses a humorous way of coping with the situation as well as a playful resistance to following orders from authorities, without however truly hindering their work. As the *New York Times* put it:

The people of Twitter decided to respond with what will now be known as an internationally recognized symbol of solidarity: cat photos. [...] The cats appeared with machine guns, French fries and beer to comfort the citizens of Brussels, who need it (Rogers, 2015).

This process makes visible the politicization of internet memes as well as the blurred boundaries between pop culture, activism, and humorous response to crises when it comes to the showing of solidarity on social media. Although lolcat memes are today part of popular internet culture, they originated on 4chan, the birthplace of the internet activists Anonymous and a site for jokes, hyperbolic statements, pornography, and offensiveness.

<<ADD FIGURE 1 HERE>>

Figure 1: Lolcat memes posted in #Brusselslockdown.

According to Shifman (2016), internet memes are indicative of an active internet culture and are an important element of civic participation in digital media. The images and videos share common characteristics, are distributed online by numerous of participants, and are created with awareness of other images and videos that are regarded as belonging to the same group of memes. Wiggins (2016, p. 453) defines an internet meme as an “remixed, iterated message that is rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity.” Crisis memes, which use templates of popular images to manifest freedom of expression, can be helpful for understanding humorous responses to challenging events (Rintel, 2013). Lolcats in particular have been used to express certain emotions in an unacceptable manner, as underlined by their origins on 4Chan (Miltner, 2014). We can argue that the lolcat response to the police appeal that people not post any useful information during the Brussels lockdown was simultaneously a socially inappropriate response to crisis and an appropriate response to an official request. Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) convincingly argue that memes can be used as “discursive weapons” at the peak of conflicts to strengthen the community and provide reminders of cultural affinity within the broader of the community. The cultural, functional, and historical features of the meme must thus be understood in the context of its propagation on social media. However, if we wish to enhance our understanding of the communities built around the meme as a cultural form, we must also consider users’ motivations for creating and sharing memes.

Twitter and crises

The memes of the Brussels lockdown were mainly propagated on Twitter. Twitter has been subject to numerous studies within different disciplines and fields of research (Weber, Garimella, & Teka, 2013). The platform has been studied in the contexts of news media (Bruns & Burgess, 2014; Bruns & Highfield, 2015; Highfield, 2016), public communication, and crisis communication. Twitter in particular and social media in general have undergone a process of legitimation, transforming the digital space from a platform for personal status updates (Burgess et al., 2017) into a legitimate platform for the communication activities of numerous commercial and public organizations (Bruns & Burgess, 2014).

There are two primary lines of research exploring the use of social media during crises. One of these concerns the manner in which emergency management organizations have adopted digital technologies and inserted them into their response activities (White, Plotnick, Kushma, Hiltz, & Turoff, 2009). The other focuses on users' use of these technologies during times of crisis. Within this latter line of research, we see researchers focusing on how users deploy social media to provide data and information in order to assist in rescue operations (Sutton, Palen, & Shklovski, 2008) as well as researchers focusing on how peer-support practices are facilitated by social media (Vieweg, Hughes, Starbird, & Palen, 2010). Within the emergent area of crisis informatics (Heverin & Zach, 2010), scholars have focused on the network aspects of information propagation as well as on issues related to trust in and the veracity of propagated content (Mendoza, Poblete, & Castillo, 2010), which clearly affect how information shared on social media can be used by emergency management organizations.

The ways in which a crisis event affects Twitter are dependent on a number of factors, such as the duration of the event, the adoption rate of Twitter among the general population, and the use of Twitter by the institutional actors managing the emergency. During crisis events, Twitter users quickly move outside their network of followers to address an *ad hoc* public identified by crisis-specific hashtags (Bruns & Hanusch, 2017). While hashtags can be any combination of numbers and letters, they quickly tend to converge toward a single, event-specific hashtag that is unambiguous for users. In the process, traditional sources of authority seem to remain central. Pre-existing authority is key to visibility in the context of crisis communication, in which retweeting activity dwarfs the production of original content (Bruns & Burgess, 2014; Bruns & Stieglitz,

2013). While the aforementioned studies focus on how networks materialize within Twitter, relatively little is known about user motivations for participating in a hashtag.

From this perspective, #Brusselslockdown presents unique characteristics. On the one hand, it seems clear that the hashtag originally started as a case of crisis communication. Offline events triggered a response from social media users, who used the platform to share their experiences, comment on what was occurring, and inform one another. A shared hashtag quickly emerged, and both newspapers and individual Twitter users began sharing and propagating news. Then something unexpected happened. Belgian police, realizing the public nature of Twitter communication, asked Twitter users to mute their activity. This does not fit the traditional scheme of Twitter-based crisis communication, in which information may be deemed as of questionable reliability but is often understood as valuable and worth sharing, monitoring, and processing. During #Brusselslockdown, users were explicitly asked to mute their participation. This did not happen. To the contrary, users changed their participation into something else.

Participation on social media

There has been significant discussions as to whether and how social media shape and potentially foster new forms of political participation (Dahlgren, 2013; Bakardjieva, 2015; Svensson, Neumayer, Banfield-Mumb, & Schossböck, 2015). It has become common to lament reflexive online participation as feel-good 'slacktivism' (Morozov, 2011) or 'clicktivism' (White, 2010), with the implication that genuine participation requires a higher level of action than simply sharing or liking on social media. Users' ability to create content seemingly provides possibilities for active political participation and engagement. When defining slacktivism and clicktivism as a set of small-scale actions, such as liking a picture or changing a Facebook profile picture to show solidarity with victims of terrorist attacks, the underlying assumption is that this form of engagement mainly contributes to the positive portrayal of an online identity (Vie, 2014). Using memes and hashtags as a form of political participation (e.g., Thrift, 2014) can, however, also be seen as a form of cultural participation. These forms of engagement have been conceptualized as subactivism (Bakardjieva, 2009) and everyday life politics (Highfield, 2016), which are part of political identity formation online.

In these forms of engagement, the political becomes personal, and ephemeral, performative acts are transformed into political engagement. As Highfield and Leaver (2016) argue, humorous visual social media content can simultaneously be a political and a mundane expression concerning both ordinary events and extraordinary events such as crises. While there is agreement that creating internet memes is a form of shared practice and engagement in internet culture, their political potential remains contested (see Bayerl & Stoykov, 2016; Shifman, 2013; Wiggins, 2016). This is partly because studies of internet memes have thus far focused mainly on the memes themselves, their visuality, and their meaning for visual internet culture (see for example Bayerl & Stoykov, 2016; Shifman, 2012). Studies that enter into a dialogue with participants in phenomena such as #Brusselslockdown usually begin by engaging with individuals who themselves engage with the crisis or political situation and *also* ask about their online actions. In this study, we take a different approach: We start with the online phenomenon and sample from #Brusselslockdown in order to understand the various dimensions of the phenomenon in terms of user motivations. We do so by investigating the users behind various types of participation during the #Brusselslockdown event. The various types of participants are identified through a social network analysis applied to #Brusselslockdown Twitter data, as detailed in the next section.

From hashtag to user motivations

The present study builds upon a mixed-methods approach to achieve three main goals: 1) to map users' activity during #Brusselslockdown, 2) to identify structurally different types of users who are active in the network, and 3) to investigate user motivations. From this perspective, the various approaches are deeply intertwined rather than merely combined, with network analysis techniques used to map the network and to select and identify relevant respondents for the qualitative interviews. Given that the research goal was not to study the initial phase of #Brusselslockdown use but to instead focus on the motivations of users who kept posting cats memes using the hashtag, the data collection occurred during the central phase of the event, deliberately avoiding the initial and the concluding phases. Tweets have been collected using DiscoverText. A random selection of 50,000 tweets has been collected on one day (23 November 2015) using the hashtag #Brusselslockdown. This is two days after the start of the physical lockdown of the city and one day after the request from the Belgian police that the public not reveal any information about police

work on social media. That is, the sample was collected at the peak of the hashtag's 'kitten invasion'.

The 50,000 tweets in our collection were composed by 35,797 unique users, with an average of 1.39 tweets per user. The goal of this large sample is to support identification of specific users for qualitative investigation. This has been done through three complementary approaches: users have been ranked based on the number of tweets produced (first ranking parameter), a network analysis of interactions among users allowed us to identify those users who retweeted most actively (second ranking parameter), and the network analysis allowed us to identify those users who interacted within tightly clustered groups – understood as proxies for conversational activities (Rossi & Giglietto, 2016) (third ranking parameter).

These three ranking criteria have been defined on the basis of three types of uses of Twitter during crisis situations that have been identified by previous research (Austin, Fisher Liu, & Jin, 2012; Cho, Jung, & Park, 2013): a) the production of grassroots information, b) the selection and dissemination of valuable information in order to augment its visibility for a larger audience, and c) the use of Twitter as a conversational medium in order to obtain emotional support.

Sampling from the #Brusselslockdown network

The exploration of kitten memes in #Brusselslockdown as it unfolded on social media requires a method for sampling user profiles from the communication network surrounding #Brusselslockdown (obtained through the combination of retweet and reply messages). The network contains 31,661 nodes and 37,758 edges. The number of nodes in the communication network is close to the total number of unique users in the entire dataset (35,797). This demonstrates the overwhelming role played by replying and retweeting activity during the event. The centrality of replies and retweets has been observed in previous cases of crisis communication (Bruns & Burgess, 2014; authors). Nevertheless, the retweeting activity in the case of #Brusselslockdown is particularly noteworthy because the information value of the retweeting activity was strongly reduced by the actual request from the authorities to refrain from posting any meaningful information. While users were asked not to provide actual information about the police

operations, users began retweeting kitten memes as a method of drowning any potentially sensitive information in noise (see Brunton & Nissenbaum, 2015).

< ADD FIGURE 2 HERE >

Figure 2: Communication network of #Brusselslockdown. Node size ranked according to out-degree. (Only nodes with degree > 10 are visualized. Colors represent community detected through modularity optimization.)

A visual analysis of the communication network built from the Twitter data reveals some interesting dynamics. When studying the distinction between retweeting users (content sharers) and retweeted users, we can observe several major clusters of actors within the content sharers network (Figure 1). A qualitative exploration of the user profiles forming the ten largest clusters within the network shows how these clusters are defined by the language spoken by users. Users tend to share or communicate mainly within linguistically homogeneous groups.

Starting from the Twitter data and the network generated from it, we identified three ranking parameters to support the selection of informants for qualitative interviews. The first ranking criteria is the overall quantity of content produced during the sampling period. We call this first type of user a ‘content producer’. The second parameter was the overall quantity of retweets received during the same period. We call this second type of user a ‘content sharer’. The third ranking parameter was identified through a study of the clustering coefficient (Watts & Strogatz, 1998). The clustering coefficient is a metric that measures the degree to which nodes tend to cluster together, and it can be measured either as a network metric or as an individual metric for each node. Previous research into second-screen TV has used the local clustering coefficient value as a proxy for conversational activity taking place within a Twitter network (Rossi & Giglietto, 2016). In the #Brusselslockdown network, users with a high local clustering coefficient can be assumed to be engaged in intensive conversational dynamics with other users rather than to just be active in retweeting content. We call this third user type a ‘conversationalist’. Table 1 shows the top-5 users for each of the aforementioned categories. A user can appear several times if it happens to be ranked among the top-5 users in more than one category.

<ADD TABLE 1 HERE >

Table 1: Top-5 users ranked according to a) number of tweets produced, b) retweets, c) clustering coefficient.

From these three user types, we selected users who were invited for interviews. For every ranking method and user type, we manually inspected the top-50 users. As the research focus is on individual users' motivations for participating in #Brusselslockdown, we manually filtered out Twitter accounts belonging to news organizations, media institutions, and various other types of user accounts of organizations or corporations.

Interviewing Twitter users

After excluding all Twitter accounts that showed institutional, governmental, or corporate affiliation, users coded as 'no affiliation' were invited for interviews. The invitations were sent as a direct message on Twitter. Across all user types, 123 user accounts have been contacted with an invitation for interviews: 43 content producers, 31 content sharers, and 49 conversationalists. As the users were located across different parts of the world, the interviews were conducted online, though we are aware of the problems with conducting online interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Users who responded to the interview invitation on Twitter received a personal message containing further information about the research and interviews as well as the option of choosing between different types of online interviews: oral Skype interviews (with or without video), written Skype interviews, or e-mail interviews. All interviews were conducted in English. While written e-mail interviews allow for participants to overthink answers, they may also lead to higher-quality responses (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). Given the different language areas, the possibility of e-mail or written Skype interviews might have reduced possible language barriers. The final choice was left to the individual participant so that he/she would be as comfortable as possible with the interview setting.

As the respondents were chosen based on their Twitter activity, numerous factors were not known prior to the interviews (e.g., whether the interviewees were aware of the offline situation that initiated the sharing of kitten memes in hashtag #Brusselslockdown). To allow for flexibility depending on participants' responses while still asking the relevant questions, the interviews were designed as semi-structured. This interview type renders impossible a simple e-mail interview in which the interviewee receives an e-mail with all the questions and responds to them (McCoyd &

Kerson, 2006). Instead, the e-mail interviews were conducted in a manner similar to a written Skype conversation: some initial interview questions were sent, and after receiving answers to these questions, respondents were sent follow-up questions.

11 interviews were conducted: Six with content sharers, three with content producers, and two with conversationalists (see Table 2). The interviews were conducted in two phases. First, the interviews with six content sharers have been conducted and analyzed. Then, building on initial knowledge about user motivations and activities from the first phase, five content producers and conversationalists were interviewed in the second phase. The interviews were conducted between April and November 2016.

<ADD TABLE 2 HERE>

Table 2: List of interviews with top posters.

Motivations for creating and sharing in #Brusselslockdown

*This, dear outsiders, is how we fight terrorism here. They haven't got a chance!
We haz kittens! #Brusselslockdown (@Gilles_EU, Twitter, 23/11/2015)*

#Brusselslockdown was, according to media reports, a humorous response to crisis and a response, moreover, that reflected Belgian culture and national attitude (see CBC News, 2015; Day, 2015; Noack, 2015). The sharing of kitten memes was a way to resist the police by not following the order of not tweeting about the lockdown as well as the terrorists by producing noise and distorting information. This form of humorous response is based on the engagement of a large number of Twitter users. To further understand their motivations for posting and sharing memes in #Brusselslockdown, we present the results from the interviews with the three user types from which we sampled: content producers, content sharers, and conversationalists.

The political content sharer

It was quite a scandal for me to realize that terrorists are on Twitter so personally I posted the hashtag to say I'm not okay with that. To symbolically give the terrorist the finger, I suppose.

They would not be finding any useful information in my tweets and that was my way of telling them to piss off. Excuse my language. (Interview 1)

The respondents who predominantly retweeted in #Brusselslockdown generally reflect the assumptions made by researchers and media alike. The motivation for sharing kitten memes was a combined affective and political response to the crisis situation. As the quote from Interview 1 indicates, users strategically produced noise to confuse terrorists. The underlying motivation is to make Twitter useless for terrorists and to reclaim the space by producing useless information. Content sharers were generally aware of the events in Brussels and wished to help the people of Brussels as well as to protest against terrorism. The humorous character of the kitten memes was also a method by which content sharers who lived outside of Belgium could express solidarity and sympathy in the context of the crisis:

The Belgians used the hashtag to make it more complicated for the suspect(s) to uncover the information about police movements that might have been shared via Twitter. [...] And, I guess, to amuse Belgians themselves because the situation offline was really tense and it had been going on for days. (Interview 3)

People were continuing to be themselves by being ironic and crazy like Belgian people can be, and I loved it and immediately started retweeting everything about those cats. (Interview 4)

Cultural awareness and knowledge about the lockdown were combined with a feeling of solidarity and a desire to support the political action of countering terrorism by producing noise on Twitter. The humorous response was regarded as a way of coping with the crisis situation without following police orders or, in the case of content sharers from abroad, of supporting and showing solidarity the people of Brussels. Concurrently, the posting of kitten memes in #Brusselslockdown made apparent the public nature and traceability of tweets:

Actually, I was frizzled and quite uncomfortable with the tweet. Who knew terrorists would ever look at Twitter and use what we post? [Laughs uncomfortably] (Interview 1)

The awareness that anyone – including potential terrorists – could read tweets was frightening, and the humorous response was simultaneously a coping strategy, an act of resistance to terrorists, and a reclaiming of Twitter by users. Content sharers realized the public nature and visibility of their communication (and the unintended consequences of this) as a result of the message tweeted by the police and the response to that message. Although all interviewed content sharers were aware of the context of #Brusselslockdown, the respondents state that their source of the contextual knowledge was not Twitter or other social media but was instead news media sources such as online newspapers or television news:

Yes well, I found the hashtag when it was trending because I follow UK newspapers on Twitter, and I thought it hilarious that all these cats were suddenly on my screen. [...] The cats were mindboggling though so of course I had to look it up, and when I saw the Sun [UK newspaper] had reported a tweet from the Brussels police authorities I understood. (Interview 1)

Although the contextual information was mainly provided by news media sources, contextual knowledge was highly relevant in motivating action in the fight against terrorists and assisting but also resisting the police, even though the crisis produced a humorous response. While these are the underlying motivations, the act of retweeting was clearly mentioned as a form of resistance or protest. Refraining from posting ‘useful information’ to resist the terrorists combined with the outrage against the unexpected perceived abuse of social media to produce the posting of memes as an act of resistance: “No, not rebellion but maybe a protest?” (Interview 1). The ironic pictures of kittens are perceived as an act of defiance against terror and their collective retweeting as a form of collective action:

I know others wouldn’t, but I really appreciated the national action to keep the terrorists at bay. And it was done by completely normal people like you and I, which is very cool and empowering [laughs]. (Interview 4)

The empowerment expressed by content sharers as a result of retweeting memes – even when experiencing the lockdown from a distance – emphasizes the presence of an underlying motivation of being part of and participating in collective action. This included advanced methods of what

Brunton and Nissenbaum (2015) term ‘obfuscation’ by filling the hashtag with noise using Twitter bots:

I [...] decided to set up a IFTTT¹ recipe to look for tweets with this hashtag and post them automated on my timeline. This is the reason for the high number of my tweets with this hashtag. If you look closely, you will see that they are all reposts from other users and none of them is actually written by me. This is true for all the other cascades of tweets on my profile. (Interview 6)

Despite awareness of the context and the strategic deployment of Twitter to support the actions in #Brusselslockdown, this comment reminds us to refrain from making assumptions based solely on Twitter data. A diversity of strategies can lead the production of digital data that we observe, and assumptions about user intentionality require further investigation through interviews. This concurrently challenges the assumption that retweeting is a ‘lazy’ form of political action on social media since the setting up of bots, for example, might be indicative of a high level of activity by one individual user. The motivations of the content sharers can be summarized as protesting against terrorists’ presence on Twitter; seeking to help the police as well as subvert their orders; awareness of and interest in the lockdown; and finding kitten memes funny, uplifting, and a good way of coping with the crisis situation, bearing in mind a general awareness of the situation in Brussels.

The **apolitical** content producer

Any excuse to post a picture of a cute cat, right? (Interview 8)

While producing memes and posting them on Twitter is usually considered a higher level of engagement and creative resistance than simply retweeting content, this is not the case for the content producers we interviewed. The users whose kitten memes were frequently retweeted did not show great interest in the event but instead stress the humorous nature of the memes and their fondness for memes and cats. While they understood what was happening during the crisis, they were not following the news or interested in the lockdown itself. They instead followed the online

¹ IFTTT web service that allows a user to create applets. Applets are chains of simple conditional statements that can be triggered by changes occurring within other web services. For example, an applet could share something on Facebook every time a tweet containing a specific hashtag is detected.

conversation to see the humorous content, which motivated them to participate by creating and sharing their own memes:

It's not that I hate Brussels or anything, because I did see the news of the lockdown and I was sad. [...] But I just do not want to constantly see this negative stuff, so I only looked at tweets with that hashtag if they had a gif or meme in them. But, of course I only posted my gif because I knew what that hashtag was about. I think I would be too confused otherwise. (Interview 9)

Rather than supporting the cause of producing noise to confuse terrorists, the content producers followed the hashtag to gain inspiration for their own creativity in producing memes. The creativity invested in the memes was mentioned as the primary motivation for participating in #Brusselslockdown. The crisis provided an opportunity for users to express their creativity in a humorous manner, as part of their online personalities:

It's funny! And I like being funny. My twitter is about being funny... it is all memes and gifs and vines. I have maybe misunderstood what #Brusselslockdown is about.. it is not about free internet is it?. But if I knew I would still post this funny picture because I like making them and this was the thing people tweeted in this hashtag. I saw many. If I had had time I would have made more than 1. (Interview 7)

The actual lockdown was not a motivating factor in their creation of memes. They were instead motivated by a desire to showcase their creativity and reach a large audience. The contextual uncertainty did not prevent them from participating, but the main motivation for participating was that the hashtag was considered 'funny' and was regarded as a forum for creative engagement. The global visibility provided by the hashtag was also mentioned as an interesting opportunity for attracting more followers, gaining visibility, and being retweeted:

I want more followers so I need to be RT'ed. It's really that simple, even though it sounds really bad now that I think about the situation, but come on... every meme that goes viral earns people a ton of followers, and that's pretty cool!!! (Interview 8)

While the content creators' desire to showcase and nurture their own humor and creativity was not politically motivated, the creators nevertheless played an important role in the phenomenon of #Brusselslockdown. With their creative input and production of noise (whatever the **self-centered** motives), they increased the noise produced and contributed humorous kitten memes that received large numbers of retweets. The #Brusselslockdown would not have been possible without them. The content producers' motivations can be summarized as seeing other users post kittens in the hashtag and wishing to participate in the creative event, finding kitten memes funny, seeking opportunities for creativity, and seeking retweets and new followers (i.e., an audience for their creative productions), with little interest in the actual context of #Brusselslockdown.

The engaged conversationalist

Among conversationalists (those who used Twitter's most interactive features), motivations differed. They described themselves as worried about the lockdown in Brussels, making it clear that they understood the entire timeline and situation. One interviewee who sent direct tweets to another user containing a cat meme with the text 'We're doomed' explained:

I do not know why it was cats that everyone posted but ofc I did too. For me it was the text that was important. [...] A terrorist attack had just happened in Paris and now this. I was showing my friend that I am worried about the world and what is happening in our countries because she is from Belgium. Very worried and scared. (Interview 10)

In this case, connections with the attacks in Paris were made, and the Brussels lockdown was understood as part of a series of terrorist attacks. Although the tweet contained a lolcat, the message contained fear of destruction. Interviewees used wordings that indicate that they wanted to *do something* after reading the tweet from Belgian police. Their tweets were direct tweets as well as retweets to and from the same users, and these tweets contained kitten memes even though they were writing their own tweet text as well, discussing the situation with their counterpart. The kitten memes held symbolic meaning for them:

Cats are sweet and cute and you know... the opposite of terrorism, so for me it was me saying 'go away, no more terrorists here' [...] But cats are very big on the Internet so it was a type of saying 'we want the Internet back from you evil people, go away from our Internet'.

Remember to make me anonymous in this because we know terrorists are probably also using Google, and I don't want them to find me. (Interview 11)

My daughter explained to me why police did not want us to tweet, because terrorists were also users. I hate it... My pictures was of cats with guns to terrorists' heads to say they are not welcome here or on Facebook. (Interview 10)

These users were motivated by a desire to protest against the terrorists' right to be on the internet. The conversationalists sought to reclaim the space with humorous and sweet pictures of kittens accompanying their text. For them, the kitten memes were not simply a way of producing noise but also symbolized the 'real' inhabitants of the internet, a place where terrorists are not welcome. In summary, conversationalists were motivated to participate in #Brusselslockdown because they protested terrorists' right to internet access and/or because they were concerned about, emotionally and politically engaged and had a strong interest in the lockdown.

Creating #Brusselslockdown

It emerges from the interviews that a great variety of motivations underly engagement in phenomena such as #Brusselslockdown. If we look at the actual motivations for creating and sharing internet memes, one type of user showed strikingly little interest in the lockdown and the crisis situation surrounding it. The meme producers, whose kitten memes received large numbers of retweets, were mainly focused on the content itself and not on the phenomenon or situation leading up to it. Their motivation was based on the memes alone (independent of the situation or context in which the memes were embedded) as a catalyst for their own creativity, fun, large audience, and the shared cultural practices of producing kitten memes. When considering this type of participant in #Brusselslockdown, it is of little use to draw upon concepts such as subactivism (Bakardjieva, 2009), everyday politics on social media (Highfield, 2017), or civic culture (Dahlgren, 2000) since all these concepts start from the assumption that there is a motivation for changing a situation. Similarly, feel-good 'slacktivism' (Morozov, 2011) or 'clicktivism' (White, 2010) are based on the assumption that participants wish to act politically but only engage in a lazy (online) form of action. Solely explaining their participation as a form of shared cultural practice (Shifman, 2013), however, would understate the important role the meme producers played in the act of resistance against the terrorists who had invaded not just Brussels but also Twitter itself. Despite their important role in

#Brusselslockdown, the content producers' acts cannot be conceptualized as engagement, given that they were unaware of the wider context. The only decision these users made was to create content that would potentially help them gain followers, give them an opportunity to express their creativity, and entertain them. The hashtag merely served as a (replaceable) platform for a cultural practice, irrespective of the context.

The user types who were highly engaged with the Brussels lockdown, showed a high level of awareness, and had political motivations for engaging were those who, from an online action perspective, showed the lowest levels of activity: They tweeted or retweeted but did not create their own memes. Content sharers and conversationalists had a fair understanding of the crisis situation, the act of resistance – as well as the particular roles they played. They clearly expressed their engagement and deliberate decision to support the collective online action by posting or reposting memes. Due to their awareness of the lolcat memes status as a tool for participating in this online action, the otherwise-humorous content took on new meanings – not revealing any information about police to the terrorists as well as reclaiming Twitter and the city of Brussels by liberating them from the terrorists.

Internet memes are part of the wider social media ecology. They are often used to make fun of everyday situations but can also be deployed in relation to more serious issues in politics and society. The context in which the shared cultural practice of producing internet memes is situated thus determines the memes' collective meaning – even though the individual content producer might be unaware of it. Building upon the concept of everyday politics, we could argue that the residents (in this case, Twitter users) have taken a major societal crisis and both personalized and homogenized it by (re-)producing commonly known internet memes. While many people may struggle to relate to the lockdown of a city, **the mundanity of a picture** displaying a cat looking sternly into a book of military strategy is something most people will understand, find entertaining, and perhaps even regard as a motivation for participation.

Conclusion

While internet memes often emerge from forms of visual representation (images, videos, drawings) of a political or social situation and are subsequently get decontextualized (see Mortensen, 2017; Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2015; Wiggins, 2016), in the case considered by the present study, this

process was reversed. In the crisis situation of the Brussels lockdown, lolcat memes were appropriated as a form of collective resistance against terrorists who had invaded social media and the city of Brussels. Users took on different roles, including those of content producers, sharers, and conversationalists. The motivations for participating in #Brusselslockdown varied – from being highly engaged with the situation, to producing noise (in part through the strategic use of bots) to push the terrorists out of Twitter and (symbolically) out of the city of Brussels, to realizing an expressive creative potential. Bearing in mind this variety of motivations, we can neither describe the phenomenon as an act of resistance nor entirely deny its political meaning. We must instead understand the use of popular internet memes in crises as a combination of motifs and activities that employ the visuality of internet memes (their humorous, provocative, and apparently meaningless nature) to produce noise as an act of resistance, to show solidarity, and to cope with crisis – as well as to participate in a shared practice of internet culture. Memes as a form of performative sociality beyond the political turned an ordinary humorous form of visual internet culture into a form of resistance in an extraordinary crisis situation. The production of noise created a form of ephemeral engagement as well as ephemeral networks of followers that could subvert both terrorists as well as police. While the authorities initially asked for silence in public social media communication, the collective production of humorous noise achieved the same result while providing a means of coping with crisis.

“Thanks to the media and citizens for their silence online as asked during the juridical intervention tonight #BrusselsLockdown” (@CrisiscenterBE, Twitter, 23/11/2015)

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User	User Type	tweets	retweets (created)	CC
User 1	Content producer	155	144	0.000583
User 2	Content producer	102	1	0
User 3	Content producer	71	58	0.000605
User 4	Content producer	68	67	0
User 5	Content producer	63	20	0
User 1	Content sharer	155	144	0.000583
User 4	Content sharer	68	67	0
User 3	Content sharer	71	58	0.000605
User 6	Content sharer	56	51	0
User 7	Content sharer	38	38	0.002845
User 8	Conversationalist	5	2	1.0
User 9	Conversationalist	2	2	0.5
User 10	Conversationalist	2	2	0.5
User 11	Conversationalist	2	2	0.5
User 12	Conversationalist	2	2	0.5

Table 3: Top 5 users ranked according to a) number of tweets produced, b) retweets, c) clustering coefficient

Interview number	Interview type	Gender of Interviewee	Nationality of Interviewee	User type
1	Skype	Female	Belgian	Content sharer
2	Email	Male	American	Content sharer
3	Email	Female	Indonesian	Content sharer
4	Skype	Female	British	Content sharer
5	Email	Female	Belgian	Content sharer
6	Email	Male	Italian	Content sharer
7	Email	Male	Belgian	Content producer
8	Written Skype	Female	American	Content producer
9	Skype	Female	Belgian	Content producer
10	Written Skype	Male	French	Conversationalist
11	Skype	Female	Belgian	Conversationalist

Table 2: List of Interviews with top posters

Figure 1.

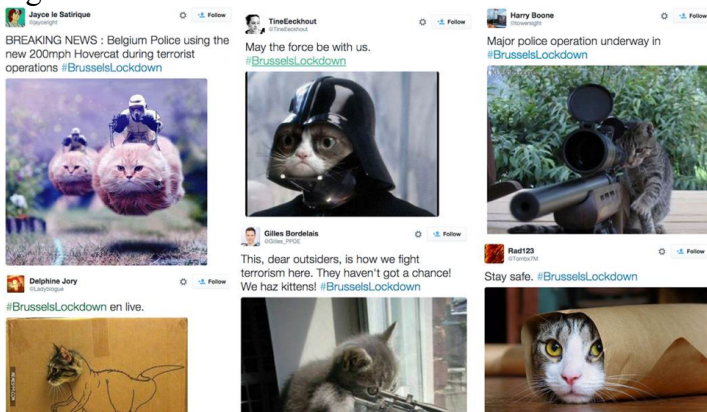


Figure 2.

