

The Lolcat Theory of Internet Law

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An Xiao Mina, [Memes to Movements](#) (2019).

Any Internet regulation—from privacy to copyright to hate speech to network neutrality—must take account of the complex and messy dynamics of meme-fueled conflicts. And for that, [An Xiao Mina's Memes to Movements](#) is an essential guide.

Mina is not a traditional academic. She is a technologist, artist, and critic; her day job is Director of Products at [Meedan](#), which builds tools for global journalism. But *Memes to Movements* draws fluently on cutting-edge work by scholars like [Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis](#), [Whitney Phillips](#), and [Sasha Costanza-Chock](#), among many others. It is an outstanding synthesis, beautifully and clearly written, that gives an insightful overview of media and politics circa 2019.

Mina's overarching point is that Internet memes—rather than being a frivolous distraction from serious political discourse—have become a central element of how effective social movements advance their political agendas. Their unique combination of virality and adaptability gives them immense social and communicative power. Think of a rainbow-flagged profile picture celebrating the Supreme Court's same-sex marriage decision in 2015. The rainbow flag is universal; it makes the message of support immediately recognizable. But the picture is specific; it lets the user say, "I, me, personally support the right to marry."

Memes do many kinds of work for movements. Memes allow participants to express belonging and solidarity in highly personalized ways, as with the rainbows. They let activists in repressive environments skirt the edges of censorship with playful wordplay. They enable activists to cycle rapidly through "prototypes" until they find ones with a compelling mass message. (There is an explicit parallel here to the technology industry's use of rapid development practices; see also Mina's recent essay on [Shenzhen](#).) They help movements craft powerful narratives around a single immediately recognizable and easily graspable idea. One of the best extended examples in the book traces the gradual breakout of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag from a surging sea of related memes: it had a popular poetic power that became widely apparent only as it started to catch on. And finally, the cycle closes: memes also let counter-movements use parodies and remixes to turn the ideas around for their own ends.

One of Mina's most striking observations is the increasing importance of physical objects as memes, like mass-produced red MAGA caps and individually knitted pink pussy hats. Mina ties their rise both to globalized production and logistics networks and to individual craft work. The embeddedness of physical memes creates a powerful specificity, which in turn can fuel the spread of online ideas. Mina's examples include the yellow umbrellas held by pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong and the Skittles dropped by protesters calling attention to the death of Trayvon Martin.

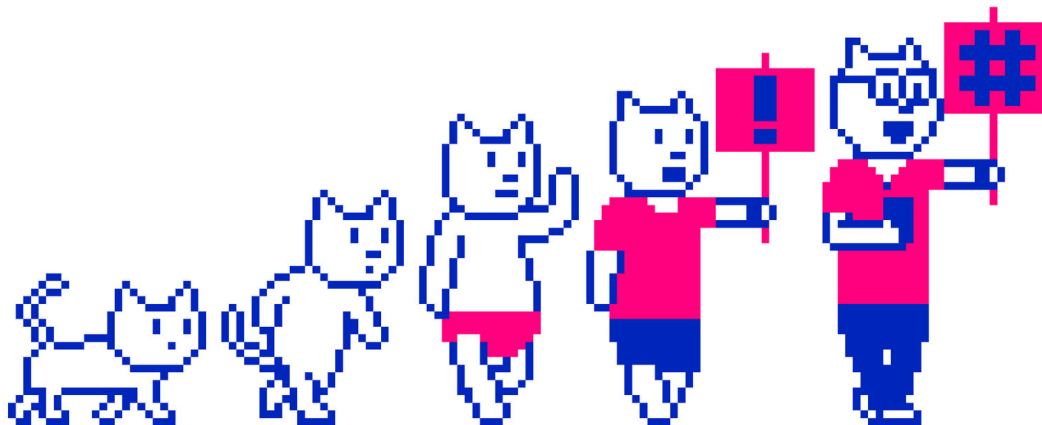
As this last pair illustrates, *Memes to Movements* is a thoroughly global book. Mina discusses protest movements in the very different political environments of China and the United States with equal insight, and draws revealing parallels and contrasts between the two. The book is particularly sharp on how Chinese authorities sometimes defuse politically potent memes like [Grass Mud Horse](#) by allowing the natural forces of memetic drift to dilute them to the point that they no longer uniquely refer to prohibited ideas.

This is also a book that is deeply, depressingly realistic about the uses of power. Activists have no monopoly on memes; state actors deploy them for their own purposes. Government-sponsored memes can take the form of an anti-Hillary image macro or a patriotic pop song that seemingly comes out of nowhere. Indeed, these forms of propaganda

are finely tuned to the Internet, just as *Triumph of the Will* was finely tuned to mass media. Marketers, too, pay close attention to the dynamics of virality, and Mina traces some of the cross-pollination among these different groups competing to use memetic tools most effectively. Kim Kardashian’s skill in promoting criminal justice reform is not so different in kind from her skill as a commercial influencer: she knows how to make a simple idea take off.

Above all, this is a compelling book on how attention functions in the world today, for better and for worse. It is a field guide to how groups and individuals—from [Ayotzinapa 43](#) to Donald J. Trump—capture attention and direct it toward their preferred aims. Mina was writing perceptively about how [Alexanda Ocasio-Cortez was winning Instagram](#) long before it was cool.

What do Internet-law scholars have to learn from a book with very little discussion of Internet law? Just as much as family-law scholars have to learn from books about family dynamics, or intellectual-property scholars have to learn from books about creativity—*Memes to Movements* is an extraordinary guide to a social phenomenon the legal system must contend with. It describes [democratic culture](#) in action: it illustrates the idea-making on which law-making depends; it connects the micro scale of the creation and distribution of individual bits of content to the macro scale of how they shape politics and society. Plus it features elegant prose and [charming pixel art](#) by Jason Li. Fifty million cat GIFs can’t be wrong.



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