

# Toward an Economy of Activist Literacies in Composition Studies: Possibilities for Political Disruption

Caroline Dadas Montclair State University  
Justin Jory Salt Lake Community College

## KEYWORDS

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**O**n Thursday, November 18, 2011, social networking sites transformed into communities of incensed students, academics, and citizens. Users on the sites circulated a series of texts composed by UC Davis students and faculty that suggested a group of peaceful student protesters (who were calling attention to significant tuition hikes in recent years) had become the victims of police brutality. Among these texts were student-captured videos that showed Lieutenant John Pike and other officers of the Davis police force hosing the bodies of seated protesters with military-grade pepper spray. Viewers watching these videos could witness non-violent students coughing uncontrollably from the intake of chemicals while they writhed in pain and huddled together on the ground as officers continued their assault. The videos circulated in juxtaposition to official statements issued by Chancellor Linda Katehi and other campus officials, which contended police acted out of necessity and in the best interest of the campus community.

The network of circulating texts grew to include a number of open letters and public statements from Davis administrators and faculty; more student-captured videos that offered varying perspectives on the pepper spray incident; live broadcasts of the campus community gathering for campus rallies and protesting outside campus buildings as UC board members met to determine best courses of action; and even a series of photoshopped images known as the “Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop” meme, which showed John Pike casually discharging a stream of pepper spray on everything from the Constitution of the United States to Gandhi. In a matter of days, Chancellor Linda Katehi shifted from a reprimanding discourse that placed blame on students and contended police action was necessary to one that was apologetic and argued that officers acted against her command. By week’s end, she established a task force to investigate what had become a highly visible and contentious public incident, and she faced widespread pressure to resign from a petition with over 150,000 signatures from citizens across the nation.

Phenomena like the Davis incident represent rich sites for examining activist literacies in the 21st century. In this article, we examine the Davis incident to show that citizens can influence how semiotic resources interact over time and across physical and digital spaces to enact political disruption. When officers used military-grade pepper spray to disperse students from the Davis

campus, students, faculty, and citizens at large engaged in a series of literate practices to shape public perception of the incident. Importantly, their practices deployed semiotic resources—such as actions, technologies, modalities, genres, and discourses—that competed with those enacted by Davis administrators. We maintain that understanding how to coordinate the interaction of semiotic resources illuminates an economy of literate practice, representing a key component of a new activism.

Incidents like Davis—as well as those that played out in other contexts such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring—indicate that political disruption is carried out and sustained through complex systems of situated literate activity that occur over time and across myriad locations. As participants in these systems of literate activity, activists are compelled to navigate and manage a network of semiotic resources in which the potential of any given resource—its political value—is relative to its position in the network and not always readily apparent. In this way, such phenomena raise interesting questions about the available means of disruption and, more specifically, how individuals determine the affordances and limitations of the semiotic resources that enable disruption and challenge the status quo.

## TOWARD AN ECONOMY OF ACTIVIST LITERACIES IN COMPOSITION

In recent years, scholars have undertaken a number of disciplinary projects in their pursuit to understand activist literacies in the 21st century. Such projects situate technologies at the center of politically-oriented literate practice (Selber; Selfe, *Technology*), argue that knowledge of multimodal communication is essential to activist efforts (The New London Group; Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel), contend that genres are sites of political struggles and resources for subverting political structures (Miller; Pare), and claim that discourses can inscribe and challenge political relations (Fairclough; Gee). Furthermore, they draw attention to the contexts in which texts and information are produced and circulated (Porter; Trimbur), suggesting that production, distribution, and exchange are key components of political disruption. We locate this project at the intersection of these scholastic areas, addressing a need for research into the literate, semiotic practices of activist publics. While scholars (Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel) have begun to detail this kind of activist work, we seek to contribute an in-depth analysis of one of the more noteworthy instances of semiotic remediation as literate practice: the reaction to the UC Davis pepper spray incident.

Through our analysis, we describe an array of practices and semiotic resources that comprise what we term an *economy of activist literacies*. An *economy* assigns value to particular literate practices within a situated context. As James Porter has explained, “There must be some value for the reader or for the writer in the act of producing, distributing, exchanging texts . . . . Writing—all writing, I would say—resides in economic systems of value, exchange, and capital (176). The value of these economies, rather than stemming from a monetary source, derive from “desire, sharing, participation, [and] emotional connectedness” (Porter 176). To generate material of value in these economies, composers must be adept at what Johndan Johnson-Eilola has called “symbolic-analytic

work": the ability to rearrange, combine, and filter existing information rather than create original texts (28, 134). Collaborative by nature, symbolic-analytic work demands an ability to draw on material created by others and remix it for specific rhetorical exigencies. In doing so, composers not only enable more effective communication in this new information economy but also can assume political power by realigning the relations among available social identities (Lemke 295). Symbolic-analytic work, then, provides access to a new kind of political participation that often bears little resemblance to historically recognizable political action such as rallies or letter writing campaigns. The value in this new activism may rest in its ability to quickly build political coalitions that reach across geographic boundaries and media platforms: a pattern we saw reinforced in the response to the UC Davis pepper spraying incident.

In discussing UC Davis students' (and others') use of semiotic resources, we draw on the work of Paul Prior and Julie Hengst, who have positioned semiotic remediation as a way of thinking through the complex layers of activity that comprise modern communication. They contend that "[s]emiotic remediation as practice then is fundamental to understanding the work of culture as well as communication; it calls on us to attend to the diverse ways that semiotic performances are re-represented and reused across modes, media, and chains of activity" (2). Their emphasis on the reuse and re-representation of semiotic performances proves useful in describing the "chains of activity" that comprised the pepper spray incident and its ensuing fallout. In particular, the notion that communication takes places via multiple genres, modes, and mediated locations enables a richer understanding of how critics voiced their disapproval of the incident itself, as well as Chancellor Katehi's response. We also appreciate Prior and Hengst's effort to distinguish between a focus on semiotics and a focus on multimodality, the latter a term that has found currency in rhetoric and composition for the past decade (Kress and van Leeuwen; Selfe, *Multimodal*; Bowen and Whithaus). As Prior and Hengst argue, "Multimodality has primarily been taken up as an issue of the composition of artifacts rather than engagement in processes, of representational forms rather than situated sociocultural practices" (7). Because we are interested in the processes and practices that students and other activists employed in achieving a broad circulation of their critiques, we rely on scholarship that has theorized semiotic (re)production as a complex process of literate activity.

The various responses to the UC Davis pepper spray incident shed light on the tendency for semiotic performances to compete with each other for public validation. We say "compete" to emphasize the notion that, when it came to the public's perception of what occurred, those who critiqued the police officers' actions were working against already established discourses of alleged student misbehavior. Because Chancellor Katehi's initial response suggested that students deserved the blame for the incidents of that day, subsequent semiotic reproductions challenged that interpretation of events. Savvy rhetoricians often rely on techniques for distribution—particularly within social media environments—to gain a wide circulation for their message(s) (Porter, *Recovering*), thereby challenging previous discursive accounts. In response to this case, many students turned to a variety of semiotic resources (involving photo editing software, video capturing media, and YouTube) as a means of critique, knowing that these compositions could be widely circulated in a short amount of time. John Trimbur has argued that rather than viewing a text's moment of production as the

key moment in a rhetorical exchange, compositionists should more carefully consider the political implications of how a text circulates: “[Delivery] must be seen also as ethical and political—a democratic aspiration to devise delivery systems that circulate ideas, information, opinions, and knowledge and thereby expand the public forums in which people can deliberate on the issues of the day” (190). It is through circulation that texts reach their audiences and that semiotic reproduction is marshaled in the service of a particular perspective. Those who thought the police’s actions inappropriate found broad support by circulating their critiques widely, using the affordances of social media. This activism generated an economy of literate practice that found value in widespread support for the pepper-sprayed UC Davis students.

## CAMPUS-WIDE REACTION AT UC DAVIS

With our analysis of the responses to the pepper spray incident, we seek to make both a theoretical and a methodological argument. While we show how semiotic remediation serves as a useful frame for understanding how all the responses to the incident are part of a network of discourses and resources that represent the incident, we also argue that semiotic remediation teaches us *how* to navigate an economy of literate practice. By tracing the remediation of signs—in our case, by following the resources students and faculty used to rupture social identities established in the narrative set forth by administrative officials—we can gain an understanding of why certain discourses gain value over others. In this case, we argue that those discourses that critiqued the police’s action effectively competed against more “official” narratives that justified the police’s decision to utilize pepper spray. For example, immediately after officers dispersed students, Twitter users began distributing student-captured videos of the Davis pepper spray incident alongside several messages composed by Chancellor Linda Katehi. As a set of texts that circulated alongside one another, the messages and videos show how textual artifacts can compete for authority through the discourses, modalities, and media they deploy.

In the hours leading up to the pepper spray incident and immediately after, Chancellor Katehi composed and distributed a series of open messages to members of the UC Davis community. These messages worked with public statements issued by the Davis Police Chief and a campus spokesperson to represent the “official” voice on the incident. In her [first message addressed to “Davis Students,”](#) (Katehi, “Chancellor’s Message”) distributed hours before the pepper spray incident on November 18, she acknowledges the precept that institutions of higher education are sites for civil disobedience, and states that she “deeply appreciates and defends robust and respectful dialogue as a fundamental tenet of our great academic institution.” On November 23, faced with the challenge of responding to and justifying the use of police force, she distributed [her second message](#) only minutes after officers pepper-sprayed students (Katehi, “Chancellor’s Message”). In it, Katehi shifts blame and responsibility toward students and away from officials. She leans on her previous message as an official “warning” and suggests that students’ obstinate violation of the warning was a decision that subjected the greater campus community to unsafe conditions and worked against officials. Taking this violation seriously, she suggests it was her responsibility to the community to rectify the situation

and ensure students' safety.

Importantly, Katehi's messages represent student protestors and campus officers in a way that seeks to justify the Davis administration's use of pepper spray and constructs an ethos of responsibility for campus administrators. For instance, when Katehi claims in her messages that officials are steadfastly dedicated to upholding liberal values, such as students' rights to dialogue and peaceful assembly, she positions officials as student advocates and presents an ethos for officials that aligns with social expectations and values. After the incident occurs and officials must justify their actions to the greater community, she employs a discourse of agitation meant to authorize the use of police force and military-grade pepper spray. By invoking the image of outside agitators (obstinate students who worked against campus officials and aggressive protesters who entrapped officers leaving them no option but to use force), the protests are represented as a threat to the safety and well being of students and the greater campus community.

Videos of the day's events (see Figure 1) taken by students, challenge the "official" narrative by materializing, and thus re-presenting, the bodies that are abstracted in Katehi's messages: those of students and officers. In contrast to the hostile and dangerous environment depicted in these messages, which led officers to protect themselves and the student body, the videos show students and officers co-occupying the quad in charged but seemingly innocuous ways. Officers move freely around the quad without perturbation from what was presented in official statements as a hostile group of students who encircled officers. In particularly incriminating fashion, one video opens with Lieutenant John Pike freely approaching one of the seated protesters from behind. He gently pats the back of the seated student as the student leans back, looks him in the eyes and asks, "Just making sure: You're shooting us for sitting here?" Even as students plead with officers, chanting "You don't have to do this" and "Don't shoot students," the officers use pepper spray to inflict students' bodies with pain.



Fig. 1. A collection of videos, distributed immediately following the incident, that circulated widely.

These depictions of the pepper spraying stand as attempts to represent the "real" events of that day, in competition with administrative accounts of unruly students who needed to be disciplined. When it comes to thinking through competing accounts of a single event, Ralph Cintron's concepts of *partiality* and *presence*—two "polarizing forces" in language—remain helpful. Partiality, according to Cintron, is the notion that language projects imperfect representations of people and their activity that are biased, inexact, and ideologically saturated (8). Presence complements partiality by masking

the biases and inexactness of a given generic artifact, causing audiences to overlook the partiality of the artifact while taking it as real, true, or commonsensical. Both concepts inform how we might look at the competitive relationship between the student videos and the administrative messages. Katehi's language conjures images of a problematic material and social site—a dangerous campus environment—in which student bodies are at risk. To project this representation as "real" and conceal its partiality, the student bodies that were disciplined by Davis officers must be abstracted, kept out of immediate sight and on the peripheries, while language like "robust dialogue," "peaceful assembly," and "outside agitators" are invoked to constitute credible official identities and legitimize the use of police force and pepper spray. According to these tactics, the narrative is only "real" and can only transform into a widely accepted account that is largely unsusceptible to critique based on how and what it makes visible as well as what it conceals. After all, officials are acting in accordance with social expectations and thus become authorized and legitimized *only if* student bodies are in fact at risk.

However, when juxtaposed with administrative messages, the videos materialize the bodies of students and officers, effectively enacting symbolic-analytic work to suggest the official narrative is constructed and, indeed, partial. As Michael Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony Michel argue, photographic and filmic technologies often conceal their own partiality and carry with them an ethos of objectivity and authority. Thus, viewers of student videos experience a "real," first-hand account of the incident in which they see that it is officials and not outside agitators who seem to threaten students. In this way, the videos persuasively rupture the social identities created in official messages and "crack" the facade of reality created by these messages. Importantly, the videos reveal the inexactness of official messages by highlighting the messages' partiality; it is in this work that the videos beckon a political coalition and create the possibility for disruption through semiotic remediation. This instance of activism suggests that capital in economies of literate activity resides not in any one text or in any one act of textual production, but in complex literate activity that assembles semiotic resources for specific rhetorical aims over time. In this way, capital is highly situated as it emerges from the way composers assemble and network semiotic resources.

## SEMIOTIC REMEDIATION BEYOND THE UC DAVIS CAMPUS

This set of reactions to the events of November 18, 2011—Chancellor Katehi's two messages, along with student videos and webcasts—formed the basis for the widespread semiotic remediation that occurred as news of the pepper spraying spread rapidly online. In particular, we cite two memes—"Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop" and "Megyn Kelly Reaction"—as examples that gained a great deal of currency thanks to a broad circulation in the days following the event. Both memes coincided with the Occupy Wall Street protests<sup>1</sup> and appeared to draw on an ethic of civil disobedience as a guiding principle in what text or images were included. We offer these memes as evidence of how their designers validated UC Davis students' critiques of the police's actions, deeming those critiques more valid than Chancellor Katehi's justifications. Considering their rapid distribution through online channels, both memes also reinforce the importance of speed and

breadth of circulation in establishing an economy of literate activity.

The “Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop” meme entries remixed a photo of Lieutenant John Pike pepper spraying UC Davis students, taken by Louise Macabitas and posted to Reddit on November 19, 2011 (Scott). The original photo shows students being sprayed while seated on the ground, their hands and arms attempting to cover their faces (see Figure 2).



Fig. 2. The original photo that led to the “Casually Pepper Spray Everything” meme. Image taken from <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/casually-pepper-spray-everything-cop>.

The moment at which Pike’s gait is captured by the camera makes him appear at ease—an impression that led to the meme’s incorporation of “casually” into its title. On November 20, two remixes of the photo began circulating online (see Figure 3): one of Pike in the 1819 piece *Declaration of Independence* and the other in the iconic 1884 painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La*

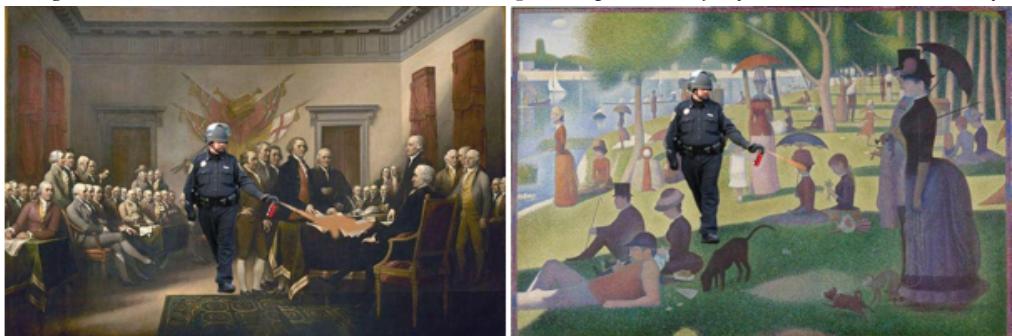


Fig. 3. Two remixes of the original photo capturing John Pike pepper spraying students. Images taken from <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/casually-pepper-spray-everything-cop>.

*Grande Jatte* (Scott). These two initial iterations of the meme use semiotic remediation (1) to further the argument of the initial student videos/broadcasts that cast both Katehi's decision and Pike's subsequent actions as a violation of the students' right to engage in civil disobedience and (2) to draw on the discourses associated with these two paintings to further the point that the pepper spraying was unjust.

The first example, which shows Pike spraying the Declaration of Independence, represents a fairly straightforward argument that Pike's actions comprised a violation of students' constitutional rights to engage in peaceful protest. In the second example, Pike is seen traversing the idyllic scene of the Island of Grande Jatte with his pepper spray, presumably disrupting the leisurely scene. In comparing the park-goers in the painting to the UC Davis students, the designer argues that they had every right to be doing what they were doing.

On the heels of these initial two meme iterations, dozens of variations of the meme began circulating online. New versions of the meme included images of famous pieces of art, depictions of historical moments, and important cultural touchstones. Each iteration, in conjunction with its particular approach, emphasized the intrusiveness of Pike's actions (see Figure 4).



Fig. 4. Subsequent versions of the remixed photo. Images taken from <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/casually-pepper-spray-everything-cop>.

As a result of the meme's rapid popularity, the mainstream media began broadcasting reports not

only of the incident itself but also of the memes' critical response to it. According to [KnowYourMeme.com](http://knowyourmeme.com), on November 21, "additional compilations were posted on Washington Post, ABC News, the Metro, Gawker, and Buzzfeed. Four separate single topic Tumblrs were also created that day...Over the next month, Pepper Spray Cop images were shared and discussed on CBS News, CNet, The Week and Scientific American" (Scott). In the majority of cases, the news items focused primarily on criticism of Pike's (and by extension, the university's) actions, with only a passing mention (if at all) of Katehi's rationale. The initial media response to the pepper spraying gave a fairly biased perspective on the incident, neither critiquing nor supporting Katehi; once the meme came into existence, however, it generated enough activity online to justify being a news item in itself. In this sense, the meme creators' use of semiotic remediation resulted in an economy of critique that gained significant value within only days of the incident.

Not all mainstream media focused on the critique of Katehi's actions, however. On November 21, 2011, Fox News reporter Megyn Kelly discussed the UC Davis incident on *The O'Reilly Factor*, offering support for the officers' actions. At one point during her appearance, she downplayed the noxious effects of the pepper spray by characterizing the substance as a food product: "Bill O'Reilly: 'First of all, pepper spray—that just burns your eyes, right?' Megyn Kelly: 'It's like a derivative of actual pepper. It's a food product, essentially'" ([www.knowyourmeme.com](http://www.knowyourmeme.com)). The following day, a meme appeared on Reddit consisting of a stock photo of Kelly and her use of the word "essentially" to downplay various horrific experiences (see Figure 5). Through this meme, writers/designers sought to remediate Fox's media coverage, which they deemed unfair in its portrayal of the pepper spray incident. While this meme veered far enough away from the actual pepper spraying that some audiences might not have realized that the two memes were related, it nonetheless effectively called into question the ethos of Fox News. Both memes, then, evidence the ability of semiotic remediation to challenge mainstream media reports and to establish an economy of literate practice through activist means.



Fig. 5. The "Megyn Kelly Essentially" meme. Images taken from <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/megyn-kelly-essentially>.

## IMPLICATIONS

Our examination of the Davis incident shows that chains of literate practice drive the semiotic remediation and systems of circulation that in turn enable disruption. For rhetoric and composition scholars interested in complex notions of political disruption, semiotic remediation suggests that disruption occurs through complex systems of literate activity in which semiotic resources interact

and compete. As Prior and Hengst argue, this means that “researchers should look at semiotic trajectories and chains across time and place, recognizing both the need to understand semiotics as dispersed and mediated and the value of tracing out mediation, ANT-like, rhizomatically across situated functional systems” (24). Such research requires scholars to trace the ways that semiotic resources circulate and interact over time, revealing key moments when semiotic resources enable political critique. In the case of the pepper spray incident, by tracing the ways that students’ and faculty’s activity circulated alongside and interacted with that of administrators, we can theorize how the semiotic resources these participants employed gained value only in relation to the other.

Relatedly, we believe that as teachers we need to discuss how semiotic remediation can enable political disruption. As in the past we may have focused on how writing as a semiotic system can effect change, we now have to account for other forms of literate activity that may disrupt the status quo. In particular, we need to discuss past instances of semiotic remediation—such as the myriad reactions to the pepper spray incident—in the classroom with students. Using the language of partiality and presence can help emphasize not only how meaning is always contingent and unstable (partiality), but also why actors can be motivated to make it seem otherwise (presence). In discussing the role that resources play in semiotic remediation, we need to resist the tendency to essentialize their respective affordances and constraints, which runs the risk of suggesting to students that meaning-making is a simplistic, formulaic, or at best stable process. Instead, we should design pedagogies that present affordances and constraints as messy and complex phenomena—shifting and unstable; based on particular social, cultural, historical, and material conditions; and, thus, as problems that are waiting to be theorized. In short, we should be doing this theorizing with our students, using recent examples.

The value of the responses critiquing the UC Davis pepper spray incident lies in their resistance to powerful discourses coming from the administration and other sources that supported the officers’ actions. Because of the videos and memes that objected to the administration’s rationale, different versions of the day’s events—versions that supported the students’ right to peacefully protest and not be pepper sprayed because of it—gained significant capital online and in mainstream media. In other words, the chain of literate activity in response to the pepper spraying incident should stand as reason for optimism that those in positions of lesser power hold the ability to challenge the powerful’s justification for their own ethically questionable acts. Despite its limited scope, scholarly work such as our examination of the Davis incident has direct implications for rhetoric and composition pedagogies that aim to prepare students for politically oriented civic participation. It is with greater awareness of how to navigate and manage semiotic resources within systems of circulation that student-activists can read and shape the political value of various resources to enact disruption. While the economy itself is one driven by semiotic remediation, successful participation in that economy depends on rhetorically savvy symbolic-analytic work—and this is at the heart of a new activism in composition studies.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The student protest itself was at least partially inspired by the “Occupy” movement that gained traction in the previous months.

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