

When the King turns Jester: A Carnavalesque Analysis of Police Outreach on Social Media in Kerala

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Abstract. As bureaucratic organizations enter social media spaces for public outreach, the organization of their communication assumes forms more suited to the needs, requirements and tastes of a digital society. Successfully interacting with new media users requires that the organization shed bureaucratic formality and appropriate a social media personality, with its language and viral digital artefacts. The study examines the digital approach of the Kerala Police in its use of memes based on popular Malayalam cinema, a sub-literacy that the bureaucracy shares with the public. Using a mix of interpretive examination of memes and interviews with the police, we use a carnivalesque frame to highlight ways in which the Kerala Police subverts the negative discourses related to police identity and police-public interaction through comic memes. We propose that the choice of a means of outreach that has a greater affective impact on the middle-classes, rather than the poor, offers insight into a specific moment in state-citizen relations where a bureaucratic organization's use of technology becomes the means of defining its approachability. This case also highlights the prerogative institutions have in creating solid online presences to deal with new forms of informational attacks that are enabled by viral social media.

Keywords: Bureaucratic communication·Social media communication·Police·Humour·Cinema·Facebook·Memes·Carnavalesque.

1 Introduction

Public agencies are part of the ecosystem of technology and development in which being techno-savvy and interacting with the public directly on social media is a means of signaling a modern institution. Bureaucratic communication on social media can be a path to transforming or redefining the organizational identity or, more directly, a way to enhance its organizational performance through effective outreach. The adoption of social media in the public sector has been proposed as a paradigm shift towards greater citizen engagement and participation, through responsive accountability and open collaboration [1]. A large body of work on the use of social media by organizations in public service, both in politics and policy, shows that the primary driver of online engagement is to impact the affective sensibilities of viewers with the end goal of image management [2].

Humorous content is an important part of such affective sensibilities [3], though with the necessary precondition that there be a shared cognitive environment - the inside jokes must be understood by parties involved [4]. With the increasing popularity of social media, memes have become a means of shared cultural experience, used in a variety of communicative environments to signify affiliation, to parody, or offer social commentary [5].

While memes began as an informal, personal form of exchange, they have grown over time to be used by a range of stakeholders including religious organizations [6], advertisers [7], professional organizations [8] and politicians [9]. Meme creators include both engaged stakeholders or 'active publics' who advocate for or against an organization, and members of the 'aroused publics' who create memes as a response to a specific individual or product [7]. In this work, we examine the creation of memes by 'active publics', i.e. representatives of the Kerala Police (KP), a public safety bureaucracy seeking to use social media as a means of outreach. Specifically, we examine the use of comedic, often self-deprecating memes, which use images from popular cinema as a means of popular outreach. We frame the use of satirical memes by KP from a carnivalesque perspective, building on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the Carnival as a means of a satirical challenge to social hierarchy and systems.

Unlike studies in the past that have used the carnivalesque to examine the attack on an institution from the outside, we propose that social media use in the Kerala Police case offers an interesting take on how a subversive discourse can be employed from within a bureaucracy. The choice of carnivalesque output for the police, comic memes based on popular Malayalam cinema, has roots in a long tradition of social commentary both in film itself, and in the reproduction of film in public events such as festivals or cultural gatherings, as well as other media including television and social media. The idea is frequently used in outsider politics, where a political actor offers a mockery of the existing system to present themselves as a challenger to the status quo. Here, we propose that Kerala police turns the carnivalesque on its head, in that the establishment and the jester are one and the same.

2 Related Work

Our work builds on four areas of rich work on carnivalesque theory, bureaucratic communication on social media, memes in social media communication, and traditions of satire and cinema in the state of Kerala. An examination of literature in these fields provides a lens and a framework for our study.

2.1 Bureaucratic Communication on Social Media

Recent work shows that government communication on social media enables citizens' participation and collaboration with the government, as well as build more openness about its activities [10]. Public institutions have also adopted these new channels of communication and use social media for various purposes, one of which is to overcome the barriers to communication often encountered in the public sector [11]. Meijer and Torenvlied [12] examine the new forms of digital bureaucratic communication by

analyzing the adaptations in the three characteristic features of bureaucratic model of government communication: centralization, formalization and boundary creation identified based on Weber's [13] foundational work on bureaucratic organizational structure.

Though social media use has stoked concerns about online disinformation and polarization, it is also generally argued, and increasingly common that public institutions interact with the public directly and that social media can improve communication, citizen engagement, transparency, and trust [14, 15]. Social media use can make government processes appear citizen-centric by engaging with or even potentially gauging public opinion [16 - 18].

Studying Twitter use by police, Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer find that a direct channel of communication to showcase their work helps police to reinforce their legitimacy [19]. This is a means of citizen reassurance since the public's relationship with the police is greatly impacted by public opinion, which is a wicked problem since the police has the power of legitimate force over the citizens [20]. In contrast, sousveillance from citizens does little to reinforce trust [21], as social media allows the citizens to impact this public opinion about the police through showcasing their personal experiences.

2.2 Conceptualizing the Carnival

Humorous content is an important part of making affective appeals to people online [3], though a shared cognitive environment is necessary for its effectiveness [4]. Humor is at the heart of the carnivalesque environment - the carnival offers a unique space for challenging orders that may otherwise be untouchable through formal orders of power since it does so behind the mask of humor. In the carnivalesque setting, political issues are discussed with the use of outsider status in presenting oneself [22]. The components of the carnival are the site of the carnival - a part of the public sphere where the satirical action takes place, and the protagonist, or "fool", through which the action is delivered. It is characterized by (1) a populist and critical inversion of official words and hierarchies; (2) hierarchical norms, positions and prohibition on activities being suspended; (3) an atmosphere of creative disrespect and degradation; (4) social formations that are temporarily recontextualized to expose their fictive foundations [23]. The carnival allows a window of opportunity in which there is a relaxation of conventional norms on public behavior and a reversal of hegemonic social roles [24].

While much work on the carnivalesque actor has focused on antagonistic politics, there is a small body of work that looks at tension with modern bureaucracies. Examples include mothers organizing against genetic engineering [25], activists engaging with big business [26], or even nation-states responding to international bureaucracies [27]. Here, in the case of the KP, as the establishment, it mocks itself, performing an alternative model of engagement. Indeed, their use of self-directed jokes derived from popular cinema, a middle-class persuasion in Kerala, turns on its head Guy Debord's [28] argument that states that unjust institutions working towards the satisfaction of the powerful cannot have a sense of humor.

2.3 Meme Manipulation

With its roots in the Greek word 'mimema' meaning imitated, the notion of an internet meme has been appropriated out of a genetic meme. The internet meme refers to short media objects such as images or brief moving pictures that are edited for use in a different context. Memes are rhetorical artifacts that fundamentally operate through reaction. They are predicated on a shared cultural experience, used in a variety of communicative environments to signify affiliation to parody, offer social commentary and in effect shape collective belief and actions [5]. A meme is only as good as the inside joke it is able to signify, thus depends on the subcultural literacies of communities it calls to [29]. While memes began as an informal, personal form of exchange, they have grown over time to be used by a range of stakeholders from religious organizations [6], advertisers [7], professional organizations [8] to politicians [9].

Memos circulated in a top-down manner, especially from politicians, can be a method of disarming critics and relieving tension [30]. Their public, performative nature is inherently carnivalesque. Memes blur boundaries between interpersonal and mass, professional and amateur, bottom-up and top-down communications' [5]. In using memes to communicate, KP presents itself in a style that is associated with young, informal communication, and in using widely recognized artifacts from popular culture, it humanizes itself as one with the rest of the citizenry.

Meme creators include both engaged stakeholders or 'active publics' who advocate for or against an organization, and members of the 'aroused publics' who create memes as a response to a specific individual or product [8]. In this work, we examine the creation of memes by 'active publics', i.e. representatives of a Kerala Police (KP), a public safety bureaucracy seeking to use social media as a means of outreach.

2.4 Tradition of Satire and Cinema Culture

The choice for the carnivalesque style may hark at social commentary and satire aimed at institutions in a strong and socially conscious record in post-Independence Malayalam cinema, though the culture of satirical opposition through public performance has a longer political history. The 18th-century poet, Kunjan Nambiar is widely referenced for his carnivalesque style - using satirical verses that ridiculed the kings and the high priests of the day, at a time when sovereigns and the religious elite were supreme [33]. The state boasts the highest number of cartoonists, television satire shows, and widely consumed satire theatre, not just in centers of urban elites, but also among poor and rural geographies [33]. The wide consumption of arts and cinema has meant that much of the public discourse is shaped by cinema [35], which has been central to the state's attempts to define itself in various ways against its national and regional "others" [34].

3 Methodology

We use qualitative methods, including interviews and observations, to study the actors in the chain of content creation for the KP, and conduct interpretive analysis of individual memes. A central character in the memes is the "police mama" (police uncle) -

an approachable, witty police officer. We studied the memes first, and then conducted 25 semi-structured interviews of the KP social media team, commanding officers, public administrators, and PR executives, and satirists. Informal coding of the themes was conducted after batches of interviews, and the interview questions were updated based on what emerged as the major overarching themes. Interviews were largely conducted in Malayalam, translated verbatim, and the entire transcripts were coded iteratively for themes at the end of the primary research process.

The research team was very familiar with Malayalam cinema; thus, the memes were accessible for analysis. As polysemic units of cultural text, their multilayered nature enables symbolic representations, referencing cultural aspects that can be employed in dog-whistling to groups who ‘get’ the joke. Rhetorical criticism of the memetic units as employed by Silvestri [36] allows us to best tie the content and ideas presented in the meme to the cultural, social discourses in the state. We studied each of the memes for the symbolic arrangement of the image and text, and contextualize them to the original source, usually a scene from a film. Between August 2011 and September 2019, the Kerala Police Facebook page published 664 images on their timeline, spanning content related to events, achievements, hotlines, legal awareness messages, greetings, and finally memes. All except the memes were largely informational in intent. We selected all 34 meme images, typically multi-panel series of screenshots from a Malayalam film, and conducted a close reading. Four purposes of messaging emerged following deep reading and thematic coding of the memes – (1) pushing page popularity; (2) awareness creation; (3) countering misinformation; and (4) advertising initiatives. We then reclassified these under conceptual headings – (1) image management, (2) legitimacy signaling, (3) relationship building, and (4) awareness. The paper discusses representative memes that can be critically analyzed for the visual and textual style of the messaging.

3.1 Structure of Kerala Police Social Media Communications and Audience

External social media communication undertaken by the KP is through their verified Kerala Police Facebook Page, Instagram account and a Twitter account handled by a social media cell. The social media cell members were selected through an ‘entrance exam’ after inviting applications from all the police personnel in the police departments of the state. The entrance exam assessed the candidates’ knowledge of criminal law, skills in creating memes using cinema and their tact in defending the department using humor. After the candidates were selected, they were given social media management training at Cyberdome, a public-private partnership police initiative that deals with cybercrime prevention and security. The four-member social media team works round-the-clock, monitoring the social media platforms, receiving messages from users which need to be processed internally and channeled to the correct police departments, gathering intelligence, responding to comments and messages by users and creating engaging content. The dissemination of information from the page is centralized as the Inspector General of the Police department signs off on content that is published.

The KP page had over a million followers, 88% of whom were male. The core community of followers were males in the age groups of 18-34, which accounted for almost 70% of their following. Over 90% of list their primary language as English, versus 6%

Malayalam. A third of the fan base was international – from places in the Middle East, which have large populations of Keralite migrants. While these are not definitive indicators of class (and the KPs messaging is largely in Malayalam), these suggest that the consuming audience of the Facebook content is not from the poorer classes of Keralites.

4 Results

“When the king wanted to communicate something, his man would come to the market, beat the drum and make an announcement. It was fine because people were in the marketplace. Now, where are the people? People are on social media. You can’t sit in the ivory tower and expect people to come to the noticeboard for information. No one will come. You have to engage with them and take suggestions.”

Pradeep, Public Administrator, Kozhikode, Kerala

The KP is marred in perceptions of unwarranted violence and corruption, further exacerbated by the sousveillance culture that has published much video/photographic evidence of police brutality or misuse of authority. This, in and of itself, is arguably not new, but in the past, the police did not have the same response prerogative. Pradeep’s quote points at the current moment in media consumption and the need for communication it has created. Alongside citizens posts of negative content on experiences with the police, popular media continues to project police as corrupt, incompetent, and brutal. By keeping a well-maintained online presence, KP engaged in a direct PR exercise, attempting to flood the same platform with counter-stories that reshape perceptions, but also, using the connective affordances of social media, to form new relationships.

4.1 Reimagining the Police-Public Relationship

“The Kerala police, their social media page has been successful in changing people’s perception of the police. Actually, they haven’t done any work for it – they continue to beat up and kill people, kill them with their vehicles, do all of these things. but they have created an atmosphere where you can go joke with them.”

Fathima, Journalist, Ernakulam, Kerala

To present a ‘relaxed’ citizen-police interaction, away from the typically tense and power-imbalanced engagements involving police, this meme (**Fig. 1**) calls the public to digital action while portraying a collaborative, laidback relationship. Images from iconic Malayalam films *Nadodikattu* (1987) and *Chitram* (1988) are used. *Nadodikattu*, a satirical comedy about unemployment in 80s Kerala, enjoys a cult status with lines from the film commonly known across the state. The scene here is recreated as a conversation between Kerala Police and the New York Police Department (NYPD).

In the first panel, a scene from the film in which the comic duo dream about a luxurious life in the future is used. Here, the KP superimposes lines as though the duo are musing ‘how standing with the public, hand in hand, joking about with and guiding them, is such fun.’ In the second panel the KP Facebook page says, “In the coming

year, the number of our Facebook followers would reach 1 million” to which NYPD Facebook page responds, “No way that’s going to happen”. In the third panel, Kerala Police Facebook page addresses the social media audience to say, “What do you say... if we put our minds to it, can we not make it happen?” The last panel is a riff on a widely known line from the *Chitram*.



Fig. 1. Meme of scenes from two iconic films presented as a conversation between New York Police Department and Kerala Police on who can pull together more followers.

In multiple memes, the KP social media cell creates an ‘opposing’ team, another bureaucratic authority, for example, the Bengaluru Police Department, or as in this case, the NYPD, to use a sense of belonging as an affective appeal. The appeal to Keralite nationalism is enabled through a ‘do your bit’ for the home team enabled by a simple like clicked. Since the meme sets a goal number of followers, taking a page out of online crowdfunding campaigns, it builds up a competitive endgame.

Besides this tactic of competitive support for the home team, the ‘roasts’ of Facebook users who comment on these posts acts as a further means of engagement. The witty nature of the photo-comments, cinema dialogues and textual comebacks both from the police and in the banter with casual users aims to make the pages funny and engaging for citizens. Clever responses are then shared by KP as screenshots on other platforms, including WhatsApp, to reach out to new audiences. Here, KP takes a page out of the twitter strategy of the fast-food chain “Wendy’s”, which roasts its competitors and Twitter users who tag “Wendy’s” and that shapes opinions and enhances sales and marketing. This new face of endearment also creates unanticipated ironic situations, such as this exchange with a young prospective bride.

“They call us police mama (uncle). Sometimes they ask very amusing things. Someone sent us a picture of a police officer and asked us to investigate him. We thought it was fake. Then she told us that she’s getting married to him and wanted to see if he’s clean. (What do you do?) We investigate and tell her what we find!”

Kerala Police Social Media Cell Member, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

The intended brand outcome is that of an avuncular, trustworthy authority figure who is looking out for you. The temporal aspect of the carnival ensures that the sanctioned subversion of social order and law allowing for a challenge to authority is confined within that window of opportunity. As the carnival draws to a close, one returns to the ordinary time and to the normal order of social hierarchy and norms. In the case of the police bureaucracy, it is the spatial nature of its activity that is critical. The digital mask of the police mama signifies a performative relationship on social media that breaks away from ordinary interactions with the police and enters into fictive time through the anonymity and normal role loss that the carnivalesque platform allows. This fictional spatial relationship has the promise of a real, physical relationship that departs from the current police-public equation. On the ground, the interactions with the public may not involve the digital jest as suggested by the following excerpt.

“Go to a police station. How do they behave to ordinary people? How many police officers laugh? They can’t cook up humor. My family met with an accident in the night. For the police officer to come check on us he asked for Rs.500 from me. Even though he knew who I was. He forced me to pay up. This is the reality. Can I enjoy the humor during these moments? It is highly superficial”

Thomas, Political Satire TV Host, Allapuzha, Kerala

For those who have actually dealt with the KP, or continue to do so, the memes were separated from the expectation of real interactions. The skew of the online following towards a young, sizably expatriate population suggests that the target of the PR exercise is intended to operate separately from the actual day-to-day functioning of the KP.



Fig. 2. Photograph titled ‘Polite Action’ that appeared in The New Indian Express (13.12.2018)

Clever messaging on social media owes its success in some part to the convergence of mainstream media with new media. The social media content published by the KP becomes news riding on wit. The image of a protestor being carried away by the KP, quickly punned as ‘Polite’ action (**Fig. 2**), got coverage on print and television. The social media post takes a commonly encountered face of police engagement – dealing

with protesters – and turns the unsavory, antagonistic engagement into something done so amicably, and in the best interest of society.

4.2 Carnavalesque Disciplining

“We have limitations as a law enforcement agency. We can’t criticize the govt, politics, not even social critique. Memes are used for critique. We are using it as an awareness method. It is a janakiya (popular) art. A way to reach many quickly.”

Kerala Police Social Media Cell Member, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

The carnival presents a space that assumes the suspension of social order, law, and norms. A policing organization can neither turn away from its responsibility of upholding law and order, nor can it cleave itself from the state which grants it the authority to discipline. However, the performative space of social media offers the organization a means to momentarily recast itself by separating the manner of disciplining without yielding the role. In **Fig. 3**, we see a meme built out of a scene from the film *Aye Auto*, in which one of the key players is an obnoxious policeman (Srinivasan, pictured here), who causes trouble for auto (minicab) drivers. The first panel of the meme is titled – Extraterrestrial Organisms might be amongst us: NASA Scientist. In the second panel, the policeman asks, “Can I see the registration certificate for the vehicle?” The driver with Yoda’s head photoshopped onto his body responds, “Sir, I’m an alien. The policeman responds, “Even if you are an alien, if you want to drive in Kerala, you have got to have proper documentation.”



Fig. 3. Meme using a film with an obnoxious policeman to show how rules apply to everyone

The wording emphasizes the police’s ability to discipline, and that nobody is above the law. The meme intentionally sets up for the reader to expect that a bribe will be demanded, ironically embracing the fact that the state is distanced from the average Keralite, who at best expects to be squeezed by the police. The traffic stop is among the

most common citizen police interactions, and one in which the citizen is invariably at the mercy of the policeman. The scene from *Aye Auto* takes aim at bureaucratic distancing from the average Keralite, highlighting it in the body of the police officer to whom the motorist is a faceless object of power. He may as well be an alien.

In the film, the scene close with a passing motorist yelling a taunt at the policeman squeezing the auto driver, underlining the scant respect afforded to cops by the average Keralite. The scene from the film is frequently aired on television comedy shows and online, recognized for Srinivasan's iconic characterization of an irksome cop. Repurposing a scene widely used to parody them, the KP admits to the audience that it gets how people see them, and nonetheless its work goes on.

"We have to stay on their level. We can't behave like we are the police and twist our mustaches. We can't stand above them; we have to stand beside them. Only then would we receive responses."

Kerala Police Social Media Cell Member, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

Through their take on the very tools used by filmmakers to provoke a mediation on the state, the Kerala Police appropriate the narrative, using the carnivalesque as a means of performing a policing function – of encouraging compliance with order. Yet the deeper goal is to signify homophily – your neighborhood policeman consumes the same media as you, indeed sees the state much as you do.

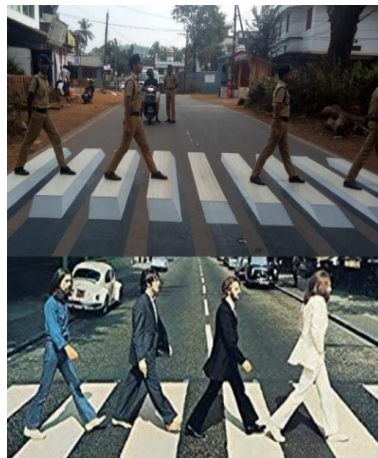


Fig. 4. Kannur police restaging the Beatles 'Abbey Road' cover

Yet the choice of media objects has politics of its own. The capital of its neighboring state of Karnataka, Bangalore, finds itself targeted by similar one-upmanship 'like' races on Facebook, partly because its online tactics are comparable. In place of regional cinema for visual content, the Bengaluru City police references pop culture such as *Breaking Bad*, *Game of Thrones*, *Chappelle's Show* or a popular catch-phrase from the song *Ridin'*. These are distinctly different from the local-language, popular cinema content that KP generally uses, highlighting differences in the audiences being performed

to. The Bengaluru city police goes after a younger, wealthier, audience that consumes international media, deals little with the police, but significantly with social media. A curious case in point that turns to an iconic but anachronistic global image is the awkward recreation of the Beatles Abbey Road cover (**Fig. 4**) by Kannur Police to discourage jaywalking, a reference of doubtful recall for the largely rural North Kerala population.

4.3 Re-legitimizing Authority

The style of memetic messaging is aimed at virality, which creates a tension between the kind of message that achieves an intended policing outcome, and one that can easily attract attention. In discussions, those associated negotiated their own understanding of what forms a compelling narrative through trial and error online.

“Before we started this page, if you tried searching for the Kerala Police on YouTube, the first results would be videos of police accepting bribes, of police hitting people, it would be videos that show a bad aspect of the police. Now our videos are the first results.”

Kerala Police Social Media Cell Member, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

The KP recognized that something too obviously a PR message without its own standalone appeal as an interesting media artifact was unlikely to work. YouTube came up repeatedly in any exchange about brand management in India. The attention to video as a narrative medium is indicative of KP’s appreciation of short-form audio-visual material as form factor, and search optimization as an outreach factor in a complex attention economy. By the time of writing this piece, KP had already made its own short film, which was featured on its channels.

The meme in **Fig. 5**, is built on the popular 2016 police station drama, Action Hero Biju. The use of Biju, the protagonist of the film, carries symbolic weight. Not only was the film widely seen, but the protagonist played a relatable regular citizen, who happens to be a policeman. He himself navigates life as a member of a bureaucratic system, steeped in its inequities, inefficiencies and asks of emotional labor, departing from cliched depictions as slaves of politicians or super cops who singlehandedly and violently save the day.

In the film, Biju deals with complex human situations but remains steadfast and effective. In the meme, Biju addresses the Sabarimala issue, a tense and divisive political issue. When the Indian supreme court legalized women’s entry in the revered Sabarimala Temple, a large contingent of the Keralite Hindu population, as well as political establishment aggressively opposed it. The police, acting in accordance with the law, were charged with the duty of escorting women who wish to worship the deity to the sanctum sanctorum, but in the position of enforcing a law that may make them unpopular with a significant portion of the citizenry. The meme states “we are watching”, to remind readers of the panoptical gaze at those that may choose to cause trouble at the site, but the use of Biju, the upstanding cop, presents a normative turn.

The juxtaposition of images invites the viewer to evaluate the rowdy, disruptors of peace to their routine lives and compare it to the righteous police officer who also is upright and doing his job right. The image of the antagonists in the meme is important since they are not dressed as male Sabarimala devotees, who typically wear a specific all-black outfit. It attempts to find solidarity with the section of the public that disassociates from the section that is portrayed as the perpetrators of random violence. Here, the KP treads lightly to not present a value judgment against citizens opposed to women's entry on account of their beliefs, or to other any specific community. They position themselves as peacemakers, who enforce the law of the land and are only opposed to extreme acts that may undermine public order.



Fig. 5. Meme about legitimate authority

“Because of the Sabarimala issue, we are facing an attack. Whatever we post, they try to comment negatively or publish their ideas under our posts. During the Sabarimala issue, 90k people suddenly arrived on our page. They started liking our page in order to post their opinion in our page. Police are facing the biggest backlash in the Sabarimala issue. We are a law enforcement agency, there is no politics.”

Kerala Police Social Media Cell Member, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

The Sabarimala issue presents an important case study of how memes can be used to present an alternative narrative when the institution is under attack. The meme text emphasizes duty, righteousness, and legitimacy, and in crafting fear around miscreants rather than devotees. The meme also shows that the panopticon works both ways - citizens can mean surveillance through sousveillance, and in carefully navigating the text of the message, the police emphasizes that it is on the citizen's side, not as the strong hand of law, but as a thoughtful partner who makes the pilgrimage experience better for everyone.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Kerala Police's use of social media has been arguably one of their most successful PR exercises in recent years. The direct fan following of 1.2 million online is just one metric – the memes have got KP attention in newspapers and television, and other states have since tried to emulate them. They self-present an approachable authority, thereby attempting to forge a new relationship with the public, contesting prevailing perceptions about the police through a carnivalesque fashion of challenging organizations of power, authority, and forms of communication associated with it. In this study, we argue that this may not have been possible without turning to the carnivalesque style and turning to popular culture as its metaphor of reference. The KP performs a diffusion of hierarchical tensions between the police and the public experienced both in lived experiences as well as in the media by revoking formal language and norms.

However, the real problem of power imbalance between the public and the police is steeped in other forms of social inequity which the KP not only does not address, but arguably reinforces. Marginalized groups within the public experience the imbalance far more brutally than the rest, and they are conspicuous by their absence as audience members for the creative PR exercise. The KP's attempts to change its public image is an important case in performative public engagement, but that this is wholly separated from the actual functioning of the institution. The carnival strategy may work for certain functions of the institutions, as it has to an extent with KP, but herein lies the paradox. If public institutions increasingly do the same, without changing their practices and engagement with citizens, that it is purely the lip service is eventually a given.

Despite the tenor of the memes themselves, the hierarchies within the bureaucratic organization remain intact, even in the outreach process. The move to online communication hasn't democratized outreach – all communications run through the gatekeeping process overseen by a superior officer, and new forms of stock responses online replace bureaucratic run-arounds experienced at police stations.

A look at the social media approach of district police departments in the state shows the variance in the content and tone. Even though the headquarters use comic memes and clever means of engagement, this has not trickled down to the level of individual police stations or in smaller towns, where conventional communication such as press releases, posters, record of achievements in the ceremonious, official manner are still the standard means of interaction. This demonstrates a classic problem posed by top-down changes such as bringing in a PR consultant to headquarters – the vision from the top cannot impact the actual working of the nodes without a generational change to the way things are traditionally done.

The popularity of the KP's engagement model has initiated a wave among other bureaucratic departments in Kerala getting on the social bandwagon. Indeed, a paradigmatic change in bureaucratic communication may be underway in terms of both the means and style of informal communicating with the public among bureaucratic departments. In this also lies the 'ICTD' conundrum – who *really* benefits from this?

The reframing of the public service appears to be clearly aimed at the middle classes, as we see in the statistics of who follows these pages. This needs to be seriously interrogated, since it is arguably the poor that deal with the police more often on a day to

day basis, without the advantage of lawyers, or political protection. It is also the poor that are most likely to face the hard hand of police justice, that the memes work so hard to undermine. And yet, as the middle-class outreach attempt has worked well, it has set in motion a range of public services to start their own online strategies, signaling that the aspirational discourse of a modern, witty, and tech-savvy department that appeals to the politically important constituents may go farther than to appeal to the less powerful citizens who use these services.

A reimagination of the relationship between the police and public could be an endeavor to change perceptions that may translate to a change in the organization of relationships, processes and discourses surrounding police bureaucracy and society in which it exists. As we examine the ways in which top-down organizations and the state police force appropriate memes, controlling and disseminating a supposedly democratic means of communicating ideas, future work must look at the broader implications of how organizational communication through social media serves to strengthen existing systems and hierarchies.

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