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# Folkloristics in the Digital Age



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Eds. Pekka Hakamies and Anne Heimo

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# Vernacular Authority Speaks for the Glock

## Heterogeneous Volition in an Institutional Proverb

Robert Glenn Howard

In 2012, 'hollywoodleek' posted the graphic in Fig. 1 on a website dedicated to aggregating humorous internet content. The meme couples an action-movie-style one-liner with a photograph from a misleading perspective which makes it appear that a menacing pistol is aimed directly at a harmless bumblebee. The first comment posted in response to the graphic makes a typical terse witty quip. The second comment states

what seems to be the obvious. 'Bumblebees are harmless and do not sting.' The third comment, however, is unusual. Flouting the typically brief form of user commenting, 'fantomen' posts 235 words that begin: 'THESE LITTLE \*\*\*\*\* [bees] ARE MASSIVE CUNTS!!! Let me tell you a story...' The story goes on to describe how the commenter was, as a child, stung multiple times by what she or he believes was a bumble bee. Based on my own research, I believe it is possible for bumblebees to sting, but it very rarely happens. In any case, the response concludes the story of this rare bumblebee event, exclaiming:

And that ladies and gentlemen is an example of why bumblebees are assholes. They like to look all sweet and harmless, but on the inside they are all brutal psychos that will take every chance the[y] get to harm you. (hollywoodleek 2012)

Possibly just meant as a humorous rejoinder to the post or possibly a cathartic rant about a real childhood experience, the juxtaposition of the harmless bee with the extreme power of a modern pistol bearing down on it creates an oddly whimsical portrayal of violence that elicits an even stranger response.



Fig. 1 'YOUR MOVE... BEE...';  
at FunnyJunk.com, 2012.



The painful possibilities of a bumblebee's sting, however, did not capture the interest of those involved in the brief discussion following this post. Instead, a new responder joked: 'He's holding a Glock... I think the bee is pretty safe.' Fantomen jabbed back by posting a collage of photographs depicting twenty-two Glock pistols that appear to have violently cracked during use. He wrote sarcastically: 'What are you talking about? Glocks are FINE firearms. And I will tolerate none of you[r] slander here.' But then another user, 'dmanspeed', arrived and completely changed the tone of the discussion again:

under standing that everyone has their own opinions i have to say that glocks are too light. when using a police issued G 17 .40 compared to a 1960's US army standard Colt 1911 .45 i find my aim waving all over the damn place with the glock.

This newly serious attempt to actually assess the pistol in relation to another, the 1911, inspires yet another responder to post what appears to be a proverb of sorts: 'You show your 1911 to your friends and your glock to your enemies.' Taking on the newly serious tone of the exchange, fantomen reveals his involvement in gun culture, writing: 'I can shoot glocks OK, but I dislike the ergonomics' (hollywoodleek 2012).

Why did this visual joke move so quickly to a serious discussion and why did one poster have what appears to be a proverb perfectly suited to this discussion at the ready? The answer to these questions is obvious if you are familiar with the massive volume of online discourse which is topically specific to recreational gun use. Some of the most common topics there are debates about which gun or gun accessory is better, and some of the most common guns compared are the Glock and the 1911. These discussions are so prevalent, in fact, that they have spawned their own community-specific gunlore – including the proverb quoted above.

When this graphical joke uses the Glock handgun as a resource to elicit a humorous response in its audience, that usage comes at a price. Depicting the Glock, the post now necessarily participates in, inadvertently or not, a huge network of discursive formations that exist beyond the boundaries of this particular website. Those formations manifest their power by transforming the humorous discussion into a serious one. Whatever the original poster or the first responders intended, the aggregate of many millions of posts passionately comparing the Glock to the 1911 insisted that the discussion be a serious one.

To begin to consider how this whole other discourse can suddenly emerge to exert its power in this obscure corner of the internet, neither the meme nor the proverb can be taken as simple examples of digital 'lore'. Instead, network communication events like the 'Your Move, Bee' post must be considered as moments in an ongoing chain of associations through which previous

individuals with different intentions have acted in ways that contribute to the expression of the new event. In this article, I examine online performances of this gun proverb to demonstrate how imagining heterogeneous volition as the material out of which network communication events emerge can account for the complexity inherent in everyday acts of online communication.

### Vernacular authority

We can conceptualise each network-mediated communication event as emerging at the end of a chain of previous individual, diverse, and potentially quite different events. These previous events (taken together) constitute the new event as it emerges from the previous actions and actors. Those actors each had their own intentions and each made their own choice to communicate. As a result, each new event is born of the heterogeneous volition of many actors over time. So-called 'digital folklore' is one category of such events in which this heterogeneity is particularly clear (Howard 2017).

What we usually think of as 'netlore' or digital folklore is a form of vernacular discourse (Dundes & Pagter 1975; Blank 2013). In this usage, 'discourse' refers to communication about a particular thing and 'vernacular' refers to discourse that is non-institutional. 'Vernacular discourse', then, includes any communication event that is marked as distinct from any institution. Institutions, in this sense, are something that has been instituted. Typically, institutions are instituted by a linguistic act such as signing a contract or making an oath. Once instituted, institutions exert very real power even if they are only our communally imagined social constructions.

Similarly, vernacular discourse exerts power. Specifically, it carries with it vernacular authority. Vernacular authority is authority that is generated by the perceived quality of being non-institutional. The most familiar form of this sort of authority is informally shared knowledge that we typically imagine as traditional. We seek the 'correct' or 'authentic' song, dish, dance or other practice imagining there is some particular traditional way of enacting that practice (Howard 2013).

Maybe the most distilled form of vernacular authority emerges in the performance of proverbial speech. Often offered as a sort of evidentiary or explanative claim, proverbs are authoritative specifically because they are part of a shared common knowledge that exists beyond institutions. Even when an institution or an institutional actor uses a proverb, that user is seeking authority from the proverb's sense of traditional or common knowledge in addition to her or his position as part of an institution. The difference between

vernacular and institutional power is that institutional status is conferred on people or things by the highly charged and high-profile act or acts of instituting. Vernacular authority, by contrast, emerges out of the imagined aggregate of many low-profile everyday individual expressions like the myriad of repetitions that render any common proverb, apparently, wise.

Online, the increased potential for visibility that network technologies bring to everyday communication has dramatically affected the high-frequency but low-profile nature of vernacular discourse. In a feedback loop, those engaging in vernacular communication online can now more easily see other similar or related online communications. As a result, the power of vernacular discourse is amplified by the visibility of more mundane acts because such acts suggest a wider distribution of the 'common' or 'traditional' value or belief. As more people see more other people saying the same thing, what they are saying appears more authoritative and people can then more easily refer to and repeat those increasingly authoritative claims. Through this network visibility, repetition functions to gather these individually mundane actions into a potentially powerful aggregate volition. In this context, 'aggregate volition' refers to apparently communal expressions of will that emerge in repeated similar acts by different individuals over time. In the online context, the visibility that networks give to everyday communication magnifies the apparent aggregating effects of vernacular discourse by enabling individuals to see more and more of them associated through links.

For researchers wanting to document and explore cases of this aggregation, the sheer volume of linked expression that needs to be assessed is a significant methodological problem. This problem is surmountable by deploying partly computational methods in the documentation and analysis of massive amounts of this aggregating everyday communication.

## Methods

To document aggregate volition, I used a combination of computational analysis and close textual analysis to locate four major topical categories of online vernacular firearms discourse on a moderately sized mainstream internet forum dedicated to recreational gun use.

While online forums are not the most common or the newest forum of social media, I chose to use computational analysis in this medium because it provides an excellent source for the necessary data. Forums offer a large volume of vernacular communication in a relatively normalised and easily translatable format. Because forum software uses specific HTML code to

create the webpages that comprise it, scripting software can use those ‘tags’ to extract information and place it into database fields. Creating a database allows the generation of network graphs of the discourse that then allow a huge volume of online gun discourse to be looked at fairly quickly.<sup>1</sup>

I chose to use the Guns and Ammo Forum because it is, in many ways, a typical gun forum. It is part of the *Guns & Ammo Magazine* website. The magazine was first published in 1958 and offers a largely United States audience ‘content covering the complete spectrum of firearms, accessories and related products’. It claims to be ‘the most respected media brand in the firearms field’ (Outdoor Sportsman Group 2015). Its online forum appears to have started in 2011. The forum is moderately sized compared to other gun forums I have documented with about 7000 members and just over half a million posts as of the summer of 2016. Other forums have more narrowly defined audiences such as those that are geographically specific like CalGuns.net. CalGuns focuses on California gun users and has 92,697 members. Other forums narrow their users by focusing on a specific gun model like GlockTalk.com. GlockTalk focuses on the Glock brand of handgun and has 191,992 users. Based on a nationally marketed magazine, Guns and Ammo Forum gives a view into a moderate sized forum with a broad cross-section of online gun discourse.

To locate the most active users of the Guns & Ammo Forum, I created graphs that show which individuals most often speak to each other in responding forum posts or ‘threads’. Noting individuals who interact often and individuals who interact less often, I located all the posts by different users and compared the topics being discussed in those posts.

To create these network graphs, I worked with computer programmers to write Perl<sup>2</sup> computer language scripts that download an entire forum and then place its contents into an SQL<sup>3</sup> database. As of 2016, I had downloaded fifteen gun forums for a total of 34,105,654 individual posts. The Guns and Ammo Forum alone contains 525,219 posts. If I were to spend one minute reading each of these posts on just the Guns and Ammo forum, it would take me 364 days with no breaks. To get a good overview of the data on just this one forum is simply not possible without a computational approach. Such an approach,

- 1 For more on my methods, please see my 2015 book chapter in *Research Methods for Reading Digital Data in the Digital Humanities*.
- 2 Perl is a general-purpose computer language commonly used to automate simple computer network tasks.
- 3 SQL or ‘Structure Query Language’ is a special-purpose computer programming language designed for managing data in relational database systems.

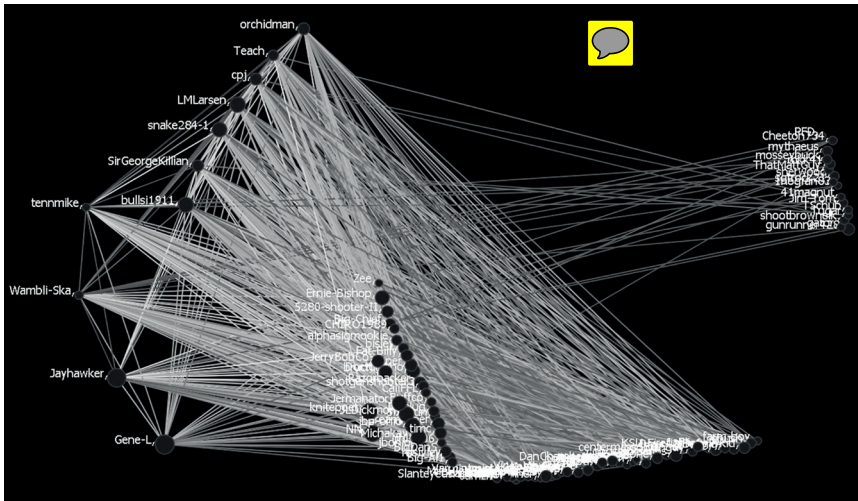



Fig. 2 Guns and Ammo Forum User by Co-Thread Network Graph, 2013.



however, cannot replace close analysis. While numerical representations of human expression can direct the researcher's attention to important or interesting content, only close analysis brings the subtlety and nuance of individual everyday communications to light (Howard 2015). Combining close reading with the overall perspective provided by computational analysis, I can better understand the topics of discussion that define the discourse.

To locate these topics, I generated graphs that visualise which individual users post in the same threads such as that in Fig. 2. Using these graphs, I gain a large-scale view of the discourse on the forum even though I could not possibly have read all the posts. I can tell which individuals speak most and who they most often speak to because the more times each linked pair of individuals post in the same forum thread, the redder and thicker the lines between them on the graph become. At the same time, the more each user posts overall, the bigger the red dot representing their location in the network becomes. To really see what these individuals are discussing, I can now search the database for all the posts posted by a particular user or users and read them. Picking the most interesting of the top ten users, I searched for and read the last hundred posts that user posted on the forum. In cases where an interesting discussion emerged, I would locate and read the entire thread where that post appeared.

## On-line gun culture

By looking at what was being talked about by these users in the Guns and Ammo Forum, three  topics of discussion become clear: 1. 'How to...' 2. 'Politics' and 3. 'Which is better?' Posts that I categorise as part of the 'How to...' topic generally feature individuals discussing specific techniques associated with recreational firearm use including hunting techniques, gun maintenance practices, and so on. 'Politics' focuses on discussions and predictions of the introduction of new gun laws. At the time of this research, the focus was on the possibility that President Obama would implement a new gun ban in the United States before his term in office ended. 'Which is better?' generally features individuals discussing which guns and which gun accessories they like most. In these discussions, intense debates sometimes emerge about which item is best.

Most of these discussions do not end with individuals stating that they have decided which product is finally best or which product they will now purchase. Instead, much of this discourse is what I have previously termed 'ritual deliberation'. Ritual deliberation occurs when individuals engage in what appears to be a debate. However, the terms on which that debate is engaged preclude any final decision being made. This sort of deliberation serves the ritual purpose of enacting shared competency in a discourse in order to demonstrate group identity (Howard 2011: 58–65). Among the common topics in this discourse, the 'How to...' topic serves the least ritual purpose. When engaging in this topic, individuals seem most often to be genuinely seeking information about how to do things. They tend to be less inclined to speak to the same individuals about the same things. The 'Politics' topic, on the other hand, is engaged in by a relatively small group of people who post disproportionately more than other users. There is seldom real dissent in this topic. No-one calls for stronger gun control measures, for example. However, engaging in these debates seems to be a way for individuals to inspire each other to political action and there are sometimes specific corrective exchanges where ideas are forwarded and then abandoned (or at least quieted) as the debate moves forward (Howard 2017).

Like the 'How to...' topic, the 'Which is better?' topic often emerges when individuals are genuinely seeking advice about guns or accessories to buy and use. However, specific discussions about particular products have inspired enough discourse to become notorious in the online gun community, such as the debate about whether the Glock or the 1911 handgun design is better. These debates function more as ritual deliberation than deliberative decision-making because they seem to continue  without any hope of resolution, and they seem to inspire intense identification  some individuals' community.

Along with debates that compare the AR15 to the AKM family of assault rifles and those that compare the .45 ACP cartridge to the 9mm cartridge, the comparison between the 1911 and the Glock inspires some of the most intense debate. ‘Glock Perfection’ is the self-appraising slogan of the Glock weapons manufacturing company, and those who seem too fully convinced of this claim have been derisively dubbed ‘Glock fan boys’ by the larger gun community. The very different handgun design of the 1911 also has a large following. In the next section, I will look at how individuals use these two mass-produced commercial handguns as a resource to enact their own identities in the online gun community. As they do this, the volitional force of institutional weapons’ producers and the vernacular users’ desire to participate in an informal community are merged into online performances of, among many other things, a gun proverb.

### Vernacular authority speaks for the Glock

The example of what appears to be a gun-culture-specific proverb I described above is commonly enacted in the Glock vs 1911 version of the ‘Which is better?’ topic, and this proverb demonstrates how everyday online expression emerges out of aggregate volition. ‘Show your 1911 to your friends, show your Glock to your enemies’ qualifies as a proverb on the basis of Wolfgang Mieder’s accepted definition because it is a fixed and memorisable form that contains generally known wisdom (Mieder 1993: 5). The wisdom here is, on the literal level, that the Glock is an effective firearm. On a more metaphoric level, the wisdom is that function is more important than form. In both registers, this kind of folk speech is also an endorsement of a specific commercial product: the Glock line of pistols.

Here, individual expression comes infused not only with the communal wisdom of a proverb but also with the institutional interests of the weapons manufacturers that the proverb explicitly supports. As with the other topics documented in these forums, individuals perform this saying online in order to mark themselves as sharing an identity in the online community. But they do so at the price of supporting commercial interests by asserting the superiority of the weapons that the corporation manufactures and sells. Here, vernacular expression participates in the marketing of firearms.

Searching the words ‘show your 1911 to your friends, show your Glock to your enemies’ on the Google search engine resulted in 43,800 results. I cataloged the first hundred results that were clear performances of this proverb. The performance of the proverb constitutes a sort of ‘gunlore’ practice because



its repeated performances create a community of gun owners who recognise it. Based on Georges' and Jones's famous definition of folklore, the proverb exhibits 'continuities and consistencies through time and space' (Georges and Jones 1995: 1). These continuities and consistencies are magnified by digital technologies because individuals can access websites where other gun-lovers congregate and share the knowledge that defines this specific community. Going to these sites, in turn, further increases their exposure to the continuities and consistencies. For these individuals, this proverb is one of many resources they can deploy to enact their identity as firearms enthusiasts. However, individuals expressing their identities online are not the only volitional forces emerging in the practice of this proverb. The Glock corporation has made the performance possible and has contributed to defining the value of function over form in the community, and, in the end, Glock benefits from the practice of repeatedly performing this proverb as individuals produce an enormous amount of free or nearly free publicity for the company's products.

The appearance of the specific brand name 'Glock' is an institutional element that gives rise to the vernacular performance. Glock is the registered trademark of Glock Ges.m.b.H., an Austrian weapon manufacturer. Its founder, Gaston Glock, designed the mostly plastic pistol and patented it in 1982 as part of a competition for the Austrian military's primary handgun contract. Winning the contract, the very popular series of Glock handguns has gone on to become one of the most prolific and widely used pistols worldwide, adopted by over fifty national militaries and law-enforcement agencies from Sweden and the United Kingdom to Malaysia and Israel. Glock reportedly has 65 percent of the US law-enforcement market contracts (Glock Ges.m.b.H. 2016). The Glock model '19' is often described as one of the most effective pistols ever produced. However, when the Atlanta police department adopted the Glock, the local newspaper reported: 'New Gun "Ugly," But Effective, Police Say' (cited in Barrett 2013: 282). Reporting on a mass shooting in 1991 the *Houston Chronicle* noted: "Ugly" Gun Can Fire 16–20 Shots" (cited in Barrett 2013: 284). Even the gun's first major US importer, when first seeing the new high-tech pistol, commented: 'Jeez, that's ugly' (quoted in Barrett 2013: 52).



Fig. 3 Front cover of an online brochure for the 'Gen4' variant of Glock pistols introduced in 2010.



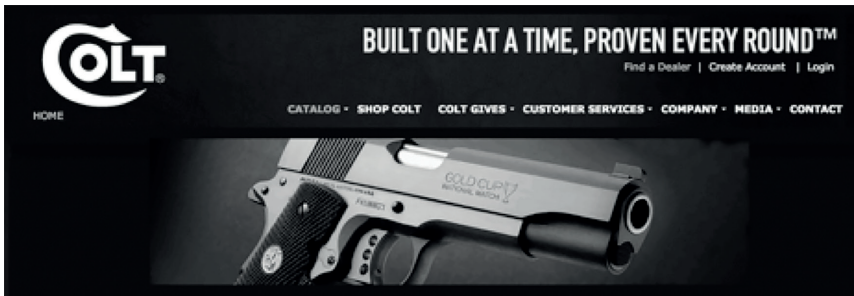


Fig. 4 Colt's marketing website for the 1911 pistol, 2016.

In gun discourse, the Glock design is imagined as emphasising function and not aesthetics. Glock's own marketing slogan promotes this ethos by suggesting that simplicity (both in words and in form) gives the user confidence: 'Safe. Simple. Fast. = Confidence' (Glock Ges.mb.H. 2010).

Though the term '1911' in the proverb is not a registered trademark, it still refers to a discrete gun design that one of several companies actively market to US civilians as well as military and law-enforcement agencies. The 1911 is a much older design that is, arguably, less reliable but more aesthetically appealing. Originally designed by John Browning for the American firearms' manufacturer 'Colt's Manufacturing Company', the 'M1911' designation was given to the design when it was adopted by the US military as its standard military handgun in the year 1911. Used for the next seventy-five years, the gun has taken on an iconic status. Invoking this status in their 2016 marketing materials, Colt suggests that the owner of one of its modern versions of the pistol becomes connected to its historic users through the 'faithful' reproduction from 'blueprints':

Colt 1911 pistols and their descendants were in the hands of confident World War I, World War II, Korean War and Vietnam-era servicemen. Colt customers today can purchase reproductions of these weapons, each faithfully manufactured to the original specifications from factory blueprints. (Colt's Manufacturing Company LLC 2016)

Instead of emphasising its modern design, materials or manufacturing process, Colt emphasises that its pistols 'offer enthusiasts an opportunity to own a handcrafted 1911 type pistol' (Colt's Manufacturing Company LLC 2016).

Understanding the sorts of ethos these two pistol designs have helps clarify why individuals might use them to define their identities in this community. It also helps clarify the meaning of the proverb. One might show a 1911 to one's friends because though the design is not as modern or as functional as the Austrian Glock pistol, it offers a powerful sense of connection to US history and, after all, it is considered nice to look at. It has what well-known gun

blogger Nutnfancy has famously dubbed a ‘second kind of cool’. As Nutnfancy describes it, an ‘item actually has TWO KINDS OF COOL: [1] PERFORMANCE within its category and [2] the intrinsic ENJOYMENT it provides its owner’ (nutnfancy 2008). If the 1911 markets itself as offering its users the ‘intrinsic enjoyment’ of being connected to a rich history of users, the Glock claims to offer pure performance in the form of ‘confidence’ that it will work effectively. By all accounts, however, both pistols are extremely deadly, and both have functioned effectively for individual users and large militaries for decades.

Based on this understanding of the ethos of the two guns, the meaning of the proverb in the gun community can be rendered something like: ‘it is more important that the weapon works well than that it looks good’. To put it even more bluntly, the assertion of the proverb at the literal level is really that the Glock is the more effective weapon. The proverb is, ultimately, making a claim about which of these two commercial products is better, and that places it squarely in the common online gun discourse topic of ‘Which is better?’

All such discourse participates in what social-network marketers call ‘brand communities’ (Jenkins 2013: 163). These communities are a combination of the efforts of individuals who have developed a passionate attachment to a product and the careful facilitation, encouragement and even augmentation of those communities by marketing professionals. As a result, the discourse in these communities is a hybrid of volitional actions that include both everyday vernacular actors and commercial corporate actors. In most cases, this hybrid of volitional forces is probably not being harnessed to very serious ends. Brand communities are most commonly associated with fan culture arising around media franchises like Star Trek or Harry Potter (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1991; Hinck 2016). But they are also common among users of specific forms of durable recreational products like motorcycles, guitars – and guns.

In a November 2012 post Travis590A1 invited users of the California-oriented ‘CalGuns’ gun forum to state which was their favorite handgun using the .45 ACP pistol round, a round that is the traditional cartridge of the 1911 and immediately associated with it by members of the gun community. ‘Travis’ made his opinion provocatively clear: ‘Mine is a Glock’. A day later, ‘AeroEngi’ posted: ‘You guys would seriously pick a Glock over a 1911 in the .45 category? I’d without a doubt go with a 1911’. And a long discussion of the relative merits of the two guns began. Several posts in, one user noted:

I love shooting my 1911, but it’s had jamming issues, been back to the factory twice for repairs. My Glock G30’s [Glock handguns using the same cartridge as the 1911] have never jammed, not once in many thousands of rounds [...] I don’t know the originator of this quote, but I like it: “You

show your 1911 to your friends, you show your Glock to your enemies”  
(Travis590A1 2012).

Here the user establishes vernacular authority for his support of the Glock by portraying the saying as being commonly held wisdom as is typical of proverbial speech: ‘I don’t know the originator of this, but...’

After the proverb was invoked, the next 157 posts in the forum thread include 129 individuals sharing 61 pictures of their own favorite .45 caliber handguns. This flood of photos is good example of the emic genre of ‘gun porn’.

Amateur gun porn is the practice of taking and sharing pictures of one’s own guns. While there is professional gun photography made for advertising or other purposes, amateur gun porn is not interested in selling guns. Instead, it functions as a way to assert one’s identity as a member of one sort of sub-group or the other in the larger recreational gun-user community. The identification with the Glock-brand community is, in particular, strong enough that individuals who identify this way most strongly are dubbed ‘Glock fanboys’. The community is large enough for well-known YouTube gun celebrity Colion Noir to be able to offer a 2 minute and 29 second YouTube video titled ‘You know you’re A GLOCK FANBOY when... (Noir 2012)’. The discourse also includes advocates such as the well-known online gun magazine editorial: ‘Glock fanboy makes his case’ (Tim 2012). In another example, an amateur forum poster on the gun-friendly forum Survivalistboards.com started a thread titled ‘I’m a Glock fanboy...’ in which he wrote: ‘I know it’s not the popular thing to say but I have to go with what works. Now glock needs to make a 1911 and all will be right in the world... Okay, flame on...’ (Uglyfish 2012). His anticipation of a coming ‘flame’ or rush of incoming negative comments to his post reveals both the widespread nature of the Glock vs 1911 debate as well as the apparent lack of interest in actually coming to any new conclusions based on the debate. A 2010 thread on the Ar15.com gun forum titled ‘Which firearms-related fanboys are the worst?’ shows an overwhelming number of users believe Glocks have the worst ‘fanboys’. One user summed up the statement well, writing: ‘Glock by a mile. Its design is about as exciting as a honda civic yet people worship it’. Another user agreed:

I would have to go with glock. They always have to do some ridiculous assed thing to prove (prove to who, we’re not sure) how great their choice in a handgun is.

fanboy #1: I shot mine underwater.

fanboy #2: I shot mine in a bowl of jellow.

fanboy #3: I shot mine in battery acid.



Fig. 5 Glock Army Gun Porn, 2012.



Fig. 6 1911 Gun Porn, 2012.

etc. (ArmyInfantryVet 2010)

In the ‘Which firearms-related fanboys are the worst?’ thread, the 1911 also has a large showing. The more austere nature of the gun and the stereotype of the owners that identify with it bubbles to the surface in one post when a user asserts that 1911 fans are less open to joking about their gun than others: ‘Come on, we all know it’s the 1911 fanboys... They actually and seriously get offended if you talk mean to a 1911’ (ArmyInfantryVet 2010).

These kinds of exchanges certainly are debates about which guns are better, and some participants probably are deciding on which handgun to use or purchase. However, these discussions most often function primarily as a means to express one’s opinion and display competence in gun discourse, and thus display membership in the gun community. Whichever brand an individual favors, there are no resolutions to these debates, nor would there usually be any real consequences of a resolution if one were to be found. Instead, these online celebrations and denigrations of particular guns allow individuals to participate in the community by expressing their preference.

Threads like the one from CalGuns above are very much meant to invite the forum users to aggregate their volition in the repetition of well-known arguments and opinions – and post pictures. In the 129 posts in that thread, most of the comments were affirmations of the poster’s pictures like ‘+1 for my Glock’. There were also positive comments made about the photographic skill of the gun owners. The photo below seemed to be the group favorite in this particular thread, and the dramatic lighting, reflection and composition with liquor bottles in the background render this photograph more technically sophisticated than most. The Glock photo above is much more typical.

Taking and sharing these photographs is certainly a form of vernacular artistic expression; a vernacular practice that serves as means for these individuals to connect as a community. At the same time, this expressive practice could only arise as it has after the successful design and sales of these

particular handguns. Further, these particular weapon manufacturers necessarily benefit from the development and expansion of the brand community as its members repeatedly extend the online presence of and advocate for the particular company's products at little or no cost to the company. This hybrid vernacular-institutional-expressive practice is empowered by and empowers already powerful institutions in the global military industrial complex. Here, the volitional forces of individuals interested in building community and connecting with other gun owners is mixed with those of individuals manufacturing and selling guns.

In another example, however, we can see most clearly how the performance of this proverb mixes vernacular volition with that of commercial gun makers. On 20 February 2015, a user posted a link to an article on the 'left-wing gun nuts' Facebook group page. The article was from a well-known industry magazine called *Military.com* and was titled: 'Marines allow operators to choose Glocks over MARSOC .45s'. After the link to the article, the poster noted: 'You show your 1911 off to your friends and your Glock off to your enemies' (Left Wing Gun Nuts 2015).

The article he was posting as part of this proverb performance offered a short news report on the partial adoption of the Glock pistol as a replacement for a highly specialised version of the 1911 pistol in limited use by the US military. The article referenced a larger institutional debate about what gun the US military should purchase as its standard pistol. The US military first called for arms manufacturers to offer new pistol designs for an overall pistol contract in 2011, but the contract was not awarded until 2015. As a result, there were long-running public debates in the online gun community about which company should be awarded the contract until it was finally decided. Arming the entire US military would be a very lucrative contract for any weapons maker, and Glock was certainly a frontrunner in the competition. On the Facebook page, the debate about what new pistol the US should purchase in the future emerged at the vernacular level.

Supporting the Glock's famously simple design over the more traditional hammer-fired design of the 1911, 'Dave' posted: 'Choose a striker fired weapon [The Glock]!' Another user responded: 'The 1911 is slick, but a Glock 19 is faster, lighter, [and] cheaper'. Then yet another poster sarcastically suggested that Glock were incapable of killing at all, writing: "'Show off your 1911 to your friends and your glock to your enemies'? Why? To hope they die laughing?' A Glock supporter rejoined quite seriously: 'Personally, I love Glock. My G19 and G27 were without any doubt some of the best pistols you could buy'. Then a 1911 supporter retorted: 'I believe the article when it points out "lack of enough training" [. . . was] part of the issue'. And then still another user,

'Jon', referenced the original posters' use of the proverb. In so doing, he brought the vernacular authority of the proverb to bear even more resolutely by reposting a variant of it in the form of an image-macro-style meme with the comment: 'That is my new favorite quote' (Left Wing Gun Nuts 2015).

The deployment of this proverb here on Facebook expresses its support for the US military's adoption of the Glock in an informal exchange,

and this initial contract offered significant financial rewards for Glock. It would increase sales and prestige, and it could even become a stepping-stone towards the larger and more lucrative contracts still undecided at that time.

In January 2017, however, the army leadership did not choose the Glock from the competitive bids it received. Instead, coming in far cheaper, the Sig Sauer P320 was chosen to replace the US Army's aging stock of M9 handguns (Cox and Hope 2017). Designed by Beretta, a private Italian weapons' manufacturing company, the M9s have been in use since 1985, and were widely considered to be out of date, worn out and in need of replacement (White 2016). A general contract with the US Army could have been worth as much as \$98.1 million (Cox 2016). Typically, follow-on contracts would be expected with all the other branches of the US military which could be worth as much as \$160 million. Further, adoption by the US military would have certainly boosted civilian sales of the pistols because its usage by the military would be seen as a stamp of approval. The amount of money at stake for Glock was significant, and Glock actually disputed the army decision in civil court. Though Glock lost the contract to a strong competitor, Sig Sauer's pistol immediately displayed significant safety and reliability problems. As those problems became widely reported, the voices of Glock aficionados responded with loud cries of 'I told you so' (Dabbs 2017). While the participation of vernacular authority in the public debates about the decision is not quantifiable, the vernacular authority of this proverb is clearly speaking for Glock.



Fig. 7 The 'Show your 1911 to your friends, show your Glock to your enemies' proverb as an internet meme', 2015.



## Aggregating heterogeneous volition

In the example of the ‘Show your 1911 to your friends, show your Glock to your enemies’ proverb, a bit of online gunlore empowers everyday people to add their voices to support a specific institution in the global military industrial complex. In most cases, I think, online vernacular gun discourse is practiced in ways more like the rush of gun porn or the debate following the rant against bumblebees: as a means to express a shared community identity by repeating well-known opinions and ideas using the words and ideas of the 1911 and Glock handguns.

Like all brand-community discourse, however, these acts of communication also promote the intentions of the product manufacturers. Glock and all the other corporations that produce these guns make this vernacular expression of identity possible. Because these communication events emerge out of the actions of different actors on the network who have exercised different volitional choices from different subject positions, they serve as excellent examples of how network communication technologies facilitate the emergence of heterogeneous volitional forces in specific communication events. Further, as these heterogeneous volitional forces take the form of expressive uses of the proverb, the actors participate in aggregating the authority of these forces through a feedback loop of repeated performances. The repetition of these performances enhances the appearance of authority that, in turn, encourages more performances.

Considering any one of the several ‘memes’ above or even the proverb itself as a media object or a static piece of digital ‘lore’, however, cannot fully account for the complexity this analysis has shown as inherent in these kinds of online communication events (Peck 2014 and 2015). Imagining the proverb moving through online locations as a vernacular practice is better because it recognises the emergent and thus fundamentally dynamic nature of these events, but it does not account for the fact that individuals are choosing to use these institutions to promote their own vernacular identity. And, for better or worse, this choice – this practice – is first made possible by the volitional forces embedded in the design of the Glock.

To suggest, however, that the internet has created these sorts of aggregating and hybrid discursive events would not be reasonable. Long before the internet, institutional actors appealed to constituents by deploying proverbial speech. Before the advent of social media, grassroots fan clubs and hobbyist communities emerged around commercial products. There never was some golden age where vernacular discourse was pure. And it has certainly always been the case that traditional forms come to be considered traditional when

individuals imagine there is some 'folklore' that is the aggregate of a myriad of individual performances.

What is different, though, in our digital age, is how network technologies magnify vernacular discourse. They do this in two significant ways. First, the ability of individuals to locate and engage with a much larger volume of everyday communication without being bound by geography or time in the way most mundane communication was before the dawn of the network age has made aggregating that discourse together much easier. Second, these dynamically aggregating vernacular communication events can and do happen in close proximity to and even in conjunction with institutional discourse. The separating line between what was once more singularly institutional and what was once more singularly vernacular is now far foggier, and the movement between these modes of discourse is far more permeable. These two affordances of network communication technologies have increased the power of vernacular discourse at least in comparison to the broadcast age during which corporations monopolised the few media capable of reaching mass audiences.

When the everyday Facebook user posted to the 'left-wing gun nuts' page, he posted an institutionally empowered article from an industry magazine that is quite likely to be read by individuals involved in making the decision about which handgun the US military should purchase. It is entirely possible that the generals and others making these decisions could have seen that Facebook page. It is not only possible but, in fact, nearly unquestionable that those decision-makers are familiar with the online discussions of the Glock pistol and maybe even the proverb on which I have focused. If these decision-makers have not directly read these debates online, there can be absolutely no doubt that somewhere someone whom they know has. Given the accessible and visible nature of this discourse, the proverb could, even if not consciously, have played a real part in this decision. After all, generals are part of the folk too.

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