Meming the Catch-22: Doing security where the steel wheel hits the rail
by Noah McClain

Abstract
While Internet memes are often treated as artifacts which play with broad cultural elements, they can also take on distinctive meanings within narrow communities of practice or organizational membership. This article demonstrates how interrogating a certain interpretation of a meme, and a sort of humor found within it, can reveal elements of viewers’ situated experience. In other words, I argue that when we get a joke, we begin to understand a world. I examine the particular reception of a meme — a parody of a familiar New York City subway security poster — by workers in that subway system, and show how a dark gallows humor they found in the meme draws from problems in their workplace. In turn, the world betrayed by that gallows humor illustrates challenges to organizational efforts and public policy to confront emergencies and crises. Unpacking the humor and even ridicule seen in memes in specific organizational and work settings, this article suggests, can offer shortcuts to reveal overlooked — but vital — perspectives in critical contexts.

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Introduction
Several years after the 2001 destruction of the World Trade Center, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), which runs New York City’s subway (and provides about one third of all mass-transit trips in the entire U.S.), began to plaster the subway system with posters of a lonely blue plastic bag sitting under a subway platform bench, captioned with the now-familiar admonition, “If You See Something, Say Something” (Figure 1). Signs bearing the phrase soon became practically a decorating motif in the subway system, painted even on subway station steps, printed on the backs of fare cards, and omnipresent in the agency’s printed materials and on its Web site. For a mass transit entity at the center of regional and national anxiety over the prospect of terror attacks, the campaign was its most-visible engagement with the potential vulnerability of a system with millions of daily passengers, high symbolic value, myriad
underwater tunnels, and a vast, necessary porousness.

Figure 1: NYC subway system security poster, introduced in 2003.

The ‘see something ...’ admonition was soon adopted by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and as the tagline for numerous other campaigns in other transport and urban settings, becoming, as one Washington Post writer claimed, a “national motto” (O’Haver, 2016). It also attracted the concern of scholars, such as for embodying a “banal security nationalism” (Kumar, 2018), and for exemplifying empty wastes of resources and missed opportunity to deliver real social goods (Molotch and McClain, 2012b). The tagline has proven amenable to great interpretive flexibility; The New Yorker alone has deployed it as a commentary on the neglect of glaring poverty while we search for unlikely terror threats (Lazar, 2014), and as a caption for a cartoon in which a waiter speaks the phrase to a pair of diners examining their menus at a table that is, for some reason, set on a subway platform (New Yorker, 2016).

While the “see something ...” campaign has become part of the fabric of scholarly critique and of broad popular-cultural meanings, it has also proven interpretively flexible within narrow audiences, including to the workers of the same subway system in which the campaign was initially launched.
In 2007, participants in SubChat, an online forum frequented by subway employees (and a significant community of enthusiasts) circulated a meme (Figure 2) which reproduced the security poster’s imagery with the fresh tagline, “Holy Fucking Shit It’s A Goddamn Fucking Bomb” (SubChat, 2007). At the time, I was studying how New York subway workers were adapting to relatively new expectations that they respond to a host of “suspicious” occasions, and to expectations they will manage emergencies related to terror events. Several interviewees, who had seen the meme on SubChat or in another forum, presented it to me as a gallows-humor commentary on the seemingly unresolvable predicaments of subway work under mandates to act as agents of security and emergency management. In other words, the meme was funny to my interviewees in a unique way because of the work they do, how they relate to their employer, and how that relationship frames how they saw those expectations for vigilance and emergency response.

![Figure 2: Gallows humor: Meme gleefully circulated by subway employees and others on social media (SubChat, 2007).](image)

This article therefore asks just how subway workers see this Internet meme through their work contexts, in ways that lend this Internet meme the dark, fatalist humor I discovered it holds for them.

Memes, inevitably, reference other cultural artifacts and somehow draw meaning and context from them.
Internet memes have generally been treated, however, as fragments of shared culture which speak to collective experience (Shifman, 2013). That treatment overlooks what may be much more local, specific ways that meanings are made and ascribed to cultural objects, perhaps as small-scale as a single organization’s membership. Put differently, memes may draw from fragments of mass culture but that does not mean they will be interpreted through frames of mass culture.

I propose here that studying the interpretation of mass-culture embedded memes through work-embedded frames offers shortcuts to discover problems in work contexts, and to uncover how those problems can produce such interpretations. By sharing and discussing a meme, participants in a given community of practice effectively flag its potential relevance in a way that is discoverable by researchers. When we begin to get the joke as those participants do, we begin to understand the world in which they operate.

What lends special relevance to our case, however, lies in how a key audience’s special insider humor about a “serious” message gives insight into the potential for that message to realize its ostensible goals. In our case, we find that a campaign launched under justifications presented as earnest deteriorated and fragmented for a key audience. This is an example of what McDonnell (2016) calls “cultural entropy”, which McDonnell observed in the unraveling of a public health campaign in Accra, Ghana, in which, for example, billboards with health messages were repurposed for community announcements, or to hang wares for sale on the sidewalk. While the “see something ...” signs suffered no such problem with visibility, their meaning deteriorated in ways evoked by our “holy fucking shit” meme.

I argue, then, that the meme, and the dark sense of humor subway employees found in it, is something of a Rosetta stone for understanding the status of security mandates and rules for front-line workers tasked with expectations of vigilance and emergency management. By decoding that humor, we find a predicament. On one side is subway workers’ real sense of threat of terror violence in their work settings that was at once looming but also remote in any given occasion — e.g., amidst all the abandoned plastic bags in the subway, does this one portend a world-historic act of violence instead of just some garbage? The other side of this predicament was the much more certain dangers of reporting suspicious events: subjecting themselves to an impracticable set of emergency rules and procedures in “emergency situations” they materialize through their report, but which they have few resources to manage.

This article unpacks this predicament and situates a set of mandates and rules deployed to workers in the subway, amidst what was constructed as a crisis of vulnerability to indiscriminate, spectacular violence. I sketch some of the elements which help give our meme the sense of humor my interviewees found in it. Specifically, I outline practical problems of being both accountable to emergency mandates and rules, and to what can be the contradictory requirements of operating a public transit system under a punitive employer. I show how the simplicity of mandates and rules are often unpracticable between these demands, spurring subway workers to avoid defining circumstances in ways that make them accountable to what may be irreconcilable expectations.

The broader relevance of the inquiry — in this moment of global emergency and beyond — is to use Internet-shared memes to understand the career of mandates. Mandates are far easier to issue than to materialize as programs of human action, and easier to express than to render as concrete goals that are actually reflected in the means by which routine activities are administered and coordinated. Memes — and other forms of humor — can reveal this neglected, over-idealized underbelly which lies where the rubber of campaigns launched in the name of crisis hits the road of reception and action. Studying that meeting — in our case, where the steel of the subway wheel hits the rail — can help us develop a critical stance towards emergency mandates and help us problematize how they meet with practice.

**Analytic footings:** **Symbolic mandates vs. work activities, and seeing through work frames**

The “See something ...” campaign responded to a crisis faced by the MTA, against the criticism it was failing to mitigate the vulnerability of the subway. Organizations scholars have long attended to the ways in which organizational behavior may be rooted in the need to appear legitimate, to be acting “appropriately”,
doing “the right thing” and in ways that conform to the expectations of relevant audiences. Admonitions or mandates — many as crisp and abbreviated as “see something...” — can be easy tools towards that end, especially when they stake out a position or proscribe a course of action. In moments of perceived crisis, they do this work doubly, offering apparently clear, boiled-down guidance that can be quickly propagated across media forms and outlets, albeit also devoid of nuance and detailed rationales. The propagation of new rules can serve similar purposes within organizations, serving to memorialize a legitimate effort to address a problem in a way that is accountable to onlookers and retrievable to defend against criticism.

Yet, scholars from across a range of fields have observed that proscriptions for action do not necessarily translate into action. Lee Clarke (1999) illustrates the absurdity of public messaging in irredeemably dangerous situations, such as one emergency plan for a nuclear plant disaster which admonishes adjacent residents not to rush to evacuate, and, if children are in school, to not go pick them up because authorities will provide for their needs and safety. As Clarke pointed out, empirical evidence suggests both that people will indeed rush, and will rush to pick up their kids, except under some very specific conditions. But the plan — and its simple proscriptions — allow administrators to frame the vast uncertainties of nuclear disaster as tractable risk that is manageable through an emergency plan even while, Clarke argues, that plan embodies fantasies about how people actually behave and how nuclear accidents actually unfold. But the plan can exist and do its symbolic job even when it is so divorced from grounded realities.

A prominent body of organization theory has long attended to what is called the “loose coupling” between — on the one hand — the formal elements believed to govern organizational life — like rules, policies, organization charts and even emergency plans — and on the other hand, actual work activity. Couplings are “loose” when there are only vague, partial or occasional relationships between these two (Orton and Weick, 1990). An easy example is a town-hall style meeting in which there are supposed to be pre-set time limits for each speaker, but the limit is only selectively made to apply, such as when one participant seems to be inconveniencing the advancement of the meeting agenda. The meeting rules are neither wholly ignored (an example of decoupling) nor vigorously enforced (an example of tight coupling). Instead, rules give the meeting legitimacy and offer resources which participants might decide to invoke.

Loose coupling, then, is analytically complex because formal structure is neither irrelevant, nor is it a very good indicator of practice. Instead, it is sort of, sometimes, or partially relevant to work activities. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argued that loose coupling alleviated the contradictions between formal elements like policy and procedure on one hand versus actual work practices on the other. In other words, loose coupling makes it possible for an organization to have a set of policies and procedures that are legitimate to key audiences, but which members often ignore in practice, even while they maintain the conceit that those policies indeed guide practice.

Subsequent research concerned with loose coupling in organizations, however, has only rarely problematized just how these tensions are sustained in actual settings where organizational participants work, interact, and otherwise get the job done (Powell and Colyvas, 2008; Barley, 2017). Hallett (2010) offers an important exception through a study of a public school. For many years, the school had officially operated under a system of “accountability”, entailing (among other features) the surveillance of curricula and teaching by the school principal to ensure conformity to standard expectations. In practice, the school principal had signaled compliance upwards to school system administrators and did not interfere in the classroom, where teachers maintained their autonomy. Hallett’s study picks up under a new principal who sought to actually run the school in strict compliance with the accountability system, leading to strife as teachers’ routines and autonomy were undermined. Hallet calls this process, when an organization is made to operate in strict accordance with what had formerly been a myth about how the organization operates, “recoupling.”

The concept of recoupling has significant purchase for our study of mandates and subway work because it focuses our attention on the ways in which formal mandates can “hover” above work practices without much impact until they are suddenly or occasionally made relevant, and actors are held to them. If a discourse of vigilance and preparedness became a guiding myth in the subway in response to global terror
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events, it was a myth that sat alongside an entrenched operating work culture that is intolerant of disruption. Subway workers came to manage the risks of recoupling by shaping circumstances and avoiding those in which recoupling was likely. As we will see, the unique operating circumstance of the subway — in which workers dispersed through a vast system are the main source of information for the supervisors to whom they report — gave workers some control over the instances in which safety and security procedures might be made to apply. The lack of resources to address those situations, and high potential for disciplinary action in their wake, spur subway workers to avoid reporting encounters with abandoned packages (or similar situations) to head off those eventualities.

For subway workers — living work lives stuck between a threat of potential terror, and under the much more likely threat of responding to the threat of terror as officially instructed — the meme became funny in a particular way. By sharing in the joke, we can glimpse their interpretation through what anthropologists call an emic perspective — that is, from within their world, in its own context.

While global events from terror attacks to pandemic often bring declarations that “everything is different,” we define and encounter the new in the context of the existing, and make sense of it within the context of the worldview we already inhabit, including through our work settings. Researchers have long situated the production of meaning in work in one way or another, from Bensman and Lilienfeld’s (1973) assertion that consciousness itself is a product of craft or profession, or examinations of how communities of practice develop specific ways of accounting for and lending meaning to information (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Orr, 1996; Buenza and Stark, 2009; D. Goodwin, 2009). Research on “sensemaking” in organizations has interrogated the way in which people draw from familiar routines and stories, amplify certain signals and ignore others, and, in a sense, think through their work (Weick, 1995, 1993). Goodwin (1994) showed how members of professions highlight and organize what they literally see through professional conventions. Vaughan (1996) offers what is perhaps the most in-depth, narrowly focused examination in the production of meanings through work contexts in her analysis of the launch of NASA’s fated Challenger space shuttle.

With ample precedent, then, this article turns to the meanings found in our meme, through the specific frame of reference of the New York subway as a workplace. Just how is it funny in that context?

Data

This article draws from a broader project, elements of which have also been presented and published elsewhere [1]. Here I draw from a corpus of 100 interviews with tunnel-level subway employees of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) through its subsidiary New York City Transit Authority (often referred to as the TA or simply as Transit) conducted between 2005 and 2009. Many of these interviews were conducted jointly with research collaborator Harvey Molotch and an undergraduate member of the research team.

Informants held job roles operating subways, working in stations, and maintaining tracks. Subject were recruited through an information booth set up at a mass meeting of their union, Transport Workers Union-Local 100 (TWU); through notices placed in the union’s newsletter; through flyers posted on union bulletin boards by shop stewards; and through transport security-related events such as university symposia and City Council hearings in which attendees made themselves identifiable as subway workers, and were approached by a member of the research team.

Further data comes from hundreds of hours of participant-observation in the subway system, often in the company of interviewees, and/or with several research collaborators and companions. Relevant occasions encountered in fieldwork included a slashing on a subway while I was riding with one of its crew members, and close observation of the immediate response to apparent suicide-by-train. I analyzed recordings of emergency communications for these and other incidents obtained under New York’s Freedom of
Information law. Further participant-observation included participation in several types of official MTA safety and emergency training, such as for track safety and for train evacuation procedures, facilitated by the TWU.

I obtained other radio transmissions of subway emergencies through a radio scanner linked to a continuously-recording computer left in the subway track-adjacent home of a colleague. Emergency events were parsed from long hours of mundane operations by rendering the recordings as visualizations and identifying bursts of intensified radio activity as possibly indicative of an emergency. Further research steps are detailed elsewhere (Molotch and McClain, 2012a, 2008; McClain, in press, 2022, 2018).

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**Emergency in the subway, under a punitive employer**

Consider this case: On a weekday morning, not far from the height of rush hour, a subway operator was informed via radio of a smoke condition in the vicinity of an upcoming station and was instructed to not make that station stop.

Smoke conditions are chronic in the subway, often stemming from trash (which blows through tunnels) ignited by sparks thrown by the train or smoldering from contact with the electrified third rail. Subway supervisors often confront reports of moderate smoke conditions in subway tunnels by instructing train operators to shut off the train’s air conditioning and keep moving through the smoke, by-passing any stations along the way. The strategy serves three goals: the movement of the train dissipates the smoke as the train pushes and pulls masses of air as it travels; passengers — at least those on the train — are protected from the smoke; and train service is kept on schedule, avoiding a system-wide disruption which can take hours to untangle.

The operator of our train, pulling into a smoky station with no intention of stopping, tapped the train horn, a telltale signal to passengers to step back from the platform because the train would not be stopping. He recounted to me in an interview:

> I’ve bypassed hundreds of stations for smoke. It’s just not that unusual. And usually I get the finger [from passengers]. I get people pointing at their watch. I get people gesturing [shrugging] “what’s wrong?” But I’ve never had fear, and these people were scared.

The train operator made the unusual decision to make the stop, violating the orders of Control, the office which monitors and coordinates train movement using radio communication and a generations-old technology of a schematic panel of subway lines (each divided into subsegments, adjacent to little lights which illuminate when a train is somewhere in that segment). Violating a directive from Control carries risks of great penalties, from suspension without pay to termination. While making the unauthorized stop, our train operator, knowing he’d have to explain his actions if Control noticed or later learned of the incident, was preoccupied with developing an explanation that would minimize the discipline he or the train conductor (who operates the doors and manages the loading and unloading of passengers) might face. He recalled thinking, “How am I going to word this that it sounds like I’m doing the TA a favor?”

In the end, our train operator was saved from disciplinary action not by the virtue of the explanation he prepared but by the wider context of the event: he had made the last-ever subway stop beneath the World Trade Center, shortly before the first tower fell, and carried hundreds of people away from a scene of imminent carnage. Instead of “days in the street” — or worse — he received an actual medal from the mayor. But we must take seriously the way the operator was sent orders deeply at odds with the circumstance he observed and was nearly constrained by the threat of disciplinary action.
If we unpack the operator’s conundrum, we find an important feature of subway work: Far-flung employees and the supervisors to whom they are accountable do not have access to the same information. The way that subway workers manage the problems arising from this asymmetry is vital to understanding workers’ perception of mandates for vigilance and emergency preparedness as, generally, ridiculous.

**Train operation, and asymmetries of information and of danger**

Subway train personnel are rarely physically co-present with their supervisors — they “interact in isolation” (Heath, et al., 1999) with Control. Control has authority and discretion over the operation of train service and the benefit of their schematic panel, but has only flimsy, indirect information. Train crews — operators and conductors — on the other hand, have no formal discretion but have rich, immediate information about grounded circumstances and direct exposure to those circumstances and the dangers they pose. This tension can lead to situations in which actions which seem sensible from Control’s perch are inappropriate to the eyes of subway employees who are usually in the midst of trouble when it emerges.

Scholars in and outside sociology alike have asked just how people accomplish their work processes through and around technology which mediates their communication (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1996; Star, 1996). While Transit staff does successfully assemble a working knowledge of mechanical and logistical conditions in routine processes of work, there are frequent breakdowns in collective processes of ‘seeing.’ A conductor reports, for example, an incident in which a mysterious liquid with a strong chemical smell was leaking from the ceiling of a subway car.

> Fumes were filling up the car, and [Control] told me to continue in service! [...] I’m explaining the situation to them saying the train needs to be taken out of service but they told me to continue going on. When I got to Bowling Green, the [physically present] supervisor said, “Oh no. Please immediately take this train out of service.”

It may be a normal consequence of remote communication that the full magnitude of an incident cannot be perfectly reported to supervisors in a pinch. In cases of fire, violence, and other ordinary happenstance, workers frequently cite difficulty provoking supervisors to successfully formulate the gravity of on-the-ground conditions which would, in their minds, surely result in a different response from supervisors. One train operator recounts being asked by a Control supervisor, “How high is the fire? How many inches? How high is the fire? What do you want me to do, go out there and measure it for you?” In the midst of an emergency, facing such a barrage “is when you realize you’re really on your own.” Very often, when train crews that report violence on their trains and request police response are instructed to keep to an ordinary schedule and “blow for police en route” meaning, use a particular pattern of horn blasts just before they enter subsequent stations and hope that police are within earshot at some station, recognize the pattern, and come to aid. “Signal en route for police? By that time, that guy could have turned around, shot people”, as a conductor put it.

**Requirements versus practice in a punitive organization**

Subway operations routinely entail practices which violate formal rules and procedures. A train operator reports being told “we need your cooperation” which means, she believed, “we need you to break the rules and regulations in order to get things done.” But when things go wrong, practice is recoupled to those rules, and workers can be held accountable to rules which they must usually ignore to meet the general expectations of management.

To use a basic example, subway train doors often cannot even be closed without violating a formal procedure. Conductors, from a cab in the middle of a train of eight or ten cars, operate train doors with just two sets of buttons, one set for the 15 or so doors forward of their position, and another set for the 15 or so
to the rear. At a busy station, after passengers have boarded a train, there may still be an unending stream of stragglers entering by one door or another, and the conductor can’t shut the doors if even one passenger stands to get hit by them. To halt the stream of stragglers, conductors often “recycle the doors” — that is, partly close and then immediately reopen the doors. As the doors begin to close, passengers standing in a doorway step in, while stragglers on the platform take pause and have lost momentum as the doors begin to reopen. The conductors then have a slim moment to close the doors fully. The maneuver violates basic protocols (New York City Transit, 2000), but it is often the only way a train can leave a busy station. Yet, if the conductor miscalculates and a rider complains they were clapped between the doors, the conductor can face serious discipline.

Put plainly, then, a conductor recycling the doors and achieving efficient, timely subway service is “cooperative”, while a conductor recycling the doors and garnering the pointed complaint of a passenger is deviant or incompetent. This duality is communicated in a number of ways, including that if workers fail to be “cooperative” — even when cooperation entails rule-breaking — they can be disciplined under a plethora of other rules for that lack of cooperation. A train operator described how supervisors describe the expectation of cooperation is maintained without endorsing the deviance it often entails:

They [TA managers] now have a new euphemism that they’ve come up with, ‘in a timely fashion’, which is a substitute for ‘hurry up’. [,,,] ‘In a timely fashion’ is a code. They would never admit it’s a code but it is a code. He [the supervisor] couldn’t tell me that I wasn’t moving fast enough because that would put them in a position where they’re saying safety doesn’t matter but speed does. So he says, “I can’t justify the amount of time you’re taking to do your work.” Notice how that phraseology is very careful? And I knew that I was being threatened. [...] If I don’t go along, cut all the corners, run around like a nut, eventually get myself into big trouble, maybe even get myself killed, I was gonna end up being taken out of service [suspended without pay, or even terminated — au].

This is a pattern. In the subway, ordinary operating practices, tacitly understood as appropriate and ‘called-for’ by organizational membership may be labeled deviant by supervisors when a legalistic perspective is applied. At the same time, failure to act in a “cooperative” manner — even in strict obedience of rules said to be most sacrosanct, such as those involving passenger safety — can leave workers, as they say, “targeted” by management.

Being targeted includes being singled out for small deviations from a vast corpus of rules, procedures, protocols, and situational directives as paltry as a cleaner wearing unapproved footwear, a conductor — required to align a fingertip with a sign indicating the train is fully berthed to the platform — failing to stick their whole arm out of their cab window, or, for a station agent observing a turnstile jumper, failing to admonish “pay your fare!” through an intercom system as required.

Workers thus find themselves faced with an incentive structure which intersects with a problem of uncertainty, modeled in Figure 3: it is best to be a “cooperative” employee under routine circumstances. But when an occasion turns nonroutine, and is problematized by management for some reason — such as in the wake of an accident — that cooperative disposition is a liability and will invite blame when management seeks to assign responsibility for a failure (see McClain, 2022). A claim from a cleaner is typical:

Transit’s philosophy is this: they always try to blame the lowest people on the totem pole, the lowest echelon of people. They’ll get the train operators or the conductors, the cleaners or whatever, versus any management taking blame for things. They’re always trying to push it off to the hourlies.
In response to this dilemma, subway workers default to a “cooperative” disposition, but seek to minimize the occasions which might be designated as non-routine, and which might be later scrutinized by supervision. How? By preserving the appearance of routine for off-site supervisors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Routine Conditions</th>
<th>Non-Routine Incidents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Cooperative” disposition</td>
<td>No Threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obey rules “to the letter”</td>
<td>Threat of retaliation for disrupting work process</td>
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**Figure 3:** Subway workers’ incentive structure: Disposition towards rules in routine vs. non-routine circumstances.

**Maintaining the illusion of routine**

“If you see someone smoking on the train, you’re looking in the wrong direction,” jokes a train operator. Making an issue of passenger rule-breaking invites conflict and disruption, the potential need to explain a situation to Control, a need to summon police, and perhaps a requirement to physically report to headquarters after a long shift to make a statement, in which your decisions, and even your physical presentation might be subject to disciplinary scrutiny. The goal is to avoid a situation conducive to recoupling. Instead, as a station agent (who sells fares and monitors station entries) reflects, workers “learn to not see everything and not to know everything and not to report everything,” a strategy made possible by subway worker’s general lack of physical copresence with those to whom they are answerable. The strategy helps them ward off difficult situations, such as when a train crew didn’t report their position near a track fire near West Fourth Street, and instead proceeded through the smoke in order to avoid being caught up in a mess. “When I heard [the train operator] say ‘close the doors’,” recalls a conductor, “I knew that he was going to go without permission or anything. I knew. We just went and we made it and we were like the last train through and everybody else sat in the tunnels for hours.” This strategy took on new use-cases when “security” arrived in the New York subway, in ways that will help us understand why our “holy fucking ...” meme was so very funny to subway workers.

**“Security” arrives in the New York subway**

For the MTA, the days after 9/11 were marked by vast uncertainty over how on earth to keep the subway
system safe from acts of violence that are “little” in the sense that they require few resources or even imagination to have broad impacts (Molotch and McClain, 2012a; McClain, in press, 2018). Publicly, however, the MTA expressed confidence, boasting, by early 2002, of issuing what it called “eyes and ears” training to its vast subway workforce. The instruction consisted of a pamphlet which — as subway workers later showed me — was little bigger than a matchbook, containing fewer than 200 words of content (see Figure 4). Not long after, the MTA issued to some subway workers what they called “escape hoods” which, it turned out, were devices from the mining industry, made up of a plastic bag with an elastic closure connected to a canister of compressed air, designed to give miners a short-term supply of oxygen while they escape a hostile atmosphere. Yet the more subway workers learned about the threats they might face, the less confident they grew in their training, resources, and in their employer’s capacity to respond to potential threats, and the more they came to regard MTA’s security-related mandates as — in many ways — absurd.
Consider three formal directives and one training instruction issued or reinforced in the early 2000s, all describing the obligations of train operators (paraphrased for brevity):

A. Train operators must take “every precaution” for the safety of trains and customers (Metropolitan Transportation Authority, 2003).

B. When a train is in the vicinity of a potential chem-bio incident, Control will instruct the operator to turn off the air conditioning and close the train windows. Traveling no faster than five miles per hour to avoid spreading the toxin, the train will proceed onward to the second station it comes to (New York City Transit Authority Office of Human Resources Operations Training, 2002).

C. Any employee who observes an unusual spray, vapor, odor, fog-like mist, explosion, suspicious powder or finds a suspicious object, or who observes at least two customers becoming suddenly disabled (e.g., with seizures or loss of consciousness), must “immediately” contact Control, Emergency Services, and the NYPD (New York City Transit and Reuter, 2002).

D. “If you think the atmosphere is immediately dangerous to life or health [2], put on your escape hood right away” (fieldwork note, New York City Transit safety education instructor).

Informants point out the irreconcilability of these rules as written, and the potential interpretive traps contained within them. For example, if suspicious powder is discovered, or odor of a suspicious type is detected in the vicinity, is a train operator’s actual responsibility to move their train quickly out of the area in violation of speed restrictions specified in B, but limiting the exposure of the passengers on their particular train, consistent with A? Should they first notify Control as specified in C, prolonging the exposure of their passengers perhaps in violation of A, or put on their escape hood (which restricts all verbal communication) as instructed by D, but precludes C, but which might allow them to survive long enough to bring passengers to safety, consistent with A? What should they do about the fact that there is no actual office of “Emergency Services” as described in C, unless this is shorthand for calling 911, but that no
technology readily available to train operators is capable of reaching 911 — and thus the NYPD — directly?

In nonpunitive work settings, we might imagine that employees would have confidence that their use of best professional judgment might see them through an emergency, even when rules and instructions might be interpreted as situationally incompatible. Subway workers — in my sample, at least — have little such confidence. Instead, they see those incompatibilities as damning them in any post hoc scrutiny of situations in which these regulations might become relevant.

To the extent that workers can ward off these perils, they do so by managing the emergence of occasions in which impracticable mandates might apply. But, in the immediate wake of the World Trade Center destruction, subway workers were as likely as anyone to adopt security nostrums in earnest. Observing their employer’s incapacities to deliver responses in accord with the reports workers made, however, reinforced their fatalist humor about their security roles, and helped our “holy fucking shit” meme become funny.

**Reporting concerns, and uneven responses**

Many subway workers say that, in the wake of 9/11 and periodically following global terror events, they adopted an earnest disposition towards the vigilance they were mandated to execute. Yet that path often led to inappropriate responses from management, such as is described by a train operator approached by passengers with a backpack left on the subway:

> They came up the cab window on the platform and said, “Somebody left a bag on the train, there’s no identification or anything in it.” So I called Control, told them that we had an unattended bag on the train, what’d they want me to do, because that’s now practice. And you get, “Well, what kind of suspicious package is it?” It’s like, Control, it’s an unattended bag; it is not a suspicious package. The passengers have already gone through it. If it was gonna go “BOOM” we would have known about it by now.

Another train operator commented on a similar experience involving white powder in the subway which, he was certain, was sugar from a pastry, and regretted calling in the report which led to the material being examined by a HAZMAT team, effectively stranding his train and its passengers until they determined the material was not a threat. The situation offered a learning experience in organizational response, that mundane encounters with the leave-behinds of millions of daily riders can disrupt the work process when reported upwards.

Increasingly, however, workers experienced a different message from management: if hypervigilance was tightly coupled to train operations in spite of service disruptions during times of high anxiety, the coupling was significantly loosened in times when the threat seemed more remote. Workers seeking to maintain that vigilance met with growing resistance for making reports. In the words of a conductor:

> On the platform you have to look out for public safety also. Because, now, there’s a package over there and you don’t know what it is. And there’s passengers sitting there, and you have to call it in. So management gets upset because now you’re holding up their time and their train.

Workers are aware of a basic problem: that the subway is full of people who are arguably suspicious, full of fine particulate actually made of oxidized steel (Chillrud, *et al*., 2006) and dust of many other types (McClain, 2022), full of objects which are not exactly typical to the setting, and full of unattended bags which are typical to the setting. If seeing such things are the occasions workers are required to report,
normal subway service becomes impossible. The point was succinctly made in a group interview with two train operators:

Train Operator 1: “The TA knows, if they do [security] the right way, the way you would do it, that the system never will run. So they realize, wait a minute, now we can’t do it like that now. [...] It would never move. Trust me.

Train Operator 2: ’Cause there’s always some kind of suspicious stuff. Like, everyone looks suspicious on the train, right? Don’t they look suspicious? You know, [chuckling], when you see something, say something! They all look suspicious! It’s very hard to actually close every hole in the system. You can’t do that. First of all, it’s a filthy system. They don’t clean it. They got more dust than anything. [...] These trains bring in dust from out of those tunnels. So the dust particles, I mean, if you walk into the subway, just walk and just go like this [sliding a finger across the table and looking at her fingertip] and you’ll see a thick layer of powder.

On occasions when workers do come across situations that they judge to be a real threat to security, they might find their reports unheeded. A train operator offers the detailed example in which he — in strict compliance with a mandate to avoid outgoing radio communications in the vicinity of a potential improvised explosive device (Metropolitan Transportation Authority, 2007) — undertook the unusual step of exiting his train to report a suspicious object via telephone to Control, expecting Control to issue an order for all trains in the vicinity to adopt radio silence while the matter was investigated (New York City Transit, 2001). He recalls:

I was working the M line. And they have these overhead electrical conduits [...] I see a bag up there, stuffed, stuffed up on top. Now the only way you can get up there is by climbing on some things to get it up there. I get to the next station which is 36th Street, call it in [to Control via landline telephone] and I tell ’em I have a suspicious package. Do you think they would say something to everybody, to stay off their radio in that area? No. They say nothing. I get to Steinway Street, I hear people still calling [Control], and, you know, nobody calling about that, but people calling on the radio, using the radio in the area. I get on the phone and I ask ’em, I say “what is wrong with you?” I said, “I just reported a suspicious package”, and that’s when they told me, “Oh, the police have to make that determination.”

A drift in which management often decoupled the vigilance mandate from subway operations offered important lessons, that “cooperative” employees don’t actually make reports that might disrupt transit operations. For subway workers, this disincentive — significant in its own right — became wed to the important question of how they would actually manage an emergency in spite of management’s continued introduction of obstacles to key operations, such as subway evacuation.

**Portents of unmanageable evacuation**

If the confined space of subway cars, tunnels, and stations are major sources of the subway’s perceived vulnerability to attack, evacuation is perhaps the most important means to mitigate that vulnerability.
The MTA undertook a program to train its subway crews in evacuation scenarios in the mid-2000s, but the instructional program could not overcome the problem of having just a few employees with little more than a flashlight apiece attempt to guide what could be several thousand passengers — heterogeneous in their bodily capacities, spoken languages, and cultural orientations — through the hazardous environment of subway tracks and catwalks, and perhaps up a series of steep stairs through an emergency escape hatch set into the sidewalk (see Figure 5). As one subway crew member put it, the situation would be “two of us and two thousand idiots.”

For workers, prior experience with such occasions — even when there was no imminent threat to passengers — gives them further doubt. In the confined space of the subway train, stranded passengers can take matters into their own hands, such as when, as another interviewee commented, “they kick out every single window on the train, they start climbing out ... there’s nothing you can do when they get to that point.”
Figure 5: Portions of a subway emergency exit, a deep subway tunnel connected to a sidewalk-level escape hatch by several steep staircases. IND line, Brooklyn. Photos by author.
The problem of unmanageable passengers is compounded by the flimsy equipment workers have been issued, including the escape hoods [3] which precludes verbal communication when wearing them. Moreover, they see the deployment of the hood as a liability, reflected in a conductor’s joke about his escape hood. “It’s useless anyway; the passengers aren’t gonna let you walk by with a mask when they’re choking. When they gave me mine, I said, ‘Where’s the gun?’” Respondents roundly argued that the distribution of escape hoods was “all for show”, a perspective even shared by the MTA’s own evacuation instructor. In a session I attended, the instructor warned participants that the maximum 15-minute air supply of the escape hoods was paltry, because “it could take you more than 15 minutes to get out of the system and then you can’t take it off. You have to be deconned. [...] If you flip it off it’s in your breathing zone. All this process and getting deconned may take about an hour. So much for a 15-minute duration.”

They tell you to look for a fog or a mist or people convulsing. If you see any one of those aren’t you in the atmosphere? You see any of those, you’re already in the soup, and that pretty much renders it [the hood] useless. When you’re doing this [miming the motion required to pull the hood over the head,] what’re you doing? You’re scooping it. You better hope that whatever is in that mask isn’t gonna kill you.

Another significant portent of disastrous evacuation, however, lies in a longstanding MTA program firmly decoupled from security concerns, with two joint elements. One, the continued introduction of highly restrictive turnstiles to control both entry and exit at subway stations. Second, the reduction of station staff once on hand 24 hours per day in all but a few subway stations able to unlock service gates as needed, for mundane and emergency purposes alike. The turnstile objects, known as High Entry/Exit Turnstiles (or HEETs; see Figure 6) were designed to be maximally restrictive, and confine the whole body as it passes through (McClain, 2019). The devices have a theoretical capacity estimated as 20 uses per minute in some MTA documents (Metropolitan Transportation Authority Division of Capital Construction, 2004) and 30 uses per minute in others (New York City Transit and Lodespoto, 2005), each far lower than the egress rate of proper service gates. Even these throughput rates are inflated, as, according to an interview I conducted with one of the HEETs’ engineers, they did not account for the paraphernalia — like backpacks, much less shopping carts or strollers — that subway users commonly possess (McClain, 2008).
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Figure 6: The High Entry/Exit Turnstile (HEET). Body-enclosing turnstile used for both entry and egress, rated to allow 30 exits per minute, but designed without concern for subway user’s paraphernalia, as demonstrated in bottom image of a bicycle user attempting to lace a bike through a HEET. In 2005, HEETs were found noncompliant with fire code, forcing the MTA to install adjacent emergency exit gates in subsequent years.

The MTA’s efforts to expand the use of HEETs to control subway entrances was more or less untouched by the organization’s security campaign — a prime example of decoupling. The first stations left with no
means of egress at all except through HEETs during overnight hours emerged in the middle 2000s. In 2005, a train operator summed his opinion on the situation as:

Can you imagine in the subway rush hour, people trying to go through the turnstile in New York one at a time, two at a time? You’re gonna get one person that’s gonna trip and that gate [turnstile — au] is gonna be shut down. And that’s gonna be ... it’s gonna be over!

The existence of HEETs-only stations was eventually scaled back, when the MTA was told that it was required to conform to state fire code, and that HEETs did not count towards egress capacity because they do not collapse into a “bookfold” position. In response, the MTA filed retroactive variance applications for HEETs already installed. Local politicians had vocally objected to the continued use of HEETs (Donohue, 2006, 2005), but the MTA received variances for them without even a public hearing (Auslander, 2008). The MTA was required, however, to add emergency exit gates which can be opened by passengers from within at many stations (Lysiak and Goldiner, 2009). Yet the problem with the HEETs played out over years, often in the very public pages of the city’s tabloids, punctuating the decoupling of the MTA’s stated security goals with its everyday business. The MTA was busy constricting emergency evacuation routes through the late 2000s, until it was forced to partly mitigate the safety hazards it was created by an external entity, an example of contradictions between myth and organizational behavior which interviewees invoked to me as the story slowly unfolded.

If you see something, say nothing: Managing official sight, and DIY interventions

As we see, subway workers face a string of interconnected problems, of inadequate response to reports of suspicious events; of their own potential exposure to the dangers of managing crowds in occasions deemed emergencies; of inadequate resources; of irreconcilable mandates that attach to certain events and the lack of an action path that might survive post hoc scrutiny; and of their worries that reporting suspicions might actually lead to retaliation. They tend to solve these problems with an important strategy: If you see something, do not say anything.

Workers phrase this strategy in a number of ways. “The less Control knows the better!”, according to a station agent. A train operator elaborated:

I don’t call Control. It’s like you become the victim now, you know, so to speak. ‘Cause, like, “train operator, what did the person wear?” “Did you see anything?” You know, “How tall? The color of the shirt? the shoes?” You know, I’m like just trying to help and then a lot of times people don’t call it in because they put you through so much. You know? Because I don’t know all this stuff, you know, I’m just saying that there might be a possibility of something happening. But no, they want to know everything, you know, what color hair, you know, stuff like that.

Security mandates offer trouble if followed and if not followed, the right help may not be leveraged when asked-for, and routine experience in Transit gives little confidence in the organization’s competence or benevolence in the face of potential incidents and hypothetical disaster. These dilemmas give rise to mitigating strategies. Just as a worker asks “do you really see a fire?”, do they really see white powder? If they do, they may be told to proceed away from the material at five miles per hour (a prospect that is ridiculous if the employee thinks the powder is actually anthrax, and still ridiculous even if they think it isn’t anthrax), even while trains coming in the opposite direction move full-speed and whip the powder into a cloud because the Control supervisors managing northbound trains didn’t coordinate with those managing the southbound trains.
Avoidance of making reports does not necessarily resolve the suspicions or concerns workers may indeed have. In an excellent example of benign security (Molotch and McClain, 2003), workers often wait and look for some sign that might normalize a person or object in a subway environment, or some other signal that might make a report unnecessary. In a host of other strategies, they directly confront the overwhelming likelihood that a left-behind bag is just litter or a forgotten parcel rather than an instrument of indiscriminate violence. As a train operator comments, she kicks unattended bags to discover they are not bombs:

I mean I personally have seen things [unattended parcels] that I could report but when I got closer I realize that it’s somebody’s empty McDonald’s lunch bag — that’s what it is usually. When I come, I kick it. You can tell right away.

Another worker, shown a box left on a subway moving erratically of its own accord by passengers, peered inside to discover that it contained a live chicken.

Workers hoping to discover that there is no matter of concern to report make this the case by probing their domain in ways not anticipated in any emergency plan, and generally realize their hopes right away, making the world normal once again. In what may be an effort to systematize this approach, a sign I found taped to the interior of a subway car (see Figure 7) begins exactly as many of the MTA’s security announcements do, “If you see a suspicious package ...”, but continues, “leave it for the cleaner at Coney Island. It is garbage.”

![If you see a suspicious package on the subway leave it for the cleaner at Coney Island. It is garbage.](image)

**Figure 7:** “If you see a suspicious package on the subway leave it for the cleaner at Coney Island. It is garbage.” Handwritten, photocopied sign taped to a subway car interior (most likely by subway personnel), ‘Q’ Train, South Brooklyn, April 2005.
Conclusion: A meme is funny because a crisis mandate in crisis

Our case study reveals just how the meanings of a cultural object (Figure 1) deteriorated in a setting vital to that object’s ostensible purpose, which we can witness in the reception of an Internet meme (Figure 2). To the eyes of general observers, the meme plays somewhere between a sense of vulnerability and a critique of security alarmism. Subway workers’ response to it, however, becomes a basis to discover a set of overlooked problems and dilemmas which significantly complicate both a sense of urban vulnerability and the critique of security alarmism alike. Their response to the meme proposes there is far more to the politics of security than has been addressed by public officials, advocates, scholars, and other critics, and that the overlooked politics resides in the actual ‘doing’ of security.

For subway workers, our meme is funny because of their anxieties over dangers they know they are ill-equipped to face; because of the mismatch between the earnestness of the original poster and the abandonment of that earnestness as a matter of practicality; and because of the mismatch between conditions in the subway as workers encounter them on the job versus responses they elicit from Control. The meme is funny because workers see a system of disincentives to do what the security poster plainly urges them to do. It is funny because it speaks to an anxiety over real exposure to real dangers, the mythology that the security mandates of their employer are tightly coupled to its operations, the reality of loose coupling, and the uncertainty of how and when they will be recoupled, and with what consequences. It is funny because it hints at something that subway workers know well, that it’s better to not see anything at all, a disposition which shields them from some administrative danger while perhaps exposing them to real violence.

It is likely inevitable that general proscriptions like “if you see something ...” will fail to anticipate the local meanings they might take on for different audiences, resulting in re-renderings like our “holy fucking ...” meme. The farce made of that slogan and the vigilance mandate at its core, however, is darkly funny to workers in a way that reflects valuable critiques which are at once deeply inconvenient, and essential for understanding as obstacles to proscribed action.

While this meme emerged fairly late in my interview calendar with subway workers, it suggests the methodological value of eliciting commentary on parodies to quickly uncover how emergency mandates are operating where the rubber hits the road. Studying subjects “joking around” has offered significant insight across a range of research problems in organized settings (e.g., Willis, 1981; Shibutani, 1978; Roy, 1959). Offering memes related to crisis mandates to interviewees might do the same, and act as a shortcut to uncover critical problems in the application of those mandates.

Certainly, champions of psychological inkblot tests have long held that interrogating the way that subjects interpret ambiguous, non-representational stimuli can help researchers understand a broader apparatus of perception. Internet memes, of course, may be ambiguous, but they are deeply representational, made up of familiar cultural building blocks, and that property gives them significant sociological value: the study of their interpretation can help us discover distinctive orientations to those building blocks, and invite us to discover experiences, knowledge, and politics which underpin them.

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Notes

1. Some data shared here is also deployed in other papers and publications by author or by author and a colleague (e.g., McClain, in press, 2022, 2019, 2018, 2008; Molotch and McClain, 2012a, 2008), and some passages have been adapted from the author’s doctoral dissertation.

2. The term “immediately dangerous to life or health” refers to an OSHA classification, an atmosphere that “poses an immediate threat to life, would cause irreversible adverse health effects, or would impair an individual’s ability to escape from a dangerous atmosphere” (U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2008).


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