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Internet Memes

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INTRODUCTION

The fact that this chapter exists is somewhat remarkable. Not, of course, that approximately 8,000 words were written and published in a massive tome (although that does take quite a bit of effort), but the fact that a major academic publisher thinks that the topic of internet memes is canonical enough to include in a Handbook of Social Media. In 2010, you could count the number of scholars interested in internet memes on one, maybe two hands. Furthermore, most of those scholars had to consistently make their case as to why pictures of cats with misspelled captions or videos of New Jersey teenagers lip synching to Moldovan pop songs were worthy of academic inquiry.

In our current media landscape, such arguments are less necessary. In the space of a decade, internet memes have gone from quirky, subcultural oddities to a ubiquitous, arguably foundational, digital media practice. From Comedy Central's television program Tosh.0

to the endless listicles of Buzzfeed, an entire media infrastructure has developed to report on, disseminate, and dissect the newest piece of digital culture to emerge, whether that is weekly, daily, or hourly. As internet scholar Ryan Milner (2016, p. i) notes in the introduction to his new book on memes, 'it's hard to imagine a major pop cultural or political moment that doesn't inspire its own constellation of mediated remix, play, and commentary'. Similarly, digital culture scholar Limor Shifman (2013b, p. 3) has argued that our media landscape is governed by a 'hyper-memetic logic' where 'almost every major public event sprouts a stream of memes'.

However, while memes' omnipresence may make meme research more legible to both academic and lay audiences, it is not the key to their significance. Memes were important before they were ubiquitous because they represent a practice of vernacular creativity (Burgess, 2006), a blending of folk practices (such as storytelling) with contemporary media savvy and skill. In this way, they act

like a funhouse mirror for culture and society, reflecting and refracting the anxieties and preoccupations of a variety of social groups across a series of national contexts. Memes have always been a method of circulating ideas and influencing discourse; they just do so now on a grander, more rapid scale than they did in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As Limor Shifman argues in her book *Memes in Digital Culture*, 'internet memes are like Forrest Gump. Ostensibly, they are trivial pieces of pop culture; yet, a deeper look reveals that they play an integral part in some of the defining events of the twenty-first century' (2013, p. 4).

This chapter is constructed as a primer on internet memes and internet meme research. It aims to provide a solid foundation in the theoretical and empirical work that has been done on internet memes up to this moment (2016), while simultaneously illustrating the significance of internet memes for students of communication, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, or any other discipline invested in what has come to be known as participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). It will discuss the theoretical origins and definition of memes, and trace the history of internet memes from the late 1990s to the current moment. It will examine memes as a political and activist practice in cultures across the world, and it will explore the process of commodification that memes have undergone as they moved from subcultural to mainstream media realms. Finally, it will discuss the current state of meme research and avenues for further scholarly investigation.

WHAT IS A MEME?

In 1976, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins published *The Selfish Gene*. In it, he made the case for a new unit, a 'cultural replicator' that spread ideas and behaviors in an infectious, gene-like fashion among individuals and populations alike. He called this unit the 'meme', short for 'mimema', an ancient Greek word meaning 'that which is imitated' or 'imitated thing.' The concept of the meme is based upon the principle of Universal Darwinism, which argues that any information that is varied and selected will produce design, whether that is biological or cultural. That is to say, Dawkins believed that information – whether in the form of a gene or a song – is interested in one thing, which is to be spread far and wide. Dawkins argued that these 'viruses of the mind' – which can be anything from the Happy Birthday song to religious beliefs – have a certain agency of their own, and propagate themselves to ensure their survival.

While Dawkins has since distanced himself from memetics, others took his ideas and developed them into a field of study. Scholars such as Richard Brodie (2009) and Susan Blackmore (2000) argued that humans are merely hosts and propagating machinery for memes. They maintain that humans developed to receive and spread memes, such as language – versus the other way around. From this point of view, information is selfish and strives to get copied, regardless of the consequences. While controversial, this position still has certain proponents; in 2014, *TechCrunch* journalist Josh Constine explained the results of a Facebook social influence study with the headline 'Facebook Data Scientists Prove Memes Mutate and Adapt Like DNA', stating that 'memes adapt to their surroundings in order to survive, just like organisms' (Constine, 2014).

In the internet studies/cultural studies world, memes are treated as media objects with particular characteristics and and associated practices instead of self-propelling ideas. Media scholar Limor Shifman (2013a) argues that Dawkinsian memes and internet memes are both social phenomena that are reproduced by various means of imitation and are diffused through competition and selection. However, Shifman (2013a, p. 367) contends that the issue of human agency is central to understanding internet memes,

defining them as 'units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process.'

Similarly, Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2013) assert that internet memes, which they describe as 'spreadable media', are successful because they allow different audiences to make their own meanings from the same media artifact; the specific element within each internet meme that strikes a chord will differ from person to person. Internet memes are texts, and like any other text, different readers will interpret them and put them to use in varying ways. Other scholars (Miltner, 2014; Milner, 2016) have argued that internet memes succeed because of their 'emotional resonance' with audiences; people share memes not because they are mechanistically compelled to pass on a cultural replicator, but because they are emotionally compelled by some aspect of the media object with which they are engaging.

The media objects that come under the aegis of the term 'internet meme' are far from uniform, but they do tend to fall into specific categories. As Shifman (2013b, p. 99) quips, 'in theory, all Internet users are free spirits, individuals who take their unique path to the hall of digital fame. In practice, they tend to follow the same beaten tracks of meme creation.' These 'beaten tracks' are genres, 'socially recognized types of communicative action' (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992, p. 299) that are the 'keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community' (Miller, 1984, p. 165). There are dozens of genres of internet memes that have their own rules, structures, stylistic features, themes, topics, and intended audiences (Shifman, 2013b). Some of the most recognizable meme genres include flash mobs[1], recut trailers[2], rage comics[3], lip dubs[4], image macros[5], and exploitables[6].

However, no matter what the subgenre, Shifman (2013a) argues that internet memes have three main dimensions that can connect with audiences, or be used to create meaning:

content, form, and stance. The content of internet memes refers to the 'ideas and the ideologies' that are expressed in the meme. The form involves the 'physical incarnation' of the meme; this includes the format (a video, a picture) and the 'genre-related patterns' of the format (such as font and text position, or whether the video is a lip dub or fake movie trailer). The stance of a meme has three sub-components: the participation structures, keying, and communicative functions. The participation structures of a meme involve who is entitled to participate and how; the keying of the meme involves the tone and style of communication; and the communicative functions involve the type of communication that is happening.

In order for a piece of content to become memetic, users need to modify at least one of these dimensions. This is the key difference between 'memetic' content and 'viral' content; if a piece of content is passed along intact and unaltered, it is considered to be viral. If a piece is altered or changed as it is passed along, it is considered to be a meme (Shifman, 2013b). For example, the 2009 performance of 'I Dreamed a Dream' by *Britain's Got Talent* contestant Susan Boyle is a viral video, since it was passed along without any alterations. However, 2012 K-Pop video *Gangnam Style* is considered a meme, as it inspired a series of spinoffs and imitations.

EARLY INTERNET MEMES

The exact origins of the very first internet meme are somewhat contested. As Lessig (2008) and Jenkins (1992) have argued, participatory culture did not start with the internet. In fact, some of the earliest and most popular memes were very similar to offline 'memes' from the 1970s and 1980s. One key example of this is the demotivational poster meme. Demotivational posters (or demotivators) were parodies of the motivational

posters found in offices and classrooms across the United States. Despair, Inc. was a company that started selling demotivational posters in 1998, and later created their own online 'Parody Motivator Generator.'[7]

Many of the first internet memes took the form of 'single-serving sites' (Kottke, 2008), websites consisting of a single page with a domain name that matched the content of the site. One of the earliest and most popular single-serving sites was The Hampster Dance, a website featuring a series of animated hamsters rotating to a sped-up version of 'Whistle Stop' from Disney's animated version of *Robin Hood*. The Hampster Dance originally appeared on web community and hosting site GeoCities in 1998, gaining mainstream popularity in the early 2000s. Other famous single-serving sites included yourethemannowdog.com, a site that appeared in 2001 and featured a repeating clip of Sean Connery from *Finding Forrester* repeating his notorious line, 'You're the man now, dog' (Asuncion, 2010). You're The Man Now Dog (YTMND) developed into a repository of other single-serving sites, many of which turned into memes of their own.

A single-serving site featuring a gray cat is responsible for one of the internet's most longstanding memes: the LOLcat. In 2007, blogger Eric Nakagawa took a picture of Happy Cat, a grey cat originally featured in a Russian catfood ad, and superimposed the text 'I Can Has Cheezburger?' on top of it (Tozzi, 2007). He then posted the picture on icanhascheezburger.com, and an internet sensation was born. I Can Has Cheezburger was responsible for popularizing LOLcats, as well as the image macro genre. While image macros had been floating around subcultural web communities such as 4chan and Something Awful since the early 2000s, the popularity of I Can Has Cheezburger brought the image macro – and for many internet users, memes themselves – into the mainstream.

Many of the earliest internet memes in the US context seem to traffic in the random and bizarre: websites with repeating loops, pictures of cats with misspelled captions, and silly bait-and-switch pranks, where the promise of an interesting news story turns out to be a video of Rick Astley's 1987 hit *Never Gonna Give You Up*. However, early memes were often cultural artifacts – sometimes playful, sometimes not – that served to erect and maintain in-and-outgroup boundaries within the communities from which they emerged. Many of these early memes were created by members of Something Awful[8] and 4chan[9], communities whose members were technologically skilled and valued absurdist and often off-color humor. Early memes that emerged from these collectives often reflected the tacit knowledge and technical skill required to appreciate their full meaning, making them inscrutable for outsiders. They also reflected a specific positionality; many memes emerging from what Whitney Phillips (2012) calls the 'meme/troll space' of 4chan and Reddit had decidedly misogynist and racist overtones (Milner, 2013). When memes like LOLcats moved from the subcultural to the mainstream, it was because their textual flexibility allowed them to be taken up and imbued with new meaning by different groups (Miltner, 2014).

Early memes in other areas of the world also reflected the cultural specificities of the contexts they came from. Animal-based memes in particular were genres that popularized the practice of meme generation and circulation. Early animal memes not only reflected regional humor, but cultural and political interpretations of certain animals that represented a specific national context. In Japan, for example, the popularity of early meme favorites OMGCat and Maru reflect the historical role that cats have played in Japanese culture and folklore. Some have argued that Maru closely resembles a *bake neko*, or spirit cat – a frequently humanized spirit guide with special powers who is also an emblem of good luck (Romano, 2013).

In Kenya, hyenas (*mafisi*) are animals that are seen as cowardly scavengers, and

have lent their name to those who display an unseemly sexual desire: Team Mafisi (Kaigwa, 2015). In 2015, Kenyan lawyer Felix Kiprono Matagei was put on Team Mafisi when he offered 50 cows, 70 sheep, and 30 goats to marry sixteen-year-old First Daughter Malia Obama (Pleasance, 2015). In Latin America, the image macro Ola K Ase (an intentional distortion of 'hola que hace?' or 'what's up?') features a friendly llama, an animal that is indigenous to South America and has played a role in the economic life of the region since the pre-Columbian era (Berrin, 1997). While Ola K Ase is an example of the linguistic playfulness that accompanies many internet memes, it also has been used to comment on political and social issues, including corruption scandals and gender discrimination (Monroy-Hernandez, 2015) (Figure 22.1).

MEMES AS POLITICAL PRACTICE

As several meme scholars have noted (Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2013a, 2013b; Miltner, 2014), humor is a key component of many memes, and a large part of what helps them gain traction among online audiences. However, the humorous nature of memes also makes them an ideal venue for political critique and commentary. From the days of the court jester through to the political cartoon, humor has been a method for skewering both people and institutions in the highest echelons of power. Furthermore, as Pearce and Hajizada (2014, p. 68) have argued, humor can also 'make a difference in mobilization and dissent.' The use of Ola K Ase to make a political statement reflects a practice that has existed since the earliest internet memes, and continues to be one of the primary reasons that memes are created and circulated today.

Memes in Authoritarian Regimes

One key example of the political use of memes is one of China's earliest, most famous, and popular memes: the grass mud horse, or Cao Ni Ma. The grass mud horse is a rare breed of alpaca that lives in the Male Gobi Desert, which is constantly harangued by its nemesis, the river crab. It also interacts with the French-Croatian Squid and the Intelligent Fragrant Chicken. The story of the grass mud horse started off as a children's song, but now there are grass mud horse stuffed animals, animated videos, artwork, and even lines of clothing; it is truly beloved by many in China. While this little mythical creature may seem innocent on its face, it is

Figure 22.1   Ola K Ase

actually a deeply subversive symbol of resistance against the Chinese censored internet, the Great Firewall (Wines, 2009).

According to web scholar An Xiao Mina (2012b), the grass mud horse's name is pronounced 'cǎonímǎ' in Mandarin; this sounds very similar to 'càonǐ mā', which means 'fuck your mother.' The 'Male Gobi,' which is pronounced 'Mǎlè Gēbì', sounds like 'māle ge bī', Mandarin for 'your mother's cunt.' The devious river crab, or 'héxiè', sounds like 'harmony' ('héxié') in Mandarin – a reference to the fact that the Communist Party refers to the censored internet as the 'harmonized internet.' The French-Croatian Squid is pronounced 'Fǎ Kè Yóu', and the Mandarin name for Intelligent Fragrant Chicken sounds remarkably close to the Mandarin for 'jacking off' (Mina, 2012b). As Shifman (2013b) points out, the humor of the grass mud horse is the incongruity between the way the lyrics are written (and meant to be read by the censors) and how they sound when spoken (or sung) aloud: the lyric 'on the vast and beautiful Male Gobi desert is a herd of grass mud horses' actually sounds like 'in your mother's vast and beautiful cunt is a group fucking your mother.' (Shifman, 2013b, p. 148)

The appearance of the grass mud horse appeared in concert with the Chinese government's 'Special Campaign to Rectify Vulgar Content' (Weiping, 2009). Its genius – and power – lies in the fact that although it is a rather dirty pun, its literal meaning is entirely benign; this means that it escapes the censors'

computers, as well as the government's ban on 'offensive' behavior (Wines, 2009). In a 2009 blog post, Beijing Film Academy professor Cui Weiping explained that the tone of the grass mud horse is one of sly obedience: 'I know you do not allow me to say certain things. See, I am completely cooperative, right? … I am singing a cute children's song – I am a grass-mud horse! Even though it is heard by the entire world, you can't say I've broken the law.'

The grass mud horse is just one example of an 'alternative political discourse' that is taking place in China with the help of internet memes. The *China Digital Times* has argued that internet memes have generated 'frames, metaphors, and narratives' that are an essential part of a 'resistance discourse' that undermine the authoritarian regime of the Chinese Communist Party, and as such, are an important venue for free expression and the development of civil society in China (Qiang, n.d., para. 2). However, China is not the only authoritarian regime where internet memes also play this role: dissenting groups in Iran, Egypt, and Russia (among others) have also used memes to speak out against those in power. In Azerbaijan, the use of internet memes takes on particular significance, as Azerbaijan was one of the first countries to arrest activists for creating and circulating digital humor (Pearce and Hajizada, 2014).

In September 2013, Azerbaijani youth activist Ilkin Rustemzade of the Free Youth Organization was arrested for 'hooliganism'

Figure 22.2 Grass mud horse

for posting a video of the Harlem Shake, a video dance meme. Pearce and Hajizada (2014) explain that while the video itself was non-political, the symbolism of Rustemzade's involvement with global internet culture (and its attendant political ideas) was perceived to be threatening to the government. This was not the first time such an arrest occurred. In 2009, 'donkey bloggers' Adnan Hajizada and Emin Milli were arrested for producing a YouTube video ridiculing the government for spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to import donkeys from Germany (Pearce and Hajizada, 2014), and in 2011, a group of Azerbaijani students were threatened with violence and military conscription for creating a fake talk show that critiqued Azerbaijani society and the government (ibid.).

The use of memes in Azerbaijan is an important case study, because it illustrates that while memes are often used as tools for speaking truth to power, they can also be used as tools of oppression. Katy Pearce (2015) has shown that memes are a powerful source of state-sponsored harassment in Azerbaijan. She argues that their effectiveness lies in the fact that memes are inexpensive and easy to make, and the lack of attribution usually associated with memes is an affordance that the regime uses to put distance between themselves and the harassment they are conducting (Pearce, 2015 p. 1165). Several key opposition figures and activists have been the subject of memes that ridicule and disparage them in an attempt to undermine their credibility and authority, a weapon that is particularly effective in an 'honor society' like Azerbaijan.

Similar tactics have been used in Russia to humiliate and discredit Ukrainian leaders in the wake of the Russia–Ukraine conflict of 2015–2016. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko became the subject of a series of Russian memes after he photoshopped himself in the place of Russian President Vladimir Putin on a cover of *The Economist*. This prompted a flurry of photoshop memes where Poroshenko's head was put on a series of magazine covers, usually on the bodies of famous women: Kate Upton, Megan Fox, and even the Mona Lisa (Sharkov, 2016). However, the Russian government – and particularly President Vladimir Putin – has also been the subject of many memes. In 2011, a photo of Putin riding a horse while shirtless turned into a photoshop meme of Putin riding a variety of objects, including bears and spacecraft (Figure 22.3). Putin was

Figure 22.3   Putin riding bear

also the source of memetic ridicule when it was reported that voter turnout for the 2011 elections exceeded 140% in some regions (Abramovitch, 2011). For the Russian government, the use of humorous memes as a form of political critique is no laughing matter; in April 2015, the Russian government declared a ban on the use of high-profile figures in memes (Rothrock, 2015).

Memes in Democratic Regimes

The use of memes as parody and political statement is not relegated to authoritarian or otherwise repressive regimes. Memes have been a major part of the American electoral scene since artist Shepard Fairey created his famous Hope poster and Obama was subsequently coined 'the first meme President' (Beckwith, 2012). Memes were such a part of the political discourse during Obama's 2012 re-election campaign that it was dubbed 'The Meme Election' by a variety of media outlets, including *Salon* (Jurgenson, 2012) and *The Nation* (Melber, 2012). While memes had long been a part of online political discourse, this election brought the recognition that memes had a major role in shaping – if not outright dictating – the media narrative surrounding each candidate. From the 'live-GIFing'[10] of televised debates to the Obama campaign's meme-ridden Tumblr, memes started to be recognized as a powerful form of political expression, participation, and agenda-setting.

One of the most significant memes from the 2012 election cycle was Binders Full of Women, a meme created from a comment made by Republican candidate Mitt Romney during one of the presidential debates. When asked about the gender pay gap by a female voter, Romney responded that he was given 'binders full of women' to choose from when looking for qualified candidates to employ during his tenure as Governor of Massachusetts. The gaffe was instantaneously taken up by women across a variety of internet platforms and formats, from animated GIFs and image macros on Twitter and Tumblr to reviews for three-ring binders on Amazon.com. While Binders Full of Women was similar to other memes from the 2012 election in that it capitalized on a sound bite and was met with a satirical and parodic response, it had a longer shelf life. This was primarily because, as Carrie Rentschler and Samantha Thrift (2015, p. 332) have argued, the meme 'distilled a larger context of feminist critique of the Republican Party's war on women and increasingly vitriolic online misogyny' and provided the women who participated with an easy and humorous outlet to voice their frustration and displeasure.

While elections and electoral cycles are rich environments for the generation and circulation of poltical memes, they are only a small part of the political memescape. Like political memes in authoritarian regimes, most political memes in democratic regimes focus on critiquing, lampooning, and dissecting the quotidian goings-on of the people and institutions in positions of power. In his book *Social Media and Everyday Politics* (2016), media scholar Tim Highfield argues that memes outside the electoral cycle are simply how politics are discussed and dissected by social media-literate, politically engaged citizens. Just as in authoritarian regimes, memes in democratic nations are used to create new meanings and alternative framings of particular issues, events, and public figures. Highfield also argues that political content is often excellent fodder for the memetic logics (Milner, 2015) that increasingly pervade online cultural spaces. He also explains that because the endless media coverage of politicians provides boundless material for commentary and remix, even small moments can be turned into big memes if they are offbeat, unexpected, or ripe for mockery (Highfield, 2016).

One key example of this was the #davecalls incident on Twitter. In March 2014, British Prime Minister David Cameron posted a

photograph of himself on the phone, ostensibly speaking to American President Barack Obama about the crisis in Crimea. The photo was ruthlessly mocked on Twitter, with users posting pictures of themselves in faux-serious poses with other objects held up to their ears in lieu of phones: stuffed animals, soda cans, beer glasses, and so on. Celebrities also joined in on the joke; in particular, when knighted actor (and prolific Twitter user) Sir Patrick Stewart joined in by holding a cylindrical container of wet wipes up to his ear, he gave the meme a serious boost. Eventually, Cameron himself got in on the joke, tweeting a picture of himself in a meeting with former President Bill Clinton to Stewart and quipping to Stewart, 'Talking to another US President, this time face to face, not on the phone.'

Cameron's photo represented a meme-able moment for a variety of reasons. First, Cameron is not particularly popular with certain digitally savvy segments of the UK population, and there was a distinct sentiment among this group that Cameron was promoting himself and his leadership skills in a ridiculous and unnecessary manner with the photo. Furthermore, as Alexander (2010) has argued, Western citizens are deeply skeptical of political news coverage because they perceive it to be highly staged and choreographed. On top of being cartoonish, Cameron's picture played right into these perceptions.

ANOTHER KIND OF POLITICS: MEMES AS ACTIVIST PRACTICE

Humor is often an effective tool for commenting on the gaffes and hypocrisy of those in power, and many political memes are used to comment on politics in a humorous and parodic way. However, memes often reflect and invoke the rage of the subordinated;
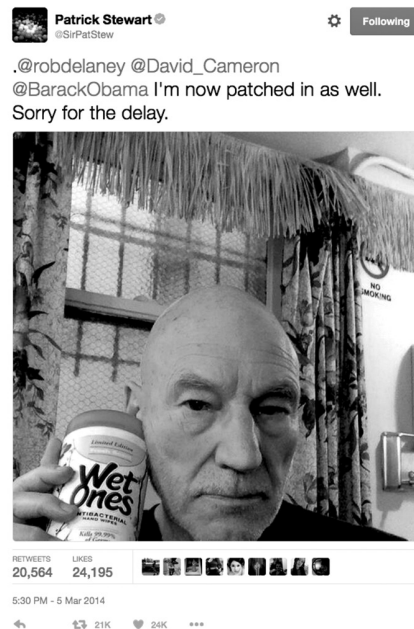

Figure 22.4a   Cameron tweet

Figure 22.4b   Stewart tweet

Chinese film scholar Cui Weiping (2009) has referred to memes as one of the 'weapons of the weak' in our mediatized society. While that may be so, the impact of some activist memes illustrates just how powerful they can be.

While many early memes emerging from the 4chan subculture were prankish and puerile, they also had their roots in (and occasionally overlapped with) a hacker culture that resisted and rejected traditional power structures and norms. As Molly Sauter (2014) explained in *The Coming Swarm*, LOLcats featured prominently on the Low-Orbit Ion Cannon (LOIC), a tool used to engage in civil disobedience in the form of Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks on powerful individuals and institutions.

However, Chinese netizens were one of the first groups to clearly illustrate the activist power of memes. In July 2011, two high-speed rail trains collided in the suburbs of Wenzhou; 40 people died and over 192 others were injured. After the Chinese government claimed that there were no further survivors, rescue workers found two-year-old Xiang Weiyi alive in a train car that was being demolished; this led to a great deal of criticism of the government and the overwhelming sentiment that the government was more interested in covering its tracks than taking the rescue effort seriously (Ding, 2011). In response to the government's negligence, a series of memes began circulating about the train crash. Eventually, the outcry reached such a fever pitch that top Ministry of Railways officials resigned, and the government eventually issued a report on the cause of the crash. Artist and researcher An Xiao Mina described the involvement of memes in the government's response as 'a watershed moment', arguing that 'it forced the government to have more transparency' (quoted in Subbaraman, 2012).

Memes also played a major role in Chinese citizens' protest of activist lawyer Chen

Guangcheng being placed under house arrest in 2011. While Chen's name was officially censored from the 'harmonized' internet, Chinese citizens showed their support for Chen in other ways. One was by taking a Dark Glasses portrait, a project created by digital artist Crazy Crab, which exhorted Chinese internet users to post themselves wearing dark sunglasses or blindfolds to express their solidarity for the blind lawyer. Like the grass mud horse, this was designed to escape the censors, as it would be rather difficult to distinguish between a Dark Glasses portrait and a selfie on a sunny day. While Chinese censors eventually caught on, certain images escaped their grasp; there are still images of Chen circulating on photoshopped posters of *The Shawshank Redemption*. As An Xiao Mina (2012a) explains, the significance of the Chen Guangcheng meme is that it kept awareness of Chen's plight active and relevant in public discourse, a state of affairs that would have otherwise been difficult to achieve in such a censored environment.

Mina also notes that memes played a similar and equally important role in the case of Trayvon Martin. In February of 2012, seventeen-year-old Martin was fatally shot in Sanford, Florida. While Martin's murder is now a well-known event, there was originally very little media coverage surrounding his death. That changed after digital strategist Daniel Maree posted a video on YouTube encouraging people to wear hoodies in honor of Martin, who was wearing a hoodie when he was killed. Maree called his movement the Million Hoodie March, and it sparked a vibrant and intense discussion in American public discourse, a discourse that was further amplified when the Million Hoodie March moved offline into the streets. As Mina (2012a) explains, 'even in a democratic country with broad speech opportunities, it can be difficult to gather eyes and ears around an issue and even harder to sustain it in people's minds', and the hoodie meme helped amplify and sustain Martin's story – and the surrounding discussion of racial profiling

and violence – in the media, both social and broadcast.

Mina (2012a) also makes the important point that part of the success of the Trayvon Martin and Chen Guangcheng meme campaigns lay in the fact that they were organized: Crazy Crab and Daniel Maree provided clear instructions on how to participate, and they also provided a central repository in the form of dedicated websites to collect the images they were encouraging people to make. This sort of organization was also key for the success of Black Lives Matter (BLM),[11] the tour-de-force hashtag-turned-movement that changed the American discourse on racial justice and police brutality starting in 2015. In their seminal study of 40.8 million tweets, 100,000+ web links, and 40 interviews of BLM activists, Deen Freelon, Charlton D. McIlwain and Meredith D. Clark (2016) argued that one of the main contributing factors to BLM's success was that their core demand of 'stop killing us' was clearly articulated and agreed-upon from the start (Freelon et al., 2016, p. 83). The BLM movement has been incredibly successful in circulating narratives about police brutality and racial profiling that counter the 'neutral' narratives in the mainstream news media. Additionally, the content posted in connection with the #blacklivesmatter hashtag was remarkably successful in educating casual observers on Twitter, illustrating that 'under some political circumstances, political appeals on social media can do more than reinforce people's preexisting opinions' (ibid., p. 79).

THE MEME-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

As the many examples of political and activist memes illustrate, memes can be an efficient, high-impact method of spreading a message or idea, and they also have the potential to dominate popular culture during their time in the limelight. Both of these affordances make

memes particularly appealing to people and groups interested in making money, whether that is advertisers, entrepreneurs, media companies, or other business interests.

Most successful memes are not created for the purpose of making money. Most memes are created for fun, to connect with a friend, or to express some kind of personally relevant statement, opinion, or joke (Miltner, 2014). As one meme creator put it, 'We're spending hours making these fun things for no compensation, and not even any recognition … just because of the inherent fun in it' (ibid.) Furthermore, the general lack of attribution that comes with the generation and dissemination of memes may be good for authoritarian governments looking to distance themselves from their harassment of dissidents, but it also makes it difficult to claim ownership – and consequently profit – from memes. Speaking to the collective nature of meme creation, one LOLcat enthusiast explained, 'You can never be like, "I'm the guy behind Ceiling Cat"' (ibid.). As Phillips (2015) relates, early memes – particularly those coming from subcultural community and 'meme factory' 4chan – required deep subcultural knowledge in order to both parse and participate in them. However, the fact that certain memes weren't designed to be mined for profit failed to deter those who saw them as an untapped commercial opportunity. As more accessible memes crossed into the mainstream and became more visible, their marketability also increased (Phillips, 2015, p. 139).

The first person to create a sustainable business model based on memes was Ben Huh, an entrepreneur who purchased LOLcat blog *I Can Has Cheezburger* (*ICHC*) in 2007. Huh recognized early on that *ICHC* was unique in the internet media ecosystem, and was able to pitch the uniqueness of *ICHC* to venture capitalists, eventually raising over US$2 million to purchase the site. In explaining his interest in *ICHC*, Huh said:

> It was doing 500,000 page views a day for a cat picture site, that nobody understood, which I thought was fantastic. … And second, it was the incredible community. It had amazing buzz. We felt like that there was a pretty good possibility that we were buying into a cultural phenomenon, a shift in the way people perceived entertainment. (Cook, 2008)

Huh used the advertising profits from *ICHC* to acquire a collection of meme-related websites, including *FAIL*, *The Daily What*, *Memebase*, and meme encyclopedia *Know Your Meme*. Huh consolidated the websites under the aegis of Cheezburger, a corporation that received US$30 million in venture funding, made $4 million in yearly revenue, and employed 75 people at its peak (Erlich, 2011). Cheezburger has published five books – two of which are *New York Times* Bestsellers – and was the subject of *LOLwork*, a short-lived reality TV show on the Bravo network (Chard, 2010; Watercutter, 2012).

While some applaud Huh's savvy, the communities that were responsible for the generation of LOLcats and many of the other memes that populate the sites of Huh's meme empire were less enthusiastic. In 2010, Huh and 4chan founder Christopher 'moot' Poole were on a panel at internet culture conference ROFLCon, discussing the mainstreaming of meme culture. Towards the end of the panel, Poole accused Huh of being an 'oil tower', unfairly profiting off the unpaid labor of others,[12] and contributing to the destruction of the meme-creating subculture that he had helped establish. 'You can say "we're giving people tools to create LOLcats" and that's great and all', Poole said, 'but more or less you're giving people those tools so you can post them on your site because you monetize them with display ads. Do you feel like you put something back? Because I don't' (Phillips, 2015, p. 140).

Poole's sentiments were expressed in a less politic way by 4chan's /b/ board[13] in November 2010 with Operation Black Rage. Teen-oriented clothing retailer Hot Topic had started selling t-shirts with Rage Comics on them, a state of affairs that enraged /b/'s community and spurred them into vengeful action.

'The corporate slut that is Hot Topic has now decided that memes are to be the latest "cool" thing amoungst [sic] 13 year old emo consumer whores', the flier for Operation Black Rage groused. 'This is only the beginning, if this is allowed to continue then it'll only be a matter of time until /b/ starts getting raped of every meme to be turned into the next I Can Has Cheezburger? And before long? /b/ will die.' The plan for Operation Black Rage was to create a series of racist Rage Comics and subsequently encourage an outrage-fueled consumer boycott of Hot Topic until the shirts were removed from shelves. The plan originally worked, with Hot Topic agreeing to remove the shirts from their online store. The victory was short-lived, however; Hot Topic soon became wise to /b/'s campaign and reversed their decision.

In the end, /b/'s fears were warranted: Hot Topic's commodification of memes was only the tip of the iceberg. In the years that followed, British company Virgin Mobile used Success Kid[14] in a cable television campaign; American startup HipChat used Y U NO[15] on billboards around the San Francisco Bay Area, and Wonderful Pistachios used the Honeybadger[16] and Keyboard Cat[17] in television commercials. While some of these memes were created and popularized by a collective, such as Y U NO, many of them contain media that can be traced back to an original owner or creator; Keyboard Cat, The Honey Badger and Success Kid all had video or images that could be – and were – licensed. Other memes that were created by a single author have also successfully capitalized on their intellectual property. The creator of Nyan Cat[18], Christopher Torres, has monetized his creation through YouTube ads and Nyan Cat merchandise; the owner of Tardar Sauce, more commonly know as Grumpy Cat[19], has parlayed 'Tard's' popularity into toys, books, clothing, animated specials, pet food sponsorships, and even 'Grumppucino' iced coffee beverages. In Hong Kong, famous cat Brother Cream has also received sponsorships and book deals.

The road to meme monetization is not a one-way street; some advertising campaigns turned into memes of their own. Old Spice's 'The Man Your Man Could Smell Like' was a memetic success that inspired imitations on *Sesame Street*, Nickelodeon television show *iCarly*, and the ad campaign for *Shrek* spinoff *Puss In Boots*. The advertising spokesman for Dos Equis, The Most Interesting Man in the World, has long been the subject of his own image macro template. However, brands have generally not met with much success when it comes to creating truly successful memes. This is because memes created by marketers and advertisers are seen as inauthentic and 'forced'. Meme encyclopedia *Know Your Meme* defines a forced meme as a meme that is 'artificially created and spread … made with the intent of becoming a meme and aggressively promoted by its creator' ('Forced Meme', 2010).

MEMETIC FUTURES

By 2012, the commodification of memes combined with other shifts in the digital media ecosystem incited a series of dire proclamations and death knells for memes. At the 2012 Digital Life Design (DLD) conference, 4chan founder Christopher 'moot' Poole mourned the end of internet culture (Olsen, 2012). After the final ROFLCon later that year, technologist Andy Baio (2012) complained in *Wired* that the shift to mobile social (i.e., primarily accessing social media on a mobile phone) was quashing creativity. On his blog, *Know Your Meme* co-founder Chris Menning (2012) declared that 2012 was 'the year the meme died'. In his book, *World Made Meme*, internet scholar Ryan Milner (2016) tells a story of how in 2014, one of his second-year undergraduate students told him, 'I remember memes. They were really big in high school. Junior year.'

It's true that the body of texts that were readily identified as memes by a specific

cohort of internet culture enthusiasts from the mid-2000s to approximately 2012 are no longer in vogue. LOLcats, Advice Animals, Rage Comics, Rickrolling and their ilk have fallen so out of favor that they have been given the meta-memetic label 'dank memes.' As Don Caldwell (2015) of *Know Your Meme* explains it, dank meme is 'an ironic expression used to mock online viral media and in-jokes that have exhausted their comedic value to the point of being trite or cliché'. As digital scholar Whitney Phillips pointed out in 2012, 'the meme/troll space of 2012 is very different from the meme/troll space of 2008. The question of whether or not that's a good thing is irrelevant – we are where we are, deal with it' (Phillips, 2012).

Much of the research on memes from 2014 onward has aimed to do just that – deal with the shifting memetic landscape and understand where we are now, although as Milner (2015) notes, 'it's easy to log in to Facebook, see yet another goddamn Minion, throw up our hands, and declare the death of the subculture.' For despite four years' worth of earnest declarations that memes are dead, the sheer volume of memes that permeate our media ecosystem illustrate that they are very much alive; or rather, as Milner (2016, p. 5) asserts, *memetic participation* is very much alive:

> Memetic media didn't start with 4chan, just as they didn't end with the final ROFLCon. Memetic practices persist, even if the specific resonant texts shift over time. If we're tired of stock character macros in 2015, it doesn't mean that 'memes are dead'; it indicates that those memes don't hold the specific cultural capital they did in 2010, or even that they hold cultural capital for people other than us.

As Milner, Highfield, Shifman, and others argued in an October 2015 series on *Culture Digitally*, much of our media engagement is governed by memetic logics, whether that is the platform vernacular of Twitter (Highfield, 2016); new modes of fundraising, like the Ice Bucket Challenge (Silvestri, 2015); and new forms of social mobilization in the form of #BlackLivesMatter. At the time of writing, as the American Presidential election of 2016 reaches fever pitch, so do the memetic texts generated about (and perhaps by) the campaigns of) Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, and Ted Cruz. Whether we are watching Bad Lip Readings of the Republican debates or trying to #MakeDonaldDrumpfAgain at the exhortation of media critic and late-night host John Oliver, user-driven imitation, remixing, bricolage, and circulation are at the core of our media engagement. Furthermore, these behaviors and logics will continue to evolve and expand long after the election – or whatever media event is next – has ended. As Milner (2016, p. 15) reminds us, 'whether or not the subculture has lost its edge, memetic logics are as pervasive as ever.'

Notes

1 Flash mobs are coordinated events where a large number of people descend on a location for a short-lived purpose. Flash mobs are usually video recorded and posted online. For more, see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/flash-mob

2 Recut trailers are parody videos that take movie trailers out of their original context and re-edit them to reflect different genres or narratives. For more, see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/recut-movie-trailers-movie-trailer-remix

3 Rage comics are a series of stick figure comic strips used to humorously express anger about the frustrations and defeats of everyday life. For more, see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rage-comics

4 Lip dubs are videos that feature a person or group of people lip synching to a popular song, usually to comedic effect. For more, see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/lip-dub

5 Image macros feature a picture or other image with text superimposed on it, usually in Impact font. For more, see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/image-macros

6 Exploitables are image templates where a defining characteristic or key piece of content can be easily edited to make a joke or other humorous statement. For a full explanation of the various types of exploitables, see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/exploitables

7 http://diy.despair.com/motivator.php

8 Something Awful is a shock image site and community that was an epicenter of early meme and trolling activity in the early 2000s. For more, see Phillips (2015).

9 4chan is an imageboard and community who's /b/ board, or 'random' board, is responsible for many of the memes that achieved mainstream popularity from 2008–2011. It is also known for being the origin site of the troll/hacktivist collective Anonymous. For a full explanation of 4chan and /b/'s role in meme culture, see Phillips (2015).

10 Live-GIFing is a practice, similar to live-blogging or live-tweeting, of creating content extemporaneously during a major media event. In 2012, Tumblr live-GIFed the Presidential debates, and in doing so helped frame the outcome of the debates in a way that was particularly friendly to Obama. For more, see Phillips and Miltner (2012).

11 For an in-depth explanation and discussion of Black Lives Matter and its accomplishments, see Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark (2016).

12 For a larger theoretical exploration of the unpaid labor of content creators online, see Terranova (2004).

13 /b/ is the 'random' board on 4chan. /b/ is responsible for many of the memes that achieved mainstream popularity from 2008 to 2011, and is also known for being the origin site of the troll/hacktivist collective Anonymous. For a full explanation of /b/'s role in meme culture, see Phillips (2015).

14 Success Kid is a reaction image macro used to express self-satisfaction or victory. For more, see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/success-kid-i-hate-sandcastles

15 Y U NO is an image macro featuring a grotesquely-drawn stick character usually used to express frustration. For more, see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/y-u-no-guy

16 The Honey Badger was originally a viral video featuring nature footage with irreverent commentary. For more, see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/honey-badger

17 Keyboard Cat is a meme used to illustrate failure or incompetence, and featured home video footage of a cat 'playing' the piano. For more, see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/keyboard-cat

18 Nyan Cat is an 8-bit animation of a grey cat with a Pop Tart for a body, flying through space with an accompanying song. For more, see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/nyan-cat-poptart-cat

19 Grumpy Cat is a dwarf cat known for her perpetually unhappy expression. For more, see: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/grumpy-cat

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