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College Writing: Intensive

9 December 2016

Pepe the Frog, Participatory Culture, and the Sociopolitical Significance of Memes

Though the political scene is constantly evolving, political discourse has historically remained consistent, with people mainly discussing politics at family gatherings or with their neighbors and coworkers. In recent years, however, a new form of political conversation has appeared online: the meme. Internet memes can take several forms, from viral videos to pop culture references and the more commonly associated practice of combining images with short pieces of text. Though they are all very different in format, the various types all share the common aspect of conveying a humorous or witty message on a certain theme. The subject of politics is the perfect meme fodder simply because it is such a controversial and emotionally-based topic: people just can't help but respond to and spread political memes across the web. And while the meme may not be the most academic form of political discourse, it has rapidly become an increasingly influential and established force in modern culture, particularly due to its participatory nature. Surprisingly, there has been a rather substantial amount written by scholars about online memes and their place in media and society. However, it has been relatively unclear what role the new arena of digital participation plays in political elections specifically, since there have only been a handful of presidential elections since the Internet was invented, and an even smaller amount since memes rose to real prominence in the late 2000s and early 2010s. This essay will analyze memes themselves to show that the use of the Internet for political interaction has had mostly a positive impact on society, because they get people more involved

in discussion and promote political thinking among those who might ordinarily remain uninterested in the process. To highlight this connection, I will first preview the structure of a meme and how it is transmitted, then relate those elements to digital political participation and the various roles that memes fulfill in our new digital society.

Why Memes Work

First of all, I propose that memes appeal as a form of an inside joke, where the reader feels a sense of achievement for understanding the reference. Furthermore, it enables the reader to feel that they can relate more closely to the meme's creator (by understanding references), colleagues and friends who may share memes on social media (sharing common interests), and the wider population of Internet users who may come across the meme (laughing at what others laugh at). Memes have become unstoppable tools of propaganda in part because they are entertaining, while allowing the creator to subtly promote their own line of thinking.

For example, one popular meme that grew out of the 2016 election is called "Textual Relations," in which an unfavorable picture of Hillary Clinton is overlaid with the words, "I did not have textual relations with that server" [CharliePhysics]. This meme references a quote from Clinton's husband, former President Bill Clinton, who once infamously said he "did not have sexual relations with that woman" in responding to a sex scandal that occurred while he was in office. The image substitutes "textual" for "sexual" and "server" in place of "woman" in order to draw a parallel because that scandal and the more recent scandal over Hillary Clinton's email server from her time as Secretary of State. In doing so, it implies that another Clinton administration would be more of the same scandal-ridden corruption from the past. Someone who was politically conscious in the 1990s may stumble across this meme online today and would understand the reference, while younger or less well-informed people may not. This

makes the former feel superior for having connected the dots. If viewers enjoy it enough, they might share it on Facebook or another social media site, where a friend could see it as well. The act of consuming the information and then sharing it with another person brings acquaintances together in common understanding of the reference, like two members of a secret organization among a crowd of average people. What's more, knowing that you are laughing at the same meme that many others are laughing at brings a sense of community and validation of one's opinions, since clearly, it must be socially acceptable to laugh if others are doing so as well. This instinct seems to come from somewhere far back in the human evolution, and has fascinating implications for the future of human psychology.

Memes as Participatory Culture

The new popularity of the meme must be contributed, at least in part, to the more general trend of new media and the rise of the Internet. The Internet of the early 21st century in particular became a new place for the spread of ideas, having been nicknamed "Web2.0" (Zuckerman 3). There, people of all backgrounds were free to express themselves like never before, without having to obtain a degree or any sort of expertise. Being open to all people means that the Internet and memes create a space where anyone can find a sense of community and a platform for their opinions, whether they be positive or negative. Indeed, from revolutionaries to everyday citizens, everyone is welcome on the Internet. This contributes to a growing participatory culture, in which exist "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations with others, [...] members who believe that their contributions matter, and members who feel some degree of social connection with one another" (Jenkins et al 5-6). Basically, participatory culture opens up the ability for more people to engage with others without needing special qualifications to do so.

This move towards a more inclusive space in which people could converse was a long time coming, and permanently expanded people's ability to share their opinions. Today, memes are an extension of this freedom, in that anyone can make them, and any meme has the potential to go viral, regardless of who created it. This apparent equality lends itself to increased usage among the population, since there is no limiting requirement for access.

The Textual Relations meme, for example, is a simple yet effective way for a random person on the Internet to share how they're feeling about the 2016 election, even though they are not an expert on the topic. It gives them an open platform and an opportunity to promote their ideas that they would not have had in the past. By extension, it also allows the creator and anyone who reads the meme to feel as though they are participating in the national discussion, because they are creating or passing on something that shares a certain political opinion. Perhaps that meme will go on to be seen by 100 other people, or several million if it goes viral. At that point, it is deeply satisfying to know that something you've created or shared has had even the smallest impact on others' political views. In a nutshell, memes have created a whole new level for potential human interaction, and people are using it more and more for an ever-expanding variety of uses.

Memes as a Necessity for Communication

Because the Internet exploded in popularity in a relatively short period of time, the world has been forced to undergo a great evolution in developing what digital media scholar Lisa Silvestri calls "social media literacy," or the ability of people to interact online. According to Silvestri, this skill is comprised of the ability to relate to content as well as understand the way technology is used to convey those messages. In terms of civic activity, scholars have concluded that technology is not only useful, but actually necessary in the current day: "To participate as a

global citizen, you must not only have technological and cultural access to the digital sphere, but you must also be able to meaningfully participate in its discourses. To do that, you need to be social media literate; and you must be able to keep up” (Silvestri 29). Therefore, understanding the Internet--and by extension, memes-- has become almost a required skill due to how much social interaction happens online today as a result of its welcoming and inviting participatory culture. Those who remain outside of its sphere of influence therefore risk falling out of touch with our rapidly evolving society. The free online participatory culture and the threat of missing out work together in making people more able to stay connected to others in a time of great social and technological change. In general, it seems that the better someone is able to interact digitally, the more involved they may be in society. Then since people are almost forced to adapt to digital media to stay connected, they are then naturally pushed towards the tendency of increased political participation online. This fact seems to point to the existence of a special obligation of memes to facilitate political and cultural development, though they may be seen as silly and simplistic forms of communication.

Memes as Youth Involvement and Socialization

As a combination of new media and participatory culture, memes appeal to younger generations while reaching out to that section of society that had traditionally been less involved in politics (Shifman 120). Since the Internet’s rise, scholars have noted that young people in particular are getting involved in the Internet as a form of socialization, through “a wide range of activities that could be considered ‘participation’, including communicating, peer-to-peer connection, seeking information, interactivity, webpage/content creation and visiting civic/political websites” (Livingstone). They may also use it to find other like-minded young people who share uncommon views or feel socially outcast. In one case, a 2010 Youtube video

titled “It Gets Better” featured two gay teens simply telling their own stories of past homophobic bullying and the resulting suicidal thoughts caused by it, as well as how they recovered and moved forward (Gal). The video soon went viral and attracted attention from thousands of others who had suffered similar experiences but had never had a support system of others to talk to. In doing so, it created a community of teens who could talk to each other and share their stories in a way that was only made possible by the interactivity of the Internet. Therefore, memes and the Internet have taken on the role of a platform for young people to connect and discover more about themselves, which positively affects the generation as a whole.

Indeed, memes are so easy to make and so widespread on the Internet that meme-ing has become almost a language of its own, which young Internet-users have learned to ‘speak’ and relate to. I therefore suggest that many young people have adopted the institution of memes as part of their identity. They’ve become attached to them as a form of their own generation-defining cultural phenomena, much like the Beatles’ music in the 1960s or sitcoms in the 1990s. Indeed, for some, memes have truly become a second language and another legitimate way of conveying emotion when ordinary words just cannot do it justice. No matter the feeling a person wishes to express, there’s probably a meme out there that can be tailored to fit the exact scenario. Young people aren’t likely to turn away from that freedom of expression any time soon.

Memes as Tools of the Political Process

Similarly, online participatory culture often encourages people to use memes in conveying their feelings about politics and elections where they would otherwise stay silent. Along those lines, it is believed that the democratic principles of the Internet may help spread that ideology and empower people to be more involved in elections (Livingstone). For sure, it has expanded the types of political activities that one can participate in during elections, as

“[Traditional] political participation has four dimensions: voting, campaign activity, contacting officials, and collective activities,” but now there are entirely new options such as “displaying campaign slogans on personal web sites, signing up for a political newsletter, or signing and forwarding an online petition” (Zúñiga). Because these forms of political participation are so easy, it promotes grassroots campaigns that draw from a much wider body of support.

There is no denying that the Internet and memes have introduced new opportunities to the citizen side of politics. The election of 2008, known as the “Facebook Election,” particularly engaged people online in a way that no previous campaign had ever done. In its post-election analysis, Pew Research Center found that “more than half the adult population were online political users in the 2008 election, [which] marks the first time [Pew] has found that more than half the voting-age population used the internet to connect to the political process during an election cycle” (Smith). This statistic is significant because it shows tangible evidence of people increasingly turning to the Internet for political discourse. Online voter political participation has since been magnified over time to the point where nearly every day there is a new political meme or trending story online to be shared and discussed.

On the flip side, memes and viral trends can also be used by campaigns to reach voters and energize supporters, such as in the 2008 Obama campaign, which used viral videos to particular success (Shifman 125). In that case, the content originated from a mix of campaign staff, interest groups, and regular people who just happened to post about the election and went viral. Evidently, the equality of memes allows easy access for anyone to get involved. It can also introduce a sense of closeness between candidates and their supporters, as it breaks down rigid barriers between them and allows for quicker and easier communication between the two (Zúñiga). The impact of memes and the Internet on the political process is therefore two-fold in

creating new ways for people to show their support while also allowing campaigns to have easier access to their followers.

However, the Internet is not just a place for campaigns and voters; it also tends to breed radical political activity because it is one place where uniform censorship is difficult to achieve. This makes it ideal for “activists and political dissidents” to spread their messages against governments that may oppress more traditional media (Jenkins et al 3). In a real life application of this idea, viral online campaigns helped political revolutions such as the 2011 Arab Spring organize and gain international followers that they would not normally have been able to reach (Shifman 122). Some of the first truly global revolutions have only been able to happen because they had a universal platform for its organizers to connect with sympathizers.

More recent political movements have actually gone further and directly involved memes themselves in spreading ideology. One such victim is a meme known as Pepe the Frog, which had been a silly, harmless Internet meme for years before it was appropriated, twisted, and used by white supremacists as a symbol of the so-called “alt-right.” In fact, it has now been labeled a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League because of its association with online racism and harassment. The situation presents a unique challenge, in that Pepe the Frog itself has nothing to do with white supremacism, yet the attached meaning has completely superseded the original connotation of the meme. As a result, the once-innocent frog is now tangled up in and intrinsically linked to tense racial politics. The fact that a meme like Pepe can be corrupted really speaks to the emerging power of memes as political symbols, and it remains to be seen if and how memes will continue to evolve as pieces of the political puzzle.

Memes as a Potential Harmful Filter

While the impact of memes and the Internet has generally been viewed as positive in allowing a better flow of information, there remains at least one potential drawback, as some scholars have questioned if memes are actually harmful in dumbing down the political process and the realm of debate (Silvestri).

I agree that memes, while funny, do tend to oversimplify complicated issues and trivialize what should be a serious and somewhat academic discussion. For example, one image uses the Game of Thrones-inspired “winter is coming” meme format to comment on the way presidential candidates often make promises they can’t keep. “Brace yourselves,” the meme warns, “The empty promises of the 2016 presidential candidates are coming” (TheBaerJew712). The comparison of politicians’ promises to a disaster on a television show is both comical, yet jaded about the state of elections in America. This type of political meme may even be dangerous to the political system, because it can lead to an apathetic and even nihilistic population who believes that nothing they do or say will make a difference. This is especially true in a year where people dislike both major party candidates on a historic level. Indeed, general indifference to the outcome has already had an effect on voting, as the 2016 election shockingly saw the lowest voter turnout in the last 20 years, with just 55% of those eligible actually voting (Wallace). This was despite the highly controversial nature of the election and the campaigns’ intense get-out-the-vote efforts leading up to Election Day. Rather than fighting harder to keep one candidate or the other out of office, people instead sat back and shared memes about their frustrations, leading to a worse outcome than if they had put in physical effort to achieve the desired result.

Among scholars, this matter appears to still be up for debate. Some have pushed back on the idea that memes dumb down the issues, arguing, “Whenever a member of a social collective engages with others, negotiates representations, or makes use of artifacts, he or she is participating in culture. Thus, whether or not we perceive internet memes as pop culture junk food, they are worth examining as instances of cultural performance” (Silvestri). In that regard, the answer to the question seems to depend on one’s definition of culture and what exactly it includes. As ways of conversing about politics, memes can indeed potentially provide useful insight about what people think about certain topics. At the same time, memes can certainly be politically damaging, because they have become an established part of digital interaction that negatively impacts voter turnout. Either way, one cannot deny that memes shape the way people discuss issues that are important to them and therefore hold great significance in society.

Conclusion

Whether or not people like it, memes today have come to play important roles as forms of communication, conveying emotion, and political participation. And though scholars may disagree as to whether the impact of memes is positive or negative, they evidently recognize and accept the overall importance of memes in influencing society since the rise of the Internet in the 1990s. It is also plain to see that the effects of memes are very widespread, as illustrated by the sheer number of different uses and applications for them. Therefore, future scholars must pay particular attention to how the Internet and its viral materials continue to evolve and shape sociopolitical behaviors over the coming years and decades. Indeed, the rapid changes in technology provide an opening for research on future developments and the way society responds. In the future, it may be enlightening to track the relationship between people and

memes, and analyze whether people's opinions of them change as they become increasingly foundational in society and its political discourse.

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