The Power of Memes

1: The Expansive Power of the Internet Meme 1

Directions: Read the following excerpt from journalist Emily Zemler's article 'The Expansive Power of the Internet Meme'[1] and then discuss the connection questions, taking notes on your answers in your books.

…

Memes are ubiquitous[2] – but why? As cultur[e] shifts at an increasing speed, we seem continually drawn to quick visuals that we can consume like candy.

…

"If we think about it from a technological or consumer perspective, memes are created by individual users," says Rebecca Ortiz, Assistant Professor at the S.I. Newhouse School Of Public Communications at Syracuse University, who recently taught a course called "Instagram and Reality."

"They're created by individuals to express themselves. And we've always looked for ways to engage in self-expression. The ability to do that itself has made memes something that have become powerful. Anyone can create them and the sh[*]ttier they are the more people like them. They don't have to have a beautiful, Photoshopped quality to them … Anybody can be a producer, and that's one key piece to this. Because they're not meant to be high production quality and because they're meant to be quickly thrown together in response to what's happening in the culture at that moment, it allows people to become these media producer[s] very quickly and very easily without needing all the fancy knowledge or the fancy production quality."

Memes are based on collective references, although some are more niche than others. For instance, you'll need some previous understanding of what "Karen" refers to in order to understand a meme about a Karen.[3] That "in the know" layer adds yet another layer to what makes people so drawn to memes – you want to find out what everyone is talking about, and then join in on the sharing.

"Memes are only shareable when there's something about them that only a select group of people can understand," Ortiz notes. "And that group can be a group of billions. You can connect with somebody through these shared meanings and cultural references, and you feel like you're special for understanding it. It builds an in-group connection."

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Ortiz emphasizes that memes, like political ads and campaign posters, are propaganda. They can be misinterpreted by viewers after they are created, but memes and graphic images articulate messages that have a distinct viewpoint. Because they are easily consumed and quickly shared, the messages have the potential to reach a massive audience – an audience that can potentially be swayed, even if the message they are delivering isn't factual. … "Memes are the perfect way to pass on propaganda because they're so easily consumed and they're fun."

Social media is, of course, dangerous ground for sharing misinformation and fake news, and memes play into that.

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[1] Emily Zemler, 'The Expansive Power of the Internet Meme', Shondaland.com, 15 October 2020.
[2] Everywhere.
[3] 'Karen is a pejorative slang term for an obnoxious, angry, entitled, and often racist middle-aged white woman who uses her privilege to get her way or police other people's behaviors', Dictionary.com

Connection Questions

1. What contributes to the popularity and wide use of memes?

2. What about memes can build an 'in-group connection'? What are the potential consequences of this?

3. How, according to Ortiz, are memes like propaganda? Do you agree with her view? Explain your answer.

4. What are the benefits and drawbacks of the meme format?

5. The creator of a meme is often anonymous. What are the pros and cons of such anonymity?

6. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebooks.

The Power of Memes

2: The Expansive Power of the Internet Meme 2

Directions: Read the following excerpt from journalist Emily Zemler's article 'The Expansive Power of the Internet Meme'[1] and then discuss the connection questions, taking notes on your answers in your books.

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A great wave rippled through Instagram after George Floyd's death in May. Users seemed to feel it was too trivial to post photos of sunsets and beaches in wake of such tragedy and injustice, and the platform took on a new purpose: to spread useful information about racism and white privilege. Not everyone could take to the streets to join Black Lives Matter protests in person, but they could share memes about police brutality, create gallery posts on how to be a better ally and re-post video footage of racist actions. Instagram pages like @justiceforgeorgenyc popped up to provide real-time information about protests, becoming virtual gathering points for the cause.

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Reading lists, actionable steps and factual information pervaded social media throughout the summer [of 2020] – and continue to be a key part of Instagram now. Collective accounts, like @climemechange, @latinarebels and @thenapministry, regularly post helpful information – and the occasional spot-on, hyper contextual meme – on specific topics or within a specific demographic, but those posts also have the capacity to move around the Internet and reach new audiences.

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"There was an amazing amount of reading lists and resources that were being shared around Instagram around the racial justice conversation that started," [John Tass-Parker, head of Politics and Government at Instagram] notes, adding that gallery posts are seen as particularly shareable. "And that has not lost steam at all."

"It's really rare for everyone in America to be forced into a situation all at the same time," [says Matt Schimkowitz, Senior Editor of Know Your Meme, which catalogs Internet memes], who sees correlations between America's use of social media after Floyd's death and use of social media in Hong Kong during its recent protests. "Speaking about the millennial generation, obviously we've had a number of wars, but none of the constant home front situations that we're experiencing right now. And the only space that people can turn to in a 100 percent safe manner in regards to a global pandemic is the Internet, so people are utilizing it in a way that allows them even more than they would usually get. It's expanded what was already there and made it more normal."

[1] Emily Zemler, 'The Expansive Power of the Internet Meme', Shondaland.com, 15 October 2020.

Connection Questions

1. How did the murder of George Floyd impact meme culture and what people shared on social media?

2. Why might memes have been a powerful format in which to share important information?

3. How, according to Schimkowitz, did the pandemic impact how people engaged with social media?

4. What are the benefits and drawbacks of the meme format?

5. The creator of a meme is often anonymous. What are the pros and cons of such anonymity?

6. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebooks.

FACING HISTORY & OURSELVES

The Power of Memes

3: How Memes are Becoming the New Frontier of Information Warfare

Directions: Read the following excerpt from Digital Communications Manager Tom Ascott's article 'How Memes are Becoming the New Frontier of Information Warfare'[1] and then discuss the connection questions, taking notes on your answers in your books.

Everyone has seen a meme, whether they know it or not. They're everywhere on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. … Despite seeming like nothing more than silly phrases written on cartoons, memes are becoming a cultural touchstone.

Memes might appear as if they're just little pranks kids play online, yet they're anything but. In the 2016 US presidential election, many memes were made by a Russian troll farm to influence the outcome. It wasn't an isolated incident, either – now troll farms are popping up more frequently. In November last year, an undercover reporter revealed a new one in Poland. The memes it's producing focus on 'the aviation and defence industries, and target key decision-makers involved in the awarding of major government defence contracts'. The memeing, it has transpired, was political.

Those memes were a form of information warfare, or what would have been thought of in the past as a psychological operation. Information warfare is often about waging an influence campaign that can change behaviour through 'unconventional means', such as social media.

…

Meme warfare … refers to using memes as individual weapons of information warfare. It's a form of disinformation that can be used to secure strategic goals. Disinformation campaigns go back to at least 1923, when the Soviet Union had an office for 'dezinformatsiya' campaigns – a term coined by Stalin to describe 'false information carefully constructed with the intention to deceive'. The internet has ushered in an age when deception can be perpetrated on a mass scale, with the click of a mouse.

…

Memes resemble traditional propaganda in a few ways; a hostile government can use them to spread malicious information in a way that's advantageous to it. But there are key differences, too. Because memes are a common way for people to express themselves online, it's very easy to make memes without their being suspected as pieces of information warfare. And they can be much more targeted. Traditional propaganda focuses on large groups of people who have some spatial or political link. The way the internet 'fingerprints'[2] users allows hostile actors to draw up their own lists, looking for links even users don't know they share.

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Memes also can have dual functions. As well as acting as a form of information warfare, they can help normalise extreme behaviours through humour. For example, memes can be recruitment tools for white nationalist groups. The Christchurch mosque terrorist, Brenton Tarrant, frequently used 8chan. All chan[3] sites require users to submit images with text. As a result, these right-wing sites are a fertile breeding

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[1] Tom Ascott, 'How Memes are Becoming the New Frontier of Information Warfare', The Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 19 February 2020.
[2] Online 'fingerprints' are created from information that companies collect about you from your computer, so that they can identify you, track you and target you with specific products or content.
[3] Chan websites are imageboard websites, which are forums that revolve around the posting of images alongside text discussions on various topics. Chan is an abbreviation for channel.

ground for memes that normalise extreme behaviour and reinforce each other. Slowly, the memes seep out into more common areas of the internet, such as Twitter.

...

One of the ways that information warfare can be fought is simply by raising awareness about issues. ... [T]here needs to be a concerted effort to make people more aware that even memes can be harmful. ...

Connection Questions

1. What are troll farms and what are their purposes?

2. How does the term *information warfare* make you feel? What does it suggest about information you might encounter on the Internet?

3. How are propaganda memes more effective than traditional propaganda?

4. How have right-wing groups exploited the meme format? What are the potential consequences of extremist memes seeping out onto the Internet?

5. The creator of a meme is often anonymous. What are the pros and cons of such anonymity?

6. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebooks.

The Power of Memes

4: Memes, Antisemitism, and The Press

Directions: Read the following excerpt from Data Science Research Scholar Susan McGregor's article 'Memes, Antisemitism, and The Press'[1] and then discuss the connection questions, taking notes on your answers in your books.

Please note, while the title of the article this excerpt is from is called 'Memes, Antisemitism, and The Press', the content of the excerpt does not reference antisemitism.

…

In the current social media environment, it is perhaps … the person-to-person dissemination of the meme that has made the form such an attractive, powerful, and potentially dangerous format for the spread of disinformation, misinformation, and hate.

In the social network context, information that spreads from one individual to the next – rather than in an obviously centralized, "top down" way – achieves much greater reach. This is … because the level of trust readers place in the content they are seeing is dependent not on the original *creator* (or even the *substance*) of that content, but on the trust the recipient has in the person who *shared* it.

Thus, a successful meme-driven disinformation campaign will reach a substantial audience by virtue of the very format. … [M]eme-driven disinformation campaigns are [also] incredibly cheap to create. Image-driven memes are often intentionally low "production value," relying, almost as a matter of form, on low-quality images and amateurish design, allowing a large number of them can be created quickly and inexpensively.

This combination of low production cost and high potential payoff – even if success is rare — makes meme creation an efficient mechanism for anyone wishing to spread both disinformation and generally hateful content.

…

One key objective of [disinformation] campaigns is for messages that begin as *disinformation* – that is content intentionally designed to deceive or mislead — to transform … into *misinformation* – that is, the unintentional person-to-person sharing of false, misleading or otherwise problematic content.

… This is in large part what makes memes useful as propaganda, allowing "alt-right users to spread elements of their ideology to 'normies,'"[2] a derisive term for the broader public that does not share their extremist views. In other words, carefully crafted memes, if successful, help suffuse a much broader cross-section of social media with hate-tinged messages than is likely otherwise.

…

Memes may originate within a particular Internet subcommunity before "emerging" onto the broader social web. … In this context, memes' transmission depends not on the viewer's understanding of the original meme's context or associations, but instead on their ability to form a cogent interpretation of the image *independent* of its original context.

In this context, the conditions for the spread of *misinformation* are much more favorable, as the person sharing the memetic "image macro"[3] with friends and family may be unwittingly sharing content that

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[1] Susan McGregor, 'Memes, Antisemitism, and The Press', Tow Center for Digital Journalism, 29 March 2019.
[2] Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Misinformation Online*, Data & Society, 15 May 2017.
[3] A meme that combines an image with text.

has much more pernicious roots – and hateful connotations – than their personal frame of inference would suggest. Even more crucially, however, is that while a given individual or community may be naive to the meme's original meaning, its unwitting spread can, in retrospect, offer the appearance of broader "support" for its more hateful and extreme interpretations.

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While in many ways the image I have drawn of the social media landscape may itself seem bleak, I do wish to highlight that, just as memes can spread messages that are divisive and hateful, they can also spread messages of support and solidarity. ... [The power of hateful memes] persists only to the extent that the rest of us let them go unanswered.

Connection Questions

1. What, according to McGregor, makes the meme form 'such an attractive, powerful, and potentially dangerous format for the spread of disinformation, misinformation, and hate'?

2. What is the relationship between disinformation and misinformation?

3. How are propaganda memes more effective than traditional propaganda?

4. How have right-wing groups exploited the meme format? What are the potential consequences of extremist memes seeping out onto the Internet?

5. What are the benefits and drawbacks of the meme format?

6. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebooks.