

5-10-2013

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## Recommended Citation

Brown, G. (2013). Web Culture: Using Memes to Spread and Manipulate Ideas on a Massive Scale *Interface: The Journal of Education, Community and Values* 13.

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# Web Culture: Using Memes to Spread and Manipulate Ideas on a Massive Scale

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# Web Culture: USING MEMES TO SPREAD AND MANIPULATE IDEAS ON A MASSIVE SCALE



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## Introduction

“**T**he Internet gives millions access to the truth that many didn’t even know existed. Never in the history of man can powerful information travel so fast and so far. I believe that the Internet will begin a chain reaction of racial enlightenment that will shake the world by the speed of its intellectual conquest,” said former member of the Louisiana State Representative and former Klu Klux Klan Member, David Duke. [1] The Internet and its uses have grown exponentially since its inception. Through websites, social media, blogs, wiki, and streaming video sites, Internet users are able to use images, text, and audio to create and develop both insightful and outrageous depictions of our culture. The things that people put on the Internet follow trends and include patterns, styles, and characters based on common ideas that people share and propagate. Internet users have assigned these products the same name that Richard Dawkins used in his analogy to genes – memes. Though Dawkins work revolves around genes, the memes on the Internet have very similar characteristics. In the online environment memes can be spread incredibly fast and far on massive scales, regardless of content. They may educate, entertain or potentially discriminate.

## The Origins and Funtuality of a Meme

Richard Dawkins first adopted the term meme in his book, *The Selfish Gene*, published in 1976. Dawkins described memes as: “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” which evolved into trends that many people follow. Memes are units of information that are transferred from one person to another. [2] The example Dawkins included was “if a scientist hears, or reads about a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures.

If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate its self, spreading from brain to brain.” [2] With the creation of the Internet, and especially with the tools of Web 2.0, the meme has a new outlet in which people are able to spread their ideas from brain to brain. Cultural ideas are represented in images, text, audio, and film. These different formats of memes can now be emailed, tweeted, shared, blogged, YouTubed, and spread among other formats.

Through computers, cell phones, and tablets people can connect to the Internet 24/7. A meme is no longer restricted to word of mouth, or another form of communication that may take a long time to gain traction and popularity. The world now has millions of people spreading many different memes about their culture, politics, and opinions through the Internet. Memes that represents our culture and our values now have the possibility of being viewed by millions upon millions of people of all ages and nationalities, rather than a single classroom of young adults.

Memes have three main characteristics that give them value and sustain their popularity. These characteristics are as applicable in regards to the Internet as they were in the original definition. In *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins theorized that memes had to have “fidelity, fecundity, and longevity” to stay alive (194). Fidelity referred to a meme’s ability to be copied and transferred from person to person. [3] Since everything on the Internet is digital information, memes can be accurately transferred from person to person through audio, video, images, and text without altering their original form. Various websites allow for the easy creation of memes where stock images are prepared and customized text is easily incorporated. Examples of these websites include MemeGenerator, MemeMaker, and QuickMeme. Through the use of social networks, the transferring of memes is as easy as a click of the mouse. In addition to the ease of sharing memes, the rate at which they spread is another defining characteristic. [3] This rate is called fecundity. The more a meme is shared, the longer it can survive and promote its messages or cultural values to viewers. Websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr are popular social networks where users have the ability to easily post images and links to memes. The more a meme is posted and shared, the more people will view it, and the longer it will be alive on the Internet. [3] This contributes to longevity, which refers to the length of time that a meme is applicable. The topics of memes vary widely from foods, to advice, to current popular trends. These types of memes tend to have a longer life. Other memes are very specific to a particular point in time. If a meme is only applicable to a certain point in time, then the meme will only last as long as that point of time is relevant to the viewer. [3] An example of this is the JibJab “This Land Is Our Land” video. The video is a 2004 Flash animation that includes then U.S. President George W. Bush exchanging insults with Senator John Kerry in the form of a music video. This meme was only

applicable to the 2004 election. The political candidates would be different for every election after that. [4] Politics are a common topic for memes, but once an election has passed, the humor of that particular meme has lost its effect.

Memes are a prime example of creative reproduction and collaboration that exists on the Internet. Unlike music, movies, and software piracy, meme creation is an art form that was created by the users for the users. Memes are a source of intellectual art created by people who have based the art on a part of popular culture. One of the older and most popular forms of memes is the cat-meme commonly known as LOL Cats (Laugh Out Loud Cats). Images will usually show cats in various positions and text will act as titles for the content of the image. A popular website for these images is [icanhas.cheezburger.com](http://icanhas.cheezburger.com). [5] I can has Cheezburger evolved over time itself. Originally the title was spelled as "I can haz cheezburger". [5] Websites like "I Can Has" are places where the reproduction of images are not only allowed, but also encouraged. Another popular collaboration meme was "All Your Base Are Belong To Us." "All Your Base Are Belong To Us" is a term from a video sequence in a 1989 Japanese video game known for its poor Japanese to English translation (Duds, 2008). The popularity of this meme, like I Can Has's cat images, used real footage from the video game to spark a collaborative process. Internet users are able to systematically download editable materials from the Internet where each person is able to recreate their own meme that complies with their own ideas and opinions. The "All Your Base Are Belong To Us" was a popular meme that evolved through Photoshop manipulation. People would upload their own images with the phrase, "All Your Base Are Belong To Us," imprinted in some way into the image, such as on a newspaper, or billboard, or a piece of nature. These digitally altered images were then uploaded to collection sites online such as [SomethingAwful.com](http://SomethingAwful.com) forums. [6] The term "All Your Base Are Belong To Us" evolved enough to become a piece of Internet history and made an appearance in Disney's *Wreck It Ralph* (2012) where the term was spray painted as graffiti on a wall. [7] The popularity also provided inspiration for a Kansas City musical artist to create his own dance song that was based off of the meme. [8] The meme "All Your Base Are Belong To Us," was a highly recognizable trend that prompted others to create additional media to continue the life of that meme.

## Humors and Commentary

Memes can be sorted broadly into two categories, either "absurdist humor" or "social commentary." [3] A study of memes in 2007 found that out of nineteen mainstream memes that were published up until that year, seventeen had humor as their key component. [3] There are millions of comedic memes online that poke fun at many different aspects of culture. Memes will take a

common image or person of notability, such as Gene Wilder's character, Willy Wonka, from *Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory* (1971), together with the topic of college graduates (<http://goo.gl/TZpTq>). The condescending look that Gene Wilder is giving in the photo can play to many different captions. The captions are satirical of college graduates who finish college with a degree but end up getting a minimum wage job such as working at a coffee shop. [9]



QuickMeme.com (<http://goo.gl/>)

On the other hand, "social commentary" can usually depict issues that are currently going on in the world and present viewers with a different perspective. One such example would be the "Pepper Spraying Cop" meme. [10] In November 2011, when Lieutenant John Pike casually pepper sprayed students who were peacefully protesting at University California Davis, the image went viral on the Internet. Immediately after the incident photoshopped images were published and appeared everywhere on the Internet. [10] A common commentary of this incident is the "Modern Warfare 2 Pepper Spraying Cop." [11] The combination of this incident with the cover of the graphically violent video game, *Modern Warfare 2*, illustrates the militaristic tactics that some United States police forces may employ, even against peaceful protesters. [11] The ability to place the image of Pike in a number of other images illustrates the way Western ideologies can be presented. Normal citizens have the ability to mock Pike, as well as anyone else, through the visual power of a meme.

## Toxic-Memes

Memes are not only funny cat photos; they are the way people think about their culture. Memes are a product of the culture that people live in. These depictions of our culture can clash with the ideologies of other cultures in dangerous ways. In 2002, Dan Dennett spoke at a TED conference about memes that he termed as "toxic-memes." [12] "Toxic-memes" are memes that are ideas that do not mesh with other ideas and are be dangerous to other cultures. [12] Dennet pointed out Sayyid Qutb as a propagator of fanatical Islamic ideas. Through Sayyid Qutb and his Qutbist followers, Dennet stated that they were able to spread Qutb's fanatical ideologies through their "press films, fashion shows, beauty contests, ballrooms, wine bars, and broadcasting station."



[12] Qutb's ideas later on influenced fanatical groups such as Al-Qaeda and other followers of Osama bin-Laden. The memes, or ideas, created by the fanatical Islamic organizations were spread out in the world through newspapers, radio, television, and eventually the Internet is a convenient mode of communication for "toxic-memes." While Qutb's fanatical ideas were spreading, Westernized memes, or ideas, were also spreading through radio, television, and the Internet. As Western memes spread exponentially around the world, they come in contact with other cultures unfamiliar, unimpressed, or even angered with the memes of the Western Culture. As western memes "spread our education and our technology, [ . . . ] we're the vectors of memes that are currently viewed by the hosts of many other memes as a dire threat to their favorite memes. The memes that they are prepared to die for." [12] The fundamental ideas spread by Qutb is no longer limited as it was during his lifetime.

As the Internet became one of the fastest growing forms of communication in human history, people with all different types of opinion make use of its capabilities. With the terrorism becoming a rampant activity in many parts of the world, groups such as the Taliban, Lebanese Hezbollah, Afghani Taliban, Palestinian Hamas and the Pakistani Tazem-e-Islami all have functional web pages that connect people over large distances and culture barriers. [13] Not only are fundamental websites spread ideology and propaganda to support each organizations cause, web sites such as [www.alneda.com](http://www.alneda.com) was used as "donation" platform which was used to purchase "weapons to be used against [citizens of the U.S.], while there were also "volumes upon volumes of zipped documents outlining specific ways to kill [U.S. citizens]." [14]

Not only Islamic fundamentalism is expanding through the use of the Internet, but White Supremacy has also started created followings. Through long distances, the Internet connects people with similar interests. Jesse Daniels points out in her book, *Cyber Racism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on civil Rights*, that there are three main point why people should be concerned about white supremacy online. First, she points out the "easy access and global linkages" that the Internet is capable of having with people around the world. Secondly, she figures that the hatred present on the Internet may create harm in real life. Finally, Daniels assumes that racism on the Internet will present a challenge "to honoring cultural values such as racial equality." [15] Anybody who has a computer can access the Internet and propagate their own ideas and opinions of discrimination if they wish.

## Conclusion

Since people have been connecting with each other faster than ever before with the Internet, ideas are shared across far greater distances without the barriers of the past. Since memes first appeared as a trend on the Internet, they've been spread in every format that can be shared with other users. Users are able to create content that examines, mocks, and even discriminate against other people's cultures. The culture of LOLcats and other Internet memes spread virally during the past two decades. The Internet memes contain both comical value and social commentary. Discriminatory content has since appeared on the Internet and is steadily growing in many different forms of hatred. The Internet is a free world without borders and international law reigning over it. Content is shared on a massive scale regardless of its message. Certain groups are trying to take advantage of this ease of transmission to achieve the same level of globalization for discriminatory content. The Internet is not only a place for funny cat photos; there are dangerous ideas that are being spread the same way as other memes.

## Notes

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