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The Meme as Post-Political Communication Form: A Semiotic Analysis

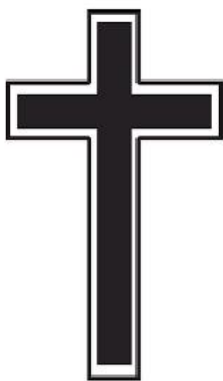
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The Meme as Post-Political Communication System: A Semiotic Analysis

Jacob Yopak

I. History

i. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of memes. I will use the 2016 American Presidential Election to frame the significance of memes and online communication in general. A semiotic model will be constructed as well to contextualize the political and social effects of memetic communication. I will conclude by connecting the semiotic model of the meme with the political theories of Chantal Mouffe and Hannah Arendt to discuss the potential for change as the new media form unfolds.

Due to the very contemporary nature of my study most of the literature that I am discussing will be tangentially related. Memetic communication was originally theorized by Richard Dawkins as applying the logic of evolution to cultural information. While the name stuck I will be focusing more on the online phenomenon which does not share many similarities with Dawkins theory.

Semiotically speaking I draw from Ferdinand Saussure, Mikhail Bakhtin, Valentin Voloshinov, Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, and Charles Sanders Peirce. While all of them are important I mainly use Peirce to discuss the semiotics of memes as his writings privileges the relationship between the mental concept of the sign and the sign itself. Using the analysis that Barthes uses in *Mythologies* may be tempting, but he is more concerned with the creation of meaning outside the dynamic of the sign and the one person observing it. Both thinkers are concerned with what observers bring to the table when decoding semiotic structures, but Peirce is more interested with the small scale meaning network that is more relevant for how memes function.

Instead of being a mere exercise on the modern aesthetics of internet culture, understanding the meme form can elucidate facts about the nature of modern political dynamics. Our political discourse has undergone a level of mediation through technological processes heretofore unseen in humanity's history. Large social media sites like Facebook and Reddit, provide users access to the public square without having to see another physical human being. Facebook alone saw that its 1.65 billion users average 50 minutes of time on the site per day. That amounts to 82.5 billion minutes clocked on Facebook per day in total. Unlike the famous squares that have reached international attention, like Tahrir, Tiananmen, and Times (and those are just the T's) the online forum has no physical limitation on how many would-be revolutionaries or passive consumers can gather together in one space. While most of the tech giants that made the most popular sites in the world were initially satisfied by profiting off their users, the 2016 American presidential election shows the influential nature of technological public forums. To best understand what happened online leading up to and during the election, and why memes as a form of communication are relevant, we must develop a full intersection between the new media and politics.

In my paper I will also assume that internet communication is structurally speaking egalitarian relative to traditional media. The internet medium flattens the differences between content creators and audience members. In addition, the limited access to physical means of media dissemination- the means to reproduce newspapers or broadcast radio waves- is a moot point online. Everyone with internet access can add something to the discussion. This leads to a lot of hand wringing on behalf of those who previously held a monopoly on the flow of information. On the other side of the spectrum are those who herald the internet as an uncomplicated democratizing force, which erroneously assumes that the material access to

information disseminating technologies is the sole barrier to a fully functioning and unbiased press. I intend to highlight how the flattening of the material distinctions between the producer and consumer of media content has created a new landscape for political media, one in which ideological difference is fostered through a lack of formalized ideological gatekeepers and postmodern identity politics usurps the traditional national paradigm. Present at this flux of ideological assertions is the meme, the weapon of choice for the modern trenches of online political discourse.

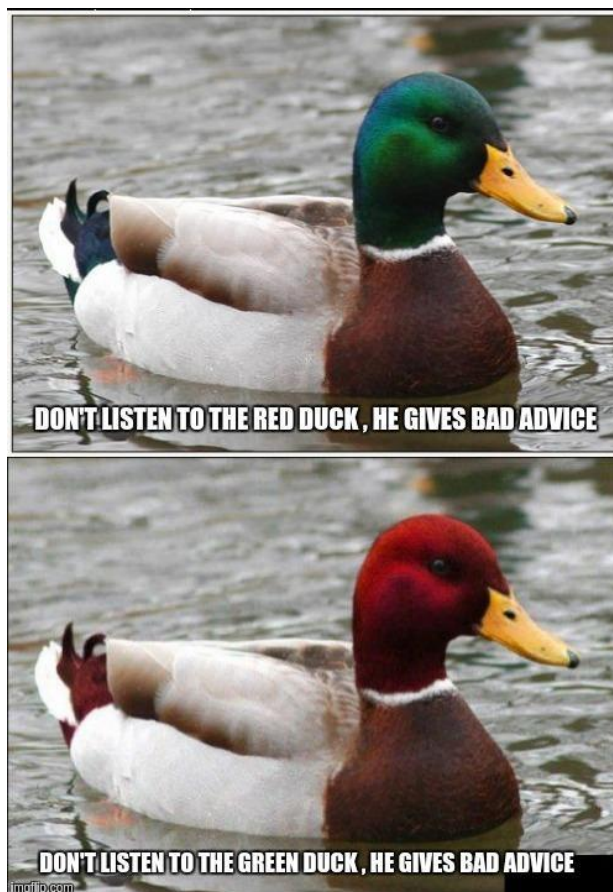
ii. What is a Meme?

This first section is to be a history of the meme-form and some basics on how they are used- especially in connection with online culture and politics.



Above is an example of one of the simplest meme forms. The framework entails a static image of a duck, accompanied with large white all-caps Impact font. The captions give advice or life-

hacks, earning the meme framework the name “Actual Advice Mallard.” The image that is shown above was the first instance of Actual Advice Mallard shared on Reddit in 2011.¹ All initial derivations of the meme entailed merely editing the text, so each different complete memes of this class shows the duck giving the reader a different suggestion. The combination of the name of the framework and the expectations for the edited caption, display how legibility of the meme depends on an understanding of the meme network. Although there is no objective link between the photo of a duck and a caption giving advice, the frequency of the connection creates a larger structure, a socially sanctioned link between the image and the linguistic markers. For example, below is a “mash-up” of both Actual Advice Mallard and Bad Advice Mallard.



¹ <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/actual-advice-mallard>

The meme is akin to the classic riddle, famously depicted in the film *The Labyrinth* where there are two guardians of a passageway in the labyrinth and one always tells the truth and the other always lies. In this meme, both ducks assert that the other gives bad advice. As in the movie, the version of the riddle depicted in the meme cannot be solved as in the movie and requires prior knowledge of both forms of mallard memes. While the intentions of this meme's original creator are unknowable, it functions by drawing attention to the larger meme networks of both advice duck memes. Here, any logical reading is predicated of whether the reader has knowledge of the meme's framework. I will hold a more detailed analysis of the framework's impact on meme communication in the Semiotics section of this paper, but a rudimentary understanding is important here to make the historical and social overview of memes legible.

The example of the two Advice Mallard Memes shows how the boundaries of a meme framework is constructed. Playing with the boundaries of what is considered a member of any meme makes the network for that class becomes apparent. For example, the concept of what is considered an "Actual Advice Mallard Meme" is in flux as meme play with various aesthetic signifiers of the image or its text. Speaking formally, this is the most constricting definition of what it takes to be considered a meme. Many images shared on other social media sites behave socially and virally like a meme but do not share any of its distinct framing. Moving forward when speaking of memes' historical import, semiotic particularities, or political influence, I will maintain that any given meme's conceptual framework is explicitly at the forefront of its usage and dissemination.

Considering the meme there are two definitions to account for. The word meme can refer to a large framework of ideas, phrases, or aesthetic signifiers for example what we expect when we consider Actual Advice Mallard. This frame then takes shape in the form of a single

reference which could be the advice Mallard saying a phrase. This single instantiation of a larger framework is what most people refer to when they say the word “meme.” Using the word “meme” to refer to the particular image or concept as well as the larger framework may cause confusion. To best eliminate ambiguity, I will refer to the instantiation as a meme or complete meme, and the framework as the meme framework or conceptual network. To be considered a meme, an instance must clearly reference network of signifiers that any one specific instance of it can opt into. Then variations of the meme’s framework are constructed as complete memes and circulated online. Memes are omnipresent online and communicate all sorts of messages in all sorts of social circles. My discussion will focus on the history of online communication, a discussion of the current political context that has brought the meme success, a semiotic analysis of the meme, and finally a political discussion concerned with the implications of the “memeification” of political discourse.

Internet users construct complete meme through the process of altering or adding to the meme template. Certain memes are more flexible with regards to what types of content they can accept; the online meme encyclopedia Know Your Meme refers to this as a meme’s “exploitability.”

In addition, I will assert that the meme can only function when the connection between its complete forms and its framework are self-evident to those who are literate in meme-usage. Memes are only memes when it is clear they are opting into certain signifiers. This may appear to depend too much on logical circuitousness. The claim that memes themselves constitute their own frameworks by displaying a trend of signifiers that then construct a legible network lacks falsifiability. However, since the creation of these connection semiotic structures is arbitrary the only way to study them is through their connection; I will therefore treat the between framework

and complete memes as self-evident. Since a meme's status as a meme is contingent on it opting into a framework, any ambiguity as to what larger network it references does not derail its reading as a meme of a class but rather prevents it from being read as a meme at all. A meme becomes a meme, as opposed to an image, if the viewer sees it as a member of a larger conceptual network.

Memes as a medium are primarily an online phenomenon, so many of the behaviors and vocabulary surrounding them are often new terms for those not of the very-online. Instead of defining them all in a list here, I will tackle them when necessary as they arise, to make the paper legible.

Memes on the internet are easy to take for granted. Attempts to tie down a definition only serves to emphasize their slipperiness. Before I talk about this technically complex method of communication, I will let a meme do the talking for me. The lengthy quotation that follows is a "cospypasta," a text-based meme that involves copying and pasting an extended verbose passage as a non-sequitur often in an unsolicited position.

"You may be onto something here. Memes used to be simple. Relatable. Worth a chuckle. Then they evolved. New formats, new tag lines, new content that was then turned into a new meme. Then memes became increasingly meta and self reflective. They parodied themselves and the users who both made them and consumed them. They built off of one another. They grew. They morphed into something entirely novel. This progressed to the point where even that wasn't enough. They had to become something more than themselves. They became surreal. They became deep fried and nuked. Each flavor building off of the last and transforming into a nearly intangible, unknown entity.

Art progressed in a similar fashion. Started off simple, I'm talking cave drawing simple. Then some pottery and some small abstract sculptures. Subjects everyone could relate to and understand. Then, as technology allowed for the creation of cultures and societies, art began to reflect that change and it evolved along with it. By the Ancient Greeks and Romans, art had become a more advanced version of the Stone and Bronze Age arts. Better drawings, paintings, and the addition of mosaics. Sculptures eventually shifted from stylistic expression to naturalistic representation. Still accessible to everyone, yet more nuanced and complex.

After the fall of Rome art stagnated and didn't change very much for nearly a millennium. Early Christian art dominated for the most part, consisting of murals and frescos and simple statues. All of which were based on the Ancient styles. Romanesque and Gothic art also built upon these precedents. This all changed when the Renaissance attacked.

A cultural explosion changed the art world forever; arguably starting with the Italian artist, Giotto. He began using techniques like foreshortening and linear perspective so that the material world could be represented as it appeared to us. A callback to the naturalistic stylings of the Greeks. Almost like a reference to the days of yore. A celebration of how art used to be, but with the explosion of new techniques and technologies, the art grew increasingly diverse. New and improved frescoes, meticulously crafted sculptures, architectural marvels and the inclusion of new materials in these works. Instead of tempera, oil was introduced along with new styles of depicting light and shadow through sfumato and chiaroscuro. These techniques and stylistic changes, while impressive, were simply an advancement of pre established art. The Renaissance paved the way for the explosion and diversification of dozens of art movements that followed.

From prehistoric art to the end of the Renaissance, art was mostly about the same subjects and used similar techniques to accomplish the goal of producing a work of art. Yes, the technical proficiency exponentially improved but considering the centuries in between, few true advancements were made.

Compare this to memes. They were so simple at first and really were nothing more. Then they got better. More technical. More circumstantial. More media to create them with. But memes could last years or many months before dying off. As time went on, the longevity of a meme shortened. This is paralleled in the art world.

After the Renaissance the Baroque period started. Then the Neo-Classicism, Romantic, Realism, and Impressionism movements not long after. Still utilizing the same technical process but the reasoning behind the movements changed. No longer was it about simply depicting the world around us, it was about prompting the viewer to consider new thoughts and ideas. Urging them to look past the image and think deeper about meaning and context. Pushing the boundaries of what art could be. The Baroque to Impressionism era spanned roughly 300 years. Compare that to the thousands of years between archaic art and the Renaissance. It was a *huge* explosion of self expression. Finally, in the mid to late 19th century starting with Post-Impressionism, Modern art emerged. This movement focused on self-consciousness, self-reference, introspection, existentialism, and even nihilism. I'm talking Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Abstract Expressionism, and Surrealism to name the most well known.

These styles changed what art could be. They were no longer about depicting life as is, or layering a painting with hidden motifs for only the privileged to understand, they were in and of themselves absurd. Abstract shapes, aggressive lines and colors, nonsensical dreamscapes. But it didn't stop there.

Post-modernism. Pushing art to the limit of its potential. Pop art, Conceptual art, Minimalism, Fluxus, Installation art, Lowbrow art, Performance art, Digital art,

Earth art. These movements are about skepticism, irony, rejecting grand narratives and reason and instead embracing the idea that knowledge and truth are the result of social, historical, and political discourse and subsequently are a subjective, social construct. It's irreverent and self-referential. It's avant-garde pushed to 11.

But what's next? Post-postmodernism? Metamodernism? Hypermodernity? Who knows? Only time will tell.

This is where memes are headed. They started off slow but have picked up so much momentum they're evolving at an exponential pace. They used to hang around for a couple years at most. Then it turned to months. Then maybe only one month. Suddenly it was a week tops. While some particularly great memes do still stick around much like the masterpieces of art in the past, new memes are created every day, every few hours. New movements of memes are being created all the time. Anti-memes. Dank memes. Abstract memes. Wholesome memes. Surreal memes. Deep fried memes. Nuked memes. Even black hole memes, time travel, and dimensional memes are now a reality. What's going to happen next? A return to the classics? A new format so brilliant it steals all our hearts and then starts a whole new movement? I'm excited for the future of memes.

TL; DR: Memes imitate art, art imitates life.

And most importantly we must always remember--- I mean me too thanks lol”

I saw this post for the first time in the early winter of 2017 and it has henceforth become a popular memetic comment in response to structurally experimental memes. Despite the meme’s dubious art history, the fact that internet communities treat the mutation of memes with such gravity shows the degree in which memes have become unmoored from the banal internet funnies of the mid-aughts to early-teens.

iii. An Introduction to Online Politics

The political contentions in the real world have made their war online, since many people naturally bring their political ideologies with them when they log on. Most alarmingly in the modern political landscape is the rise of far-right politics, in the form of the alt-right, Neo-Nazis, and white nationalist movements. The intersection between online spaces and far-right politics is

a complex one. Angela Nagle compiled a detailed perspective on these online political battlegrounds in her 2017 book *Kill All Normies; Online Culture Wars From 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*. Nagle provides a political, philosophical, and historical lens to this trend. She characterizes this shift as a “backlash” where the new conservative political bloc was a:

strange vanguard of teenage gamers, pseudonymous swastika-posting anime lovers, ironic *South Park* conservatives, anti-feminist pranksters, nerdish harassers and meme-making trolls whose dark humor and love of transgression for its own sake made it hard to know what political view were genuinely held and what were merely, as they used to say, for the lulz. (Nagle 2).

While Nagle tries to remain objective, she minimizes the possible political ambitions of these various groups. Meanwhile, labeling the anti-feminists as “pranksters” and conflating that with the myopic brutality they showed in the case of the gamergate controversy begs the question to what extent do writers like Nagle consider the real-world implications of online activity. Nagle also introduces a very important topic when considering online communication and culture: the lulz.

Whitney Phillips offers up the most exhaustive account of “lulz” in her sociological book on trolls: *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*. Phillips describes the lulz as an online social fetish that encourages certain trolling behaviors:

Within trolling communities, lulz functions both as punishment and as reward, sometimes simultaneously. Lulz operates as a nexus of social cohesion and social constraint. It does not distinguish between friend and foe, and is as much enjoyed by the trolling spectators as by the active trolling-agent. This makes the lulz an extremely slippery term, one that implies active pursuit, lulz don't amass themselves, they have to be sought out. (Phillips 28)

The lulz are a form of derision or *schadenfreude*, where there is a perverse enjoyment at seeing the discomfort of others. An act or gesture can be lulzy to experience this form of enjoyment, which is the ultimate motivation and goal for those engaging in trolling behavior.

However, the most indicative and pithy take down of what is going on online is a tweet from twitter user GreytheTick who writes, “I notice the usage of the term Feminazi has dropped off considerably now that the anti-feminists have decided that Nazis aren’t that bad.” Here, they highlight a trend that has been occurring across the internet in which formerly garden-variety misogynists embrace fascist iconography and rhetoric.



While it is likely that this political shift cannot be completely explained through online terms the importance of the online should not be downplayed. The meme as the vehicle of online discourse has massive explanatory power in determining what signifiers are being flung about in the political-ideological battlegrounds of Tumblr, Facebook, and Reddit. Nagle did point to the liberal consensus that dominated the political psyche before this backlash took place, but never quite developed the truly material criticism of the rise of modern online fascism. For instance, it may be easy to place white nationalists and their ideological ilk within the greater potpourri of

identity politics. However, as a movement, their platform questions the legitimacy of identity politics, although in name only. This is complicated by the irony of how the political apparatus of white nationalism relies on the existence of identity politics to push against. While the connection between the rise of extreme right-wing politics is not directly connected to memetic communication, it serves to contextualize the radicalization that is afforded by eschewing mainstream media options, a phenomenon that will be discussed at length later in the paper.

iv. Modern Meme Politics

The political influence of online communication and memes entered the national and global consciousness after the 2016 American political election. Where the online right hailed the power of “meme-magic” to explain their victory, the liberal wing rallied against what they saw as an army of Russian meme that is an existential threat to American democracy. While I will consider the meme forms that are employed by the left, I will primarily focus on the memes and communities that gathered around various right-wing causes (either establishment or not). My decision to focus more on one side of the political aisle stems from the right-wing memes’ effect on the political consciousness. People online are more aware of the right-wing cohorts² of meme-sharers and I hope to elucidate to what degree this activity translated to electoral success.

Choosing to focus more on the right-wing approach also provides me the opportunity to study more closely the most infamous meme during the last election: Pepe the Frog. Pepe as a case study for the politicization of memes highlights the connection between online aesthetics, the current state of political discourse, and a case-in-point on how a meme-signifier became a battleground for the online culture wars. Originated in the comic *Boy’s Club* by cartoonist Matt

² <http://observer.com/2015/12/15-memes-tumblr-obsessed-over-in-2015/>

Furie, the image of the sad anthropomorphic frog was hugely popular in the late aughts on online forums such as Gaia online, Myspace, and 4chan. By 2015, the image was officially tumblr's "most reblogged meme" and was still pivotal on 4chan. The normal meme distribution of free sharing was complicated by a now infamous 4chan post that featured edited Pepe images that were characterized as "Rare Pepes". Some of these came with added "seals of authenticity" in order to legitimize their value. This caused an explosion of "Pepe trading" where files containing up to several thousand discrete Pepe images were traded. The craze reached the mainstream to such a degree that celebrities such as Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj were sharing their own Rare Pepes.³ 4chan took the mainstream success of Pepe memes and the Rare Pepe shtick as a personal attack and an instance of their culture being appropriated. They were furious at what they viewed as normal people using the meme. 4chan characterizes the folks who do not spend a lot of time online with the derogatory label of "normie." In response, the trollish wing of 4chan purposefully constructed Pepes that were intended to be as inflammatory, offensive, or distasteful as possible. Pepes with Hitler moustaches or Ku Klux Klan robes were abundant, all with hopes to make Pepe lose its mainstream appeal. While the trolls wished to "reclaim Pepe as their own," the political campaign of Donald Trump was beginning to reach full swing. In a convenient move to appeal to his very-online demographic, or perhaps to flex his anti-establishment muscles, Trump tweeted in October of 2015 a Trump Pepe alongside the caption "You Can't Stump the Trump."

³ https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/vvbjbx/4chans-frog-meme-went-mainstream-so-they-tried-to-kill-it



Trump's tweet served as vindication for liberals that Pepe was now an official symbol for Trump and the alt-right, while it simultaneously was an acknowledgment for the online young reactionaries that Pepe was now a Trump-sanctioned symbol to rally around. The desire to make Pepe more unattractive for the "normies" and the lulzy political engagement for the grassroots elements of Trump's campaign created a perfect storm for flooding forums with Pepes with various ideological trappings from across the spectrum of reactionary politics. This activity culminated on September 27, 2016 when the Anti-Defamation League stated that Pepe was now officially classified as a hate symbol, while conceding that not all Pepes have such malicious intentions. The reactions on the 4chan boards have been one of bored nihilism who viewed their effortful campaign as nothing more than a whimsical skirmish.⁴ Opposing this shift is Matt Furie, the original creator of the Pepe character was saddened by the manipulation of Pepe to be used

⁴ <https://yuki.la/r9k/31711843>

for such harmful intentions and has started an online movement of his own, #savethepepe, in an attempt to “reclaim” Pepe from its unwholesome associations. This caused outrage on right-wing forums, especially the subreddit on Reddit called /r/The_Donald, whose members treat Pepe with the same reverence that is usually only reserved for Trump himself. Many posts called Matt Furie a cuck while sharing edited Pepes showcasing their crude disapproval.⁵

The usage of Pepe for this paper is multi-leveled. Pepe behaves in the classic meme fashion semiotically speaking. A true semiotic analysis will take place in the next section as well as determining to what degree the Pepe meme is an exemplar of classic memetic semiotic structures or not. In addition, Pepe is very historically and politically rich. The purposeful manipulation of the signification of Pepe asks to what degree the connection between the sad frog and its most hateful intentions or usages are arbitrary. In a sense, the study will be determining the legitimacy of those who claim Pepe to be a hateful flagbearer for the American reactionary right or a simple cartoon frog where any hateful interpretations are purely coincidental.

I do not want to characterize the meme form as inherently reactionary, fascist, or even conservative, as that would be equating politics to a structural semiotic system. However, after the election of Donald Trump many middle-brow liberal publications were trying to determine how Hillary Clinton could have lost such a winnable election. This led to some famous online meme-users to be caught in the political crossfire. One example of this is when Fader, an online media journal, published an alarmist article criticizing Anthony Fantano, a successful YouTube-based music reviewer, for what they viewed to be racist meme-usage. The article stated that Fantano had a side channel that “pandered to the alt-right.”⁶ The Needle Drop (the main

⁵ https://np.reddit.com/r/The_Donald/comments/70xxx8/matt_furie_is_a_cuck_you_cant_kill_pepe/

⁶ <http://www.thefader.com/2017/10/03/needle-drop-deleted-youtube-channel-this-is-the-plan>

YouTube channel that Fantano posts most of his reviews on) has over a million subscribers and Fantano keeps most of his music reviews relatively apolitical. His side channel, thatistheplan, had around 400,000 subscribers prior to its deletion in response to the Fader article. Instead of earnest music reviews, thatistheplan's most common videos were filled with bizarrely edited videos filled with memes and filled to the brim with various online aesthetic signifiers. The Fader article references several evocatively titled videos of the former channel namely "I CHANGED MY GENDER BECAUSE OF DONALD TRUMP" and "pepe the frog triggers hillary clinton," as examples of what they believe to be Fantano opting into meme culture and therefore alt-right politics. Unfortunately, the article failed to delve into the actual political content of the videos in which opting into internet aesthetics rejects the holier than thou liberalism in order to appeal to the online audience. While Fantano was using signifiers often associated with far-right online culture, such as air horns and Pepe, they were being used to laud Obama and Bernie or to support single-payer healthcare. Critics after the fact said that Fantano should have realized that the aesthetic similarities between him and the alt-right could have made him seem guilty by association, but all it took was a scroll through his Twitter profile to make Fantano's true political positions clear. The music critic asserted in his response video that "there is nothing inherently right-wing about memes⁷" but, nevertheless, Fantano's meme-heavy video channel has been deleted and several of his speaking tours have been cancelled. While Fantano was correct to say that memes are not inherently right-wing, they are often lumped in with a transgressive online aesthetic that is deemed asocial. The association between various online aesthetic signifiers is not objective and is rather a reaction to the electoral defeat of Hillary Clinton. This reaction characterizes the meme as potentially right-wing, but only to the extent

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UZqIly7pAk>

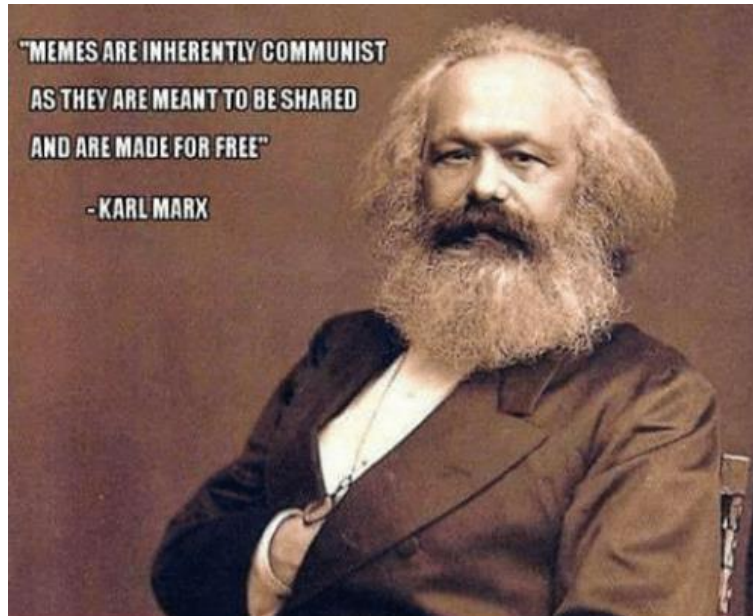
that people believe this association to be true. I will characterize the meme as equal opportunity with respects to its ideological inflections.

The only inherent politics that are available to the meme form is that of anti-authoritarianism and a visceral disdain with established mainstream media outlets. Nagle characterizes the death of old news media institutions as a case of obsolescence and not a purposeful rejection against the old guard:

The bursting forth of irreverent mainstream-baffling meme culture during the last race, in which the Bernie Sanders Dank Meme Stash Facebook page and The_Donald subreddit defined the tone of the race for a young and newly politicized generation, with the mainstream media desperately trying to catch up with a subcultural in-joke style to suit to emergent anti-establishment waves of the right and left. Writers like Manuel Castells and numerous commentators in the *Wired* magazine milieu told us of the coming of a networked society, in which old hierarchical models of business and culture would be replaced by the wisdom of crowds, the swarm, the hive mind, citizen journalism and user-generated content. They got their wish, but it's not quite the utopian vision they were hoping for. As old media dies, gatekeepers of utopian sensibilities and etiquette have been overthrown, notions of popular taste maintained by a small creative class are now perpetually outpaced by viral online content from obscure sources, and culture industry consumers have been replaced by constantly online, instant content producers. The year 2016 may be remembered as the year the mainstream media's hold over formal politics died. A thousand Trump Pepe memes bloomed and a strongman larger-than-life Twitter troll who showed open hostility to the mainstream media and to both party establishments took The White House without them. (Nagle 3)

Nagle correctly characterizes the plane of the Trump Pepes and Bernie Sander Dank Meme pages on Facebook as the modern political media landscape. This new political media is a network as opposed to top-down and the lines between performer, spectator, and audience member are thoroughly blurred. Even though there is only anti-authoritarianism that is encoded in the structures of the online communities, memetic communication, and humor, both sides of the online political aisle attempt to claim the meme as their own. The Left asserts that the meme is inherently communist due to its free cost, while the Right make an equally absurd claim that

“the Left can’t meme.”⁸ The ideological backing here is that the humorless attitude of establishment liberalism prevents the creation and distribution of any high-quality meme-making.



“Meme Marx,” found on KnowYourMeme original date and poster unknown

v. The Fake News Specter

Finally, it would be a grave error to ignore the overall political anxiety felt across the American (and perhaps global) online communities which have been exacerbated by the Russian hacking scandal and the specter of fake news. The heavily politicized usage of the term ‘fake news’ was used by the right to smear mainstream journalism outlets, while the liberal center was concerned with what they saw as rampant fallaciously constructed news stories. In order to determine the boundaries between the political memes that are the focus of this paper and all

⁸ <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-left-cant-meme>

political content disseminated online, a brief diversion describing the different types of misinformation and political “spin” often used online will follow.

The politics of the phrase “Fake News” has become a clichéd expression to discredit journalism that does not follow one’s own ideological persuasions. In addition, the severe centrist response to the moral failing of the perceived threat of fake news is a reaction stoked by the anxieties of mainstream journalism outlets, who fear their dying influence over American political thought. Fake news is not explicitly a creation of the internet; fake news has been around since the time of the Roman Empire to discredit Mark Antony and was also used to spread blood libel against medieval Jewish folk. However, accusing the internet of spreading fake-news is particularly evocative when considering its lack of formalized gatekeepers. To what degree the “fake-news” story spread due to its own merits, or if it was purposefully stoked by the fears of the previous gatekeepers of print and cable media institutions is still up for debate. Zeynep Tufekci, a Turkish intellectual and journalist, is oft-heralded as the “fake-news” expert and has held multiple Ted talks on the subject. Her book, *Twitter and Tear Gas*, provides practical examples of fake news manipulation in both American elections and populist media platforms covering the Arab Spring. In her book, Tufekci characterizes two different types of purposefully constructed media manipulation, although she never formally distinguishes between the two, they are different enough in content and operation to warrant a classification. In her description of the Arab Spring, Tufekci lauds citizen run media operations in which protesters can crowdsource journalism online, hopefully to warn their fellow protestors of either particularly entrenched police positions or to inform them of areas of relative safety. Tufekci then characterized the notable shift on the efficacy of this networked journalism during the 2016 Turkish coup d’état attempt (whether it was an actual coup or not is not of issue here), where the

websites and groups that were originally remarkably effective at informing protestors, became flooded with misinformation and the site's organizers were unable to verify or discredit the information quickly enough. Tufekci highlights their potential power and eludes to their ability to manipulation as follows:

Nawaat activists did much of their curating and monitoring from abroad, a practice that seems antithetical to understanding the dynamics of a movement. However, when social media curating is done correctly, it can be far more conducive to a comprehensive reporting effort than being in one place on the ground, amid the confusion, as traditional journalists tend to be. A traditional journalist can see what is in front of her nose and hear what she is told; a social media journalism curator can see hundreds of feeds that show an event from many points of view. Tufekci 41-42.

This form of deliberate misleading, akin to “astroturfing” (a term usually associated with online marketing), is characterized by the purposeful masking of institutional communications with the guise of populist or citizen level involvement. In the case of the Arab Spring and beyond, the implications of this form of astroturfing was a matter of life or death. Astroturfing is distinguishable from the other form of purposeful distortion, as in this case its power comes from the illusion of coming from fellow citizens or bottom-up.

However, the other form of “fake news” is a much more salient factor upon the American political consciousness. Mainstream news publications such as MSNBC covered stories of teenagers in Macedonia⁹ or other nations who are paid to deliberately fabricate news stories online under the guise of legitimate online journalism. They often went to such lengths as engineering website headers purporting affiliation with media outlets that do not exist. “The internet made it easy for anyone to quickly set up a webpage, and Facebook’s user interface made it hard to tell the legitimate news outlets such as the New York Times or Fox News apart

⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-38168281>

from fake ones such as the ‘Denver Guardian’” (Tufekci 298). Here the power to deceive is enabled by the illusion that the media text is coming from a place of power or authority.

When considering political or memetic communication online its power to persuade comes from its perceived earnest intentions when compared with the stuffy political intentions of classic media institutions. The power of the internet to communicate from peer to peer changed the media paradigm permanently. As Marcel Danesi stated in his book on *The Semiotic of Emoji*,

It is obvious that writing does indeed seem to encourage literate people to see themselves as separate individuals and develop a unique sense of Self. Prior to the spread of writing, knowledge was the privilege of the few and literacy was left in the hands of those in power. The growth of literacy substantially reduced the power of those in authority as written texts could be read “individually” and interpretations of their content reached subjectively (Danesi 172).

Just as literacy spread and people did not need to depend upon the clergy to interpret religious texts, now as a different media landscape is constructed there is less dependence on the traditional media goliaths.

From this point, having established what is at stake when discussing the meme and online communication, I am going to move forward onto a more specialized semiotic analysis of what makes a meme. From the semiotic theory a connection to their distinct political ramifications will come clear.

II. Semiotics

i. Memes are not Language

A semiotic analysis describing the function of the meme as a communication system will start by comparing them with other relevant sign-systems, namely natural human language and emojis. Highlighting the differences between memes and other communication forms provides a

frame of reference with other sign-systems and it also accentuates their historical import as a truly different style of communication, rather than just writing them off as nothing more than a picture that is shared online. I will also talk more in detail about any portions of their semiotic framework that may be relevant in the discussion of their political potential.

Semiotics started with a linguist, and the relationship between linguistics and semiotics has always been a close one. Saussure, the progenitor of modern semiotics, used spoken human language as the sign-system to define the terms that are now omnipresent in semiotics; namely sign, signifier, and signified. While the goal of semiotics to adequately theorize the intricacies of the linguistic sign may be semiotics ultimate *raison d'etre*, a complete history of this pursuit is not the intention of this paper. Although natural human language is often considered the sign system *par excellence*, language is unique when it is compared with other sign systems. While it is true that memes often have a written language component, it does not provide any significant connection to the semiotic structures of spoken language. Not only does basically all linguistic study focus on spoken language, it views written language as a different semiotic system with its own rules and meaning-making processes.

Saussurean structuralism was motivated by linguistic study- but other than the formal similarities of the terminology where the sign is the vehicle for communication, any other perceived commonalities between language and memes begin to break down. The uniqueness of human language is not a new assertion and many linguists have created theories or benchmarks proving how either animal communication systems or other human sign systems fail to measure up to the complexity of natural language. Most compellingly, is Hockett's design features of language, where he highlighted that all human languages (regardless of any superficial appearances of complexity) possess the same 16 "design features" or traits and that no other

communication system that we have encountered has matched any human language in this regard. Although primate communication has been noted to have 9 of the design features they lack more complex distinctions such as displacement or reflexiveness. Primates do not have the ability to talk about things or concepts that are not physically present, nor can they use language to talk about language. This prevents any animal communication system from matching the complexity of human language. Comparing human language to memetic communication using Hockett's design features is very limited in its application. I am not making the claim that memes are a "new language" and nor do I want to create a paradigm in which memes are a communication system that does not "measure up" to language. Therefore, another way of semiotically describing language is necessary to draw an adequate comparison between the two without the meme immediately becoming just an aberration of language rather than its own autonomous system.

Although it may be compelling to refer to the online meme-sharing youth as "meme literate" that does not serve as an indictment to the language qualities of meme-usage. While meme communication does have its own set of rules, expectations, and sociological norms to facilitate their usage, it is incorrect to call them a language. Through the combination of both the visual element and the linguistic ones- meaning is created. The language that is used in memes is often restricted by its framework to certain types of phrases, for example think of the short snippets of advice used for the Mallard Memes. Language usage within the meme framework is as regulated by the framework as the meme's visual elements. This is significant as it allows the analysis of the language used in memes to be contextualized by the meme's framework on a case by case basis, it is nothing more than a part of the framework as opposed to something outside of the larger semiotic structure

ii. Auto-Semiosis

Moving out of Saussure's linguistic structuralist approach there was a rich tradition of linguistic inquiry that rose up after him. Linguists and thinkers such as Valentin Voloshinov and Mikhail Bakhtin picked up where Saussure left off, expanding upon his coldly structuralist semiotic analysis. Out of this relatively disparate set of thinkers arose an idea that language was the only semiotic system that had the ability to undergo "auto-semiosis," that signs within a language use themselves and others to create other signs. This observation also showcases how language is privileged with respects to all other mental processes in humans. I am not attempting to write a paper analyzing memes through emoji or bricolage, but rather via language. Although memes are not an inherent communication system that has innate structures within the human brain, the way in which they relate to one another is like the auto-semiosis capabilities of natural language.

To highlight this similarity, I will use two memes, the Persuadable Bouncer¹⁰ and Drakeposting¹¹ memes, both are considered to be "exploitable 4-panel comics." The structures within them are similar, in which the form shows either the rapper Drake or the eponymous Bouncer expressing disapproval about the first image displayed in either comic. Then in the next pair of images there is a different image which is supposed to be superior (in either an earnest or ironic sense) that warrants Drake to show his approval or for the Bouncer to let "it in the club." Some examples are below:

¹⁰ <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/persuadable-bouncer>

¹¹ <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/drakeposting>



Fig: "Persuadable Bouncer" from Know Your Meme, collected on March 14, 2018, original poster unknown.



Fig: "Drakeposting" from Know Your Meme, collected March 14, 2018, original poster Martín Palma

Formally speaking, the memes display very similar semiotic structures, as they are claiming that one thing, concept, or image is superior to another. At this point, the relationship between the framework and added content again shows its importance. Compared to other communication forms they are uncommonly aware of their structures and framing on how they communicate. Both the information that is added to the template is important, but also the template in and of itself. There are many memes that display an “A is better than B” relation, including “Distracted Boyfriend¹²” or “Left Exit 12 Off Ramp.¹³” In this case, the thing that is better is either a person that is making your head turn or a ramp that requires one to rapidly swerve to take the exit. There are slight nuances that make each of the different meme templates slightly distinct, but in the end their structures are quite similar. Meme creation mandates a knowledge of the templates and this creates “crossovers” or mutations of templates.



¹² <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/distracted-boyfriend>

¹³ <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/left-exit-12-off-ramp>

Fig: Drakeposting/Exit 12/Distracted Boyfriend Crossover from Know Your Meme poster

NekothePony

Here this meme highlights the similarities between the various templates as Drake, the car, and the distracted boyfriend are all showcasing their approval/disapproval through the various elements within the others' templates. This mashup of meme template and concepts shows how the meme creators are explicitly aware of the boundaries of any specific meme class. Memetic communication encourages this type of knowledge where an exhaustive understanding of the network is needed to make legible memes. The above meme can be viewed as a sort of memetic "pun." Just like how language users use similar linguistic units to draw attention to the similarities and double meanings of words for comedic purposes, this shows that meme-users often think in similar ways. This sort of usage also muddies the interpretation that memetic communication is a simple formulaic process but instead characterizes it in a more generative and creative fashion. While this is not nearly as productive of a process as the auto-semiosis that is possible through natural language, the ability to play with the templates is a semiotic feature that is pivotal to the power of the meme.

iii. Distancing Memes from Other Digital Communication Forms

Next, I will distance the meme structures away from another pictographic online communication system: Emoji. The book on the subject, Marcel Danesi's *The Semiotics of Emoji* takes a decidedly linguistic and semiotic approach to analyzing this sign system. Danesi purposefully distances himself from calling Emoji usage a language and instead calls it "the Emoji code." One of the overarching claims made in the book is that Emoji is used to alter the

register of the text-based speech into something that is not meant to be taken too seriously.

Danesi does not want to equate this lack of seriousness with a lack of complexity even when he states that, “perhaps the emoji code is just another fad... tapping into a comic book or cartoonish mind-set that is characteristic of pop-culture style in all domains of human interaction” (Danesi 158). Yet he goes on to qualify the previous statement by admitting that the flexibility of emoji is indicative of “an ever-broadening hybridity of representation that comes from living in the digital age” (Danesi 158). Although how emojis and memes are discredited as foolish online kitsch underplays their ability to communicate online messages in a global setting. “Epigenetic global code” is how Danesi describes online communication; one in which those who are using it have a significant say in its rules and application.

Formally speaking, the meme and the emoji are distinct. The main difference between the two systems is that memes are generative while emojis are not. Emojis create meaning by reorganizing and ordering themselves in specific ways within a closed class of specific images in a specific medium. “The act of emoji creation” involves adding certain pre-created images to a text message. There is no opportunity to edit the emojis as they come pre-programmed onto most cellular devices. Memes do not follow this same logic. The two-fold parts of memes, the framework and the complete meme, is evidence of their more mutable nature. Meme-making involves making a new image through editing a preconstructed one. Both communication forms take advantage of digital technologies ability to reproduce images rapidly; but the meme uses the computer’s ability to edit content. This difference between the two helps elucidate that although memetic communication happens online, not all digital communication is memetic.

Now that a significant distinction has been made separating online internet memes with natural language and emoji, I will describe its own semiotic features by discussing the semiotic peculiarities of memes specifically.

iv. Studying Pepe using the Semiotics of Peirce

When considering memes there are few that stand out more than Pepe the Frog. As previously stated the politicization of Pepe has reached a high level, with people treating the once innocent frog as a contemptuous hate symbol or the flagbearer of their entire political ideology. Starting out to formalize how Pepe communicates, one must first consider how a concept of a meme is larger than any one instantiation. There are countless Pepe images online, that have been edited, photoshopped, have added text, or undergone any other alteration processes. As discussed earlier I will consider that a meme's membership of any larger network as clearly defined and self-evident for any one specific meme.

The salience of the meme's overarching template encourages an analysis outside of the simple sign/signifier/signified relationship of Saussure's structuralism. The semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce is the most compelling analysis in describing the relationship between a meme's class membership and any one specific meme. Peirce in the collection *Peirce on Signs* complicates the simplicity of the construction of a whole sign from its constitutive parts. He does this by claiming that a mental concept of the sign intrudes upon the semiosis. "Since a sign is not identical with the thing signified, but differs from the latter in some respects, it must plainly have some characters which belong to it in itself" (Peirce 68). While memes are almost always digital and do not have the natural link that Peirce speaks of, 'the thing signified' that Peirce references could be the mere allusion to the overarching meme class that the meme has membership of.

Strictly speaking, Pepe memes only maintain their Pepe status by their likeness. There is no explicit link connecting any one Pepe meme to the larger Pepe class of memes. In other words, it is not natural for any image to be associated with Pepe but rather it must purposefully opt into the Pepe likeness. This act of disruption between the individual instantiations and the meme framework allows the meme to be more complex than the sum of its parts.

To break this down even further, the act of meme-creation involves adding to or altering the framework of the meme. When considering the meme's framework as something that can be altered, start by thinking of an exemplar of any meme framework, which in the case of Pepe would be an image of Pepe without any added elements, or for a meme like Actual Advice Mallard would be just the picture of the duck without text. Then as someone alters the framework to make a complete meme it is that content used in the alteration process that carries the brunt of the communicative content. When you see a new Actual Advice Mallard meme the information that is most noticeable is the added text or any aesthetic shifts that occurred, as it is where the meme is different from its exemplar. This way of thinking where we notice what violates our expectations is not limited to just thinking about memes.

For example, I use a computer that is not an Apple product. Although no one would say my computer is not a computer it still violates the expectation that a computer used by a college student is likely to be a Mac. When someone sees my computer, a decidedly not-stylish Lenovo Thinkpad, it is still enough of a computer to be seen as one, yet its non-Apple traits are exceptionally noticeable.

Focusing on the information that was added to the framework also makes the ideological claiming of a meme easy. There are countless memes that are often used for political purposes:

either Strawman Ball,¹⁴ Daily Struggle,¹⁵ or Hard to Swallow Pills¹⁶, just to name a few. Being too numerous to dissect each of them individually, they are often used in political communities to attacks or point out the contradictions of the other side of the aisle. The point here being that there is not a meme that only liberals use to attack leftists and vice versa. Memes are equal opportunity when considering their ability to make ideological assertions.



Pepe the frog: taken from Know Your Meme, March 16, 2018, original poster unknown.

Returning to Peirce, who is mostly interested in the semiotic structures of language, he believes that breaking down natural language elements into its constitutive parts will eventually reach a dead end, “every thought, however artificial and complex, is, so far as it is immediately present, a mere sensation without parts, and therefore, in itself, without similarity to any other,

¹⁴ <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/picardia>

¹⁵ <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/daily-struggle>

¹⁶ <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/hard-to-swallow-pills>

but incomparable with any other and absolutely *sui generis* [unique] (Peirce 70).” Language to Peirce is not made up of other signs but rather it is natural law, “every thought, in so far as it is a feeling of a peculiar sort, is simply an ultimate, inexplicable fact” (Peirce 70). Memes of course, cannot claim to have such lofty origins and often bubble out of the painfully arbitrary; such as a webcomic for Pepe, or a prematurely dead gorilla in the case of a meme like Harambe. Peirce never claims that any one individual can change the link between language and the natural world, which also contrasts with the more mutable, epigenetic qualities of digital communication.

The elevation of the larger framework of the meme complicates the case of Pepe and how people should treat the famous frog. There are assuredly countless instances of Pepe memes that are either apolitical or even progressive in their stance, but to what degree they are outliers of the public perception of Pepe, remains to be seen. In the case of Pepe, that gives the viewer two options: see the images of Pepe as a meme only to the extent that they know it is a meme or approach the image with the knowledge that the Pepe class of memes has purposefully constructed connotations of racism and fascism. To what degree the Pepe-sharers were legitimately using the frog to disseminate Nazi ideology or racist fearmongering is still a question, as the manipulation of how the public perceived Pepe to take it back from the normies was the goal in its own right. I do not have anything in the case of prescriptive rules for judging the soul of Pepe, nor do I have any attentions to exonerate or indict the meme, as either redeemable or at the same tier as a swastika.

Concluding my take on the Pepe meme in particular- the slipperiness of the meme’s true intentions seems to be a feature and not a bug. Alt-right members gathering at protests wear their Pepe affiliations on their sleeves, whose goofy online aesthetics affords a certain far-right politics that is given plausible deniability via its arbitrariness. There has not yet been any mass

killing perpetrated by followers under a Pepe-flag, but gathering at demonstrations and shouting “normies out” makes one wonder who is considered a normie¹⁷ and to what extent their political engagement is beyond the lulz. Using Pepe, or memes in general can be used by anyone from any political ideology and can be used to try and enact all sorts of political goals. This lack of a connection to actual political seats of power affords memetic communication to speak truth to power without putting anything on the line. While there is a decidedly Trumpian wing of online meme sharing, the sort who were described in Philip’s account treat all politics as a big joke. Meme’s ability to create a sense of identity around a shared online literacy reflects back to my statements on the anti-authoritarian internet, which has an endlessly cynical view of power.

Some may claim that the liberal or progressive Pepe’s can serve as proof that the meme is neutral and is solely what one makes of it. However, it is through the relationship between memes and their framework that the restrictions and unspoken expectations come forth. When Matt Furie, the original author/creator of Pepe makes an image of the frog wearing a “Make Pepe Great Again” hat and urinating on a Trumpian incarnation of the frog, it serves to admit the corruption of the meme-framework. Additional Pepe memes have been circulating trying to distance the meme’s network from the alt-right associations.

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/23/alt-right-online-humor-as-a-weapon-facism>



Fig. "Make Pepe Great Again" by Matt Furie. Source: The Atlantic.



Fig: *Make Pepe Great Again* found on twitter from Rainbow Jedi, original creator/poster unknown.

As the perceived meme-framework and understanding of Pepe is that of a far-right icon, all memes of Pepe carry that association with them. While there may be memes pushing back against that association, the public at large considers him unwholesome, and hate symbols only become hate symbols through some concept of consensus. This may seem like a contradiction to what was stated earlier in the case of meme's structurally being equal opportunity, but that is not the case. A meme can have any added content to it that attacks or supports any political ideology and their flexibility supports this. When considering Pepe as a framework that has associations of far-right politics it does not remove the possibility of progressive Pepes, as the link between hatred and the Pepe meme is arbitrary. All non-fascist Pepes are in act of resistance from the framework and are still completely legible.

This is unfortunately as concrete of an analysis as possible when it comes to Pepe. This did not feel very satisfying for me after seeing so many Pepes that were among the most racist and bigoted images I have seen online. Unfortunately, it was the only interpretation that was honest and that acknowledged the larger political landscape. It is also probable that the racist Pepes are especially incensing as they juxtapose bigotry with an innocent and even silly original image. While the swastika provides a historical footing to understand and name the hatred, a Hitler Pepe treats the slaughter of innocents as a joke. The irreverent treatment of the Holocaust at the hands of a cartoon frog is much more palatable to mainstream people as it can be written off as the action of lunatic online trolls. Unfortunately, any legitimate criticisms levied against racist are often deflected by "it's just a joke."



Hitler Pepe, from 4Chan, original poster and date unknown.

v. A Semiotic Model of Memes

To synthesize these relatively disparate parts- the comparison with language, Pepe, and the semiotics of Peirce into a cogent theory, one element loomed over the rest with respects to relevance. The meme is a communication form in which its network and any instantiations are held in equal import, and it is only through their confluence is a legible meme created. In language, the listener brings their language skills and sociocultural information to be able to decode the information of the speaker. Similarly, in memes, the observer brings their understanding of the memetic network which elevate the image or concept to “memehood.” This creates a dynamic in which successfully creating a meme requires an understanding of the framework. Altering images into a meme template does not always make legible variations without an adequate understanding of their template. In the conclusion, I will talk about the political implications of this fact and how the higher barrier of entry for memetic communication alters the political landscape around in-group/out-group dynamics and performed authenticity.

III. Politics

i. Past Understandings of Online Media and Politics

The impact of media and media institutions on the global political landscape has always been of importance. Freedom of the press is one of the founding tenets of all modern democratic states. Classic understanding of reactionary or despotic regimes are often characterized as having a high perfect track record of attacking media institutions through the labels of “fake news” or the classic “*lügenpresse*.” Criticisms levied against the press and media (whether legitimate or not) are often predicated upon a separation between government power, the citizens, and the media institutions. Institutional power based within the state attempt to construct accusations brought forth by the media or press groupings as unfounded- that they are a corrupting force upon the consciousness of the people. For example, Hitler attacking media institutions is only coherent on the predication that not all of the German citizens were active in constructing the media narrative. As news media decentralization and digitization occurs, a reading of news media institutions as a unified body that the state needs to grapple with is outdated. How political entities negotiate this new territory of citizen-run media is the focus of this section as well as how internet memes function on the intersection between online political communication and seats of legitimate electoral power.

The past paradigm of the relationship between media and government has been of two large distinct institutions engaged in a quarrel of begrudging necessity. Books written before the 2016 presidential election, such as R.J. Maratea’s *Politics of the Internet* or the essay collection *Culture and Politics of the Information Age*, consider the internet as a vehicle to view and share institutional media communications. The internet’s ability to decentralize media narratives away

from a few ideological gatekeepers is often understated by the claim that the sole communicative act that people consider is the sharing and commenting of articles from corporate media sources. Maratea however lauds this process and labels it as “meta-journalism” where “commenting and reinterpreting of new stories online” (Maratea 35) supplies an additional chunk of media information in the overarching online journalism process. Maratea is right to say that meta-journalism is a radical shift when comparing it to more traditional top-down and centralized media paradigms, such as print journalism or radio broadcast. However, it is still an inadequate representation of the modern media landscape that takes place online. Looking beyond mere meta-journalism one must consider how internet communication is radically different from other media forms to allow for a new context of political communication.

ii. “Post”-politics

Many scholars assert that as countries transition to a post-industrial economic mode and contort to the modern international media landscape, many classically accepted forms of social relations begin to wither away. This anxiety was present in Frank Webster’s article *A New Politics* where he theorizes on a feedback loop of the decay of classic social relations in Western working-class life. He claims that as the salience of the working class in political and social life wanes in the face of the decline of stereotypical working-class industry, this begets more weakening of blue-collar sociality and the further decay of the working class as a social unit, thus furthering their political impotence. While Webster never explicitly referenced how the death of local community socialization could lead to a greater alienation with national identity- the maintenance of any working-class movement at a nationwide level is contingent on the activity of local communities. Webster then makes the claim that, “in place of community can be

identified a postmodern relativism in which values and conduct are regarded as highly differentiated lifestyle choices, which are incommensurable” (Webster 4). Identity politics then acts as the replacement for the politics of the nation-state. Webster framed this as a reactionary move while ignoring how the death of a state-based political consciousness may be a liberation for those who can now pursue their best interests outside of the nationally mandated Overton window. A political arena where the stakes are more based on personal performative individual decisions over inflexible national values is the perfect ideological battleground for a communication form as flexible as the meme.

A quick aside is needed to push back that a political paradigm that distances itself from the classic national politics is somehow a regression or any less legitimate. Although many pundits deride identity politics as a selfish aberration into tribalism- that naively assumes that the political process focused on the nation-state had everyone’s needs in mind. As identity politics includes people who were on the political margins, those who were firmly in the center of the more traditional process accuse this of a dilution of “legitimate” politics. This ignores that getting more people involved in the political process should, even from a purely numbers standpoint, make the political arena more legitimate as a public force.

This removal of the nation as a vector that carries political power also changes the dynamic in which the populace interacts with media corporations. If politics stays within the boundaries of the nation-state, then viewing the media as the third entity in the triumvirate of state, citizen, and media is a logical conclusion. As all the nations of the world economically and politically globalize- it became more complex to determine who the large media corporations serve and where the loyalties of the people lie. As media becomes instantaneous and identity-driven an internationalist political arena unfolds on social media. Online there may be more in

common between you and someone on the other side of the world who opts into various political identities and decisions as opposed to your next-door neighbor whose political views are “unseemly.” Via this removal of the physical impetus of politics, the discussion of political thought and opinion loses the requirement of institutionally mandated veneer. In fact, the sleek professionalism of classically respected media institutions is often the first victim of who is written off as fake news.¹⁸ Most writers and pundits consider this to be a paradise lost of public debate. That people have been duped into living in a filter bubble,^{19 20 21} where people on their social media feeds receive endless positive affirmation of one’s own political opinion and never have to even consider the possibility that other people might disagree with them. This of course ignores the constant and nasty political “disagreements” that occur every second, on every social media platform. It also shows the discomfort that the traditional media corporations share where the media landscape is headed, where large top-down “media creators” have a shaky future. The significance of the shift to meta-journalism showcases that often individuals trust corporate news only once it has been “digested” by fellow non-institutional sources. The filter bubble canard also ignores how usual politics is based upon organizing around like-minded individuals in the party system.

Mememes and their online popularity are the communication form *par excellence* for the new online political paradigm. Its lack of connection from any national media institution and rich visual elements allow it to exist internationally and encourage the online virality that is necessary for any online media form to succeed. This also should not be viewed that due to the comparative

¹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-media-news-survey/trust-the-news-most-people-dont-social-media-even-more-suspect-study-idUSKBN19D015>

¹⁹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/01/14/facebook-invites-you-to-live-in-a-bubble-where-you-are-always-right/?utm_term=.241cf67a69a9

²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/03/arts/the-battle-over-your-political-bubble.html>

²¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles

simplicity of memes that their success should be written off as proof of the dumbing down of the modern international political discourse. As seen in the previous section on the semiotic intricacies of memes; that a complete interpretation of them online requires a good deal of decoding ability.

Of course, the usage of the internet is not just a liberation from the giant restrictive corporations, but it also winnows public behavior through non-institutional channels. Marcel Danesi describes it as such,

When the internet came into wide use, it was heralded as bringing about a liberation from conformity and a channel for expressing one's opinions freely. But this view has proven to be specious. In contrast to the pre- internet print world, it can be said that internet culture is built on the attainment of a communal consciousness through artificial means. Living in a social media universe, we may indeed feel that it is the only option available to us. The triumph of social media universe, we may indeed feel that it is the only option available to us. The triumph of social media lies in their promise to allow human needs to be expressed individualistically, yet connect them to a common ground – hence the paradox. Moreover, as the communal brain takes shape in the global village, a form of global connected intelligence is merging, called by some a “global brain” (Danesi 174).

This movement to a decentralized media landscape changes the gatekeepers from a formalized institutional censorship to the specific mores of any one given group. On Reddit this concept is derided as a “circle-jerk”²² in which certain topics are either immediately favored or despised by “the hivemind,” and a topic's circlejerk takes for granted its positive or negative traits.

The meme's mutability allows it to be placed in various social and cultural contexts and succeed as a legible online communication form. As stated in the semiotic section; memes

²² <https://www.reddit.com/r/TheoryOfReddit/wiki/glossary>

deliver comedy or any other intended content where all the information is contained within the conceptual framework of the meme, a meme that requires an undue amount of outside information is either intended for a very strict audience or is being purposefully obtuse. The meme can either be readable as an image or, if one has prior knowledge of the framework, as a member of a meme which carries with it all the additional characteristics.

Memes and the behavior they encourage embody the anti-authoritarian attitude afforded by the internet that treats the political battlefields as one big playground. In Phillips' *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, she correctly identifies earnest opinion as the antithesis of online trollish discourse. Phillips notes how it is functionally impossible to actually determine where the true beliefs of the trolls lie, as even in more formal 1-on-1 interview settings they could be "trolling the earnest academic." A great mystery that remains even after the dust settles of the 2016 presidential election is to what degree the meme-sharing keyboard warriors seriously agreed with Donald Trump's politics or just viewed the victory for such a thought-to-be unwinnable candidate to be a troll of grand proportions. As Trump's status changed from political commentator and iconoclast to major-party candidate, there was a definitive shift as Trump's online fans pivoted from just slinging anti-Hillary memes and instead shared polling locations or advertised for phone banks. Nagle correctly characterized how Trump's initial counter-cultural posture withered away as soon as he entered office. Even beyond Trump, Nagle questions whether the "alt-right" should continue to label itself as an alternative when one of their ilk is literally in the White House. Before his inauguration, Trump purposefully labeled himself as a political outsider. The memes of the Trump campaign (and the relative move away from them once he seemed to be a legitimate candidate) served as a socially sanctioning force. The popularity of pro-Trump memes that were assumedly made by his voters independent of any

formal political structure gave credence to the claim that people approved of him politically. Where Hillary and Jeb had paid staffers constructing purposefully fabricated images for dissemination on politically sanctioned channels, Trump's unmoored fanbase made images that had the politically valuable property of coming from a grassroots angle. While it is likely that Trump encouraged this behavior (by sharing the Pepe meme on Twitter for example) it is unlikely that any political candidate could churn out the level of Pro-Trump online content without some amount of people doing it under their own volition. The same dynamic of giving legitimacy to the campaigns of political outsiders through online communication happened with Bernie Sanders. Hundreds of thousands of users posted and re-shared grassroots created content on the Facebook page Bernie Sanders Dank Meme Stash. While for Sanders this did not give him a path to the presidency, it however helped elevate his status in the political consciousness of the country to the degree that he is now the most popular politician in the nation.²³

iii. The Grassroots Factor of Memetic Communication

The process of meme-creation is difficult, as its legibility is contingent on a correct application of both added content and the framework. This gives anyone who wishes to make a meme a high hurdle to conquer because it needs to display its framework correctly and it is obvious when the meme fails. By requiring the signifiers of the meme's template to be at the front and center of any individual instantiations, communicating with memes mandates a rich knowledge of their history and usage. Many corporate-made memes have failed in the past. Arguably the most heinous being a Wendy's television ad, offering up a new sandwich that has garnered a reaction from the "The Memer." The advertisement, which shows a male subject

²³ https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/xww4ek/bernie-sanders-is-the-most-popular-politician-in-america-poll-says-vgtrn

opting into various aesthetic and linguistic signifiers of a meme-culture that was, even at the time of the advertisement's airing, horribly out of date. Wendy's corporate advertising team failed where Trump and Bernie's unprofessional keyboard warriors succeeded.

A definitive conclusion on the future political power of the meme is impossible. There are two possibilities when considering the future of meme application. One being that the meme will continue to be a counter-cultural signifier and the adequate amount of template knowledge to construct legible memes will sufficiently deter any corporate or institutional appropriation. The evidence to suggest this is the slipperiness of online culture, as accounted for by Phillips, that online culture as we know it needs an amount of irony and trolling. However, it is also possible that astro-turfed memes will be the most popular political tool to be used in upcoming high-profile elections. Within the paradigm of the politics of authenticity- campaigns have always known of the efficacy of a healthy grassroots element of the political process. By being able to now construct a different strain of media image- the political independence or authenticity of the candidate can be advertised at the same level of all other policy issues.

iv. The Future of the Memes

If all of history arrives first as tragedy and then as farce- the electoral victories of Trump are ripe for a farcical reflection. The meme may harden as an institutionally recognized form of communication as politicians use it to jockey for the sincerest performance of authenticity. The question remains as to whether people's newfound desire for a legitimate grassroots communication channel will be shunted onto another bundle of signifiers after the death of the meme. Despite the communication form's structural resistance to outside commodification, its

ability as a tool to broadcast populist support is too attractive for interests both corporate and political alike.

Authenticity has always been desirable, both in oneself and others. The knowledge that your behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs are coming from a place of true respect and conviction is important for maintaining a good self-image. Online, it is common that users discredit those who engage in ideological scuffles with them as “paid shills.”²⁴ The paranoia of calling people who disagree with you a shill is an attempt to undermine potential political antagonism. It is akin to being an online ideological mercenary fighting the battle not because you believe in it, but because you were paid. This same strand of thinking extends to conspiracy theorists who portend that survivors of mass shootings are “crisis actors” being paid to act a certain way to support a relevant political agenda. Memes and those who share them in good faith can serve as a form of inoculation from people whose sole ideological defense is assuming that people who disagree with them are only paid to do so. In addition to the fear of the shill, many online users think that all “real people” are on their side of the political dispute. As meme-use can be obscure and nonsensical for those ill-informed of online aesthetics and behavior, it provided a sense of authenticity that is now unfortunately receding. Where previously it was unthinkable to imagine a politician tweeting a Pepe, that barrier has been broken. There is no reason why other signifiers of online internet usage will not suffer a similar fate. Where once the internet was a radically other form of sociality, with different linguistic and aesthetic signifiers born not from any corporate or technocratic oligarchs, it is now unfortunately consumed with paranoia. While before making jokes about how the government and the media was ruling one’s life was a

²⁴ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-fiorella/cyber-shills_b_2803801.html

clichéd given, there was always the belief that you could “get away from it all.” This new form of paranoia is an expression that the online is losing its status as protected from manipulation.

However, one should not discredit the internet’s ability to be transgressive. As mediocritizing and corporatizing forces approach online culture, it is possible to continue editing-it and altering-it. If the sole corporate attempts were as ineffectual as the Wendy’s meme ads the internet has nothing to fear. In addition, transgression for transgressions sake is only worth-saving as long as it is challenging hegemonic power structures. While the internet has the ability to both “punch-up” and “punch-down” it is often the most racist, misogynistic, and all-around bigoted portions of the internet that all forms of institutional power tend to give a wide-berth. Memes, and an internet in general, that allow citizen-based political discussion that does not have any moneyed interest at stake, is something worth fighting to defend.

IV. Conclusion

i. Theoretical Implications

In closing, connecting the communicative contexts of memes and the political theories of the thinkers Hannah Arendt and Chantal Mouffe is apropos. While the bulk of their thought is separated by half a century, both saw a similar atrophy of the political process which they viewed as a loss of a pivotal part of what it meant to be human. To Arendt the ultimate *sine qua non* for all humans is the political action. The prerequisites for action are varied and complex; nevertheless, Arendt distances action from the other two modes of being: labor and work. Where labor is rote reproduction of life itself and work is constructing something outside of the realm of biological reproduction, action transcends beyond both paradigms. Action, for Arendt, requires human’s innate ability to forgive. In her magnum opus, *The Human Condition* she states that,

“Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever” (Arendt 257). Only by being freed from the past and not having political expression be obscured by the pall of reaction, can a legitimate body politic be constructed. The fears of astroturfing, paid shills, or Russian trolls are an inability to forgive. Dredging up past ideological clashes at every turn for Arendt prevents politics from occurring, this happens online to such a degree that some refuse to believe that they are actually talking to other people.²⁵ Although Arendt fears that the only political action becomes reaction without forgiveness, instead the body politic-to-be has been rendered inert by atomization and suspicion.

ii. Synthesizing Arendt and Mouffe

Bridging the gap between the Arendtian act of forgiveness and memetic communication is the more modern critique that Mouffe wages against “deliberative democracy.” Mouffe’s criticism hinges on what she believes to be a mere performance of political antagonism in the face of an unrelenting moralized status quo. Mouffe adequately describes modern politics as smuggling in a great deal of ideological assumptions with the guise of non-ideological rationality. For Mouffe, the political always happens at the level of antagonism. Although many modern online political discussion boards are certainly antagonistic, they lack the paradigm that Mouffe seeks: one of right vs left, as opposed to right vs wrong. Institutionally sanctioned political communications are guiltier of this sin. In mainstream media outlets free speech is claimed to be sacrosanct while there is a pile of political sensibilities and all forms of “the other”

²⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/23/russian-bots-us-election-coup-d-etat>

are silenced on the political margins. Mouffe disagrees with Arendt and directly references her in her book: *On the Political*. Mouffe states, “some theorists such as Hannah Arendt envisage the political as a space of freedom and public deliberation while others see it as a space of power, conflict, and antagonism. My understanding of the political falls with the latter” (Mouffe 8). This dismissal of Arendt as a champion of democratic deliberation avoids the possibilities for synthesis of their respective philosophies. While Mouffe correctly lauds antagonism, she does not adequately consider how the Arendtian action is in fact one of the necessary conditions for political antagonism. I posit that forgiveness does not impede the ability for political antagonism, but rather is the only way for it to occur. For Mouffe, antagonism means an encounter with a political Other, and she goes to great pains to claim we should resist the temptation to define the political Other within the framework of one’s own moral system. The clash of ideologies can only be fruitful if there is no misrepresentation or misconception of what is at stake or what both parties are arguing over. It is here that the antagonism of right vs left that Mouffe desires comes into concert with Arendtian action. This synthesis claims that the eschewing of the past affords for a politics of what is at hand, as opposed to the façade of politics that needs to quarrel over all sorts of predetermined political opinions to the extent that it becomes sport.

iii. Political Action in a Trump Democracy

Connecting democratic political theory with the banality of the internet meme is a gesture to the sorry state of current political discourse. Not in the sense that memes are boorish and facile, although they often are, but rather that this is one of the only havens of actual politics in the current society. The unexpected political power of memes tells us as much about the failure of traditional forms of democratic governance as about memes themselves. As institutionalized

media forms fail to question so many of the “taken-for-granted” qualities of the main hegemonic discourse in the name of rational liberalism, there remains a desperate need to look beyond it. The main selling point of Donald Trump’s political campaign was his performance of outside appeal, his low-brow iconoclasm and repeated cries to “drain the swamp” reflected the anxieties present around the smothering permanence of the sacred power structures. Trump’s presidency has unfortunately caused a strengthening of the right vs. wrong mentality where all members of the media class laud politicians such as Bill Kristol,²⁶ David Frum,²⁷ and George W. Bush²⁸ who all make complaints about small technocratic policy issues and Trump’s histrionics. These men of course all share large amounts of political ideology with Trump but were nevertheless welcomed into the fold of the #resistance which remained impressively blind to actual political opinions.

The Trump presidency which has been characterized as a decline of American democracy, which is a very reasonable response when seeing either his comportment or fascist tendencies, slightly misses the point. There is in fact a bittersweet interpretation of Trump’s victory, one in which it can serve as proof of the desire of the American public for a genuine political alternative outside of the current liberal hegemony. Where in Trump’s case it was a mere performance of being a political outsider (as being a political outsider is functionally impossible as a billionaire) he is a living example that authenticity is the most valuable political stance that a politician can foster. In the general election, one of the main selling points of the presidential candidates was advertising the fact that they were simply not their opponents and that alone functioned as the ultimate qualification of their electability. Trump eschewed civility

²⁶ <https://www.weeklystandard.com/kristol-trump-is-discrediting-conservatism/article/2003815>

²⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/24/books/review/david-frum-trumpocracy.html>

²⁸ <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/03/george-w-bush-liberals-freedom-press-media-russia-investigation-donald-trump/>

to broadcast his populism and Clinton made every effort to appear as reasonable as possible. Trump broadcasted her obsession with decorum and liberal values as evidence of being firmly ensconced within the hegemonic identity. It is likely that the status of being perceived as an outsider vs insider was the main political difference between the two.

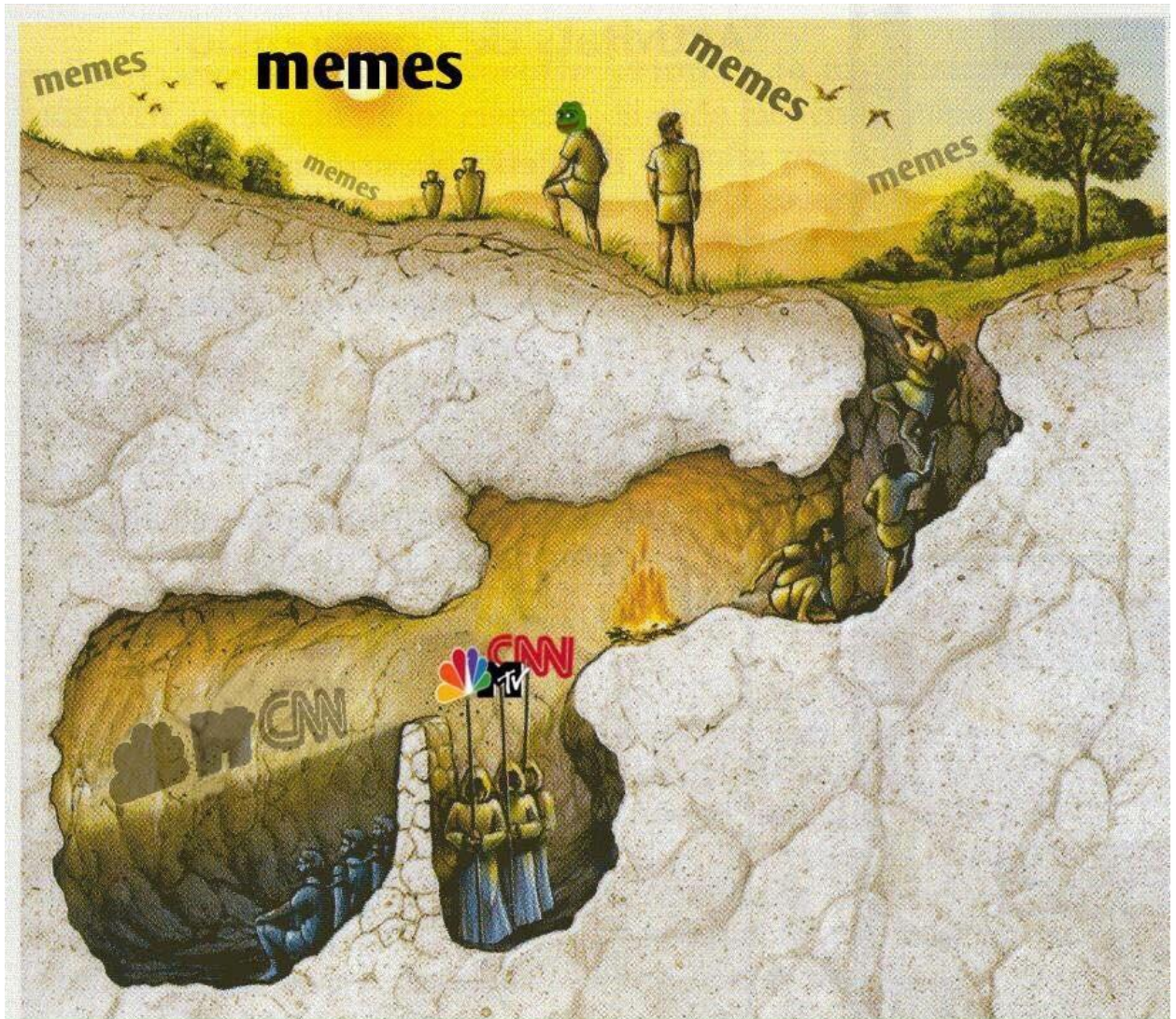
iv. Memes as Emancipatory

In conclusion, a definitive statement on the future of the intersection between media and politics is too complex to pin down. Although the semiotic structures of memes functions by maintaining in-group/out-group dynamics, the allure of appearing genuinely authentic is a very powerful motivator for interests both political and corporate.

In many ways the two possible futures of the meme are reflected upon the interpretations of the Trump presidency. Where liberalism views Trump's demagoguery and his lack of reliance on mainstream acceptability as evidence for his political monstrosity and prop up classic media institutions as the only thing that can help us survive the unique evil of Trump's vulgarity. It is perverse that many pundits now view the act of subscription to a paper such as the Washington Post or the New York Times as an act of political resistance without considering what conditions led to his election in the first place.

Opposed to the liberal interpretation of Trump and memes lies the potential for an emancipatory future. The meme's ability to communicate in a way divorced from the hegemony encourages communication between individuals. Memes, and their resistance to appropriation from institutional powers may afford a relatively fearless communication, one characterized with a confidence that the person on the other side is an individual. The antagonism that Mouffe wants and the action of Arendt's dreams needs an avenue free of corporatized or institutionalized

interests. It is only through legitimate political discussion can legitimate political action occur. Therefore, communication forms like the meme are necessary for any emancipatory or revolutionary politics. I will end with just one more meme, found on a Donald Trump forum, but I feel no reason why they should get to keep it.



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