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FROM MEME TO MEMEGRAPH:

THE CURIOUS CASE OF PEPE THE FROG AND WHITE NATIONALISM

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Fernando Ismael Quinones Valdivia

University of Northern Iowa

May 2019

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores Pepe the Frog, a comic book character that became a meme, then went mainstream, and then became appropriated by the Alt-Right in support of the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Users in the Internet have declared this meme a god, others have claimed it as a piece of crypto-art, while White Nationalists use it to propagate their ideology. I draw on McGee's notion of the ideograph to argue that, in a networked environment characterized by limited attention and heightened speed of circulation, memes have the capacity to ideologically condense publics. This gives rise to what I label the *memegraph*. The memegraph accounts for the birth, evolution, and constitution of publics around nascent, memetic ideographs. By inspecting the role of time and attention in memetic media, and examining the circulation of verbal and visual arguments, this thesis conceptualizes the role of memetic media in constituting and mobilizing publics,

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This Study by: Fernando Ismael Quinones Valdivia

Entitled: From Meme to Memegraph: The Curious Case of Pepe the Frog and White Nationalism

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

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CHAPTER 1

WHEN PEPE BECAME A RACIST FROG

"What is that?" a reporter asked Richard Spencer, a leader of the White Nationalist movement known as the Alt-Right, pointing to a pin of a green cartoon frog that he was wearing on his three-piece suit. "This? It is Pepe. It has become a kind of a symbol …" Spencer said, just as a protester punched him in the face (Murphy, 2017). Since Spencer was unable to answer the reporter's question, this thesis attempts to answer it: What is that? The "that" refers to Pepe the Frog, who started as a comic book character in 2006. It then became a meme. It then turned into a racist signifier adopted by the Alt-Right, was deployed by Trump supporters in the 2016 election, transformed into the deity of an online religion, and served as the center of an art and cryptocurrency market. This is the short story. The long story starts with Matt Furie, who created Pepe in 2006 for a comic book called *Boy's Club*. Furie intended to make Pepe innocuous, stating that the "true Pepe the Frog [was] a peaceful cartoon amphibian who represents love, acceptance, and fun. (And getting stoned)" (as cited in Cohen, 2016). Pepe and his *Boy's Club* friends were "stereotypical post-college bros: playing video games, eating pizza, smoking pot and being harmlessly gross" (Roy, 2016). The green, big-eyed, humanoid-looking cartoon frog went from an obscure comic cartoon to Internet stardom in 2008 when a picture of his head cropped from the original comic book saying "Feels good, man" started to circulate on sites like 4chan and Reddit (Roy, 2016).

Originally, Pepe's floating head was first posted to 4chan, "a message board where anyone can post anonymously" (Goldman, 2016). Although "a lot of internet

memes come from" 4chan, its culture is grotesque "like a nightmare, cesspool, that is full of offensive" posts, messages, and images (Goldman, 2016). In particular, Pepe was posted to 4chan's Robot9K (/r9k/) thread, which is unique insofar "that you can never post the same image or the same post ever again" (Goldman, 2016). Thus, early reproductions of Pepe had to be different as he started to go viral. Pepe memes also began circulating in more mainstream social media sites like Twitter and Instagram and were posted by celebrities such as Katy Perry (2014) and Nicki Minaj (2014).

The fact that Pepe had gone mainstream did not sit well with many Reddit and 4chan users. One Reddit user reminisced of the times "when memes were only a 4chan thing" and declared Pepe dead; others in the same thread wrote "rip pepe" (DezBryantsMom, 2014). Rather than giving up, however, these users tried to reclaim Pepe by posting increasingly offensive pictures of Pepes to /r9k/, in an attempt to inoculate Pepe from mainstream usage. At first, the new Pepes, later reframed as "Rare Pepes," were vile and gross but not yet racist; they associated Pepe "with really gross stuff […] poop and pee, but then that somehow migrated into very racist Pepe drawings" (Goldman, 2016). Pepe went from grotesque to politically offensive, as Pepe's different iterations now had a Hitler mustache and haircut saying "kill jews man," wore a KKK white robe, and stood outside a Holocaust gas chamber with his mischievous look wearing a Nazi uniform ("Pepe the Frog," 2016). Slowly, Pepe's meaning started to shift from innocuousness to the racist and grotesque.

While some 4chan users were pranksters who treated racism as a joke (Goldman, 2016), members of the Alt-Right used Pepe memes not to offend but as a way to create

identification; they took Pepe "seriously to a degree, and used Pepe not as a joke" (Goldman, 2016). For instance, on July 22, 2015, an anonymous 4chan user posted a "Smug" Pepe looking like Trump as a man wearing a "sombrero" and a "poncho" and a woman wearing stereotypically Mexican clothes stood behind a fence titled "U.S. Border" ("First Trump Pepe," 2017). Trump Pepes started to proliferate until Donald Trump himself retweeted a photo of Pepe with Trump's signature golden hair, standing behind a podium with the seal of the President of the United States and red and white horizontal stripes in the background. This retweet amassed more than 8,000 additional retweets and more than 11,000 likes ("Donald Trump - Trump retweets," 2016). At this point, Pepe's transformation from an obscure cartoon comic to a proud Trump supporter was well on its way.

Yet, this transformation continued to face constant contestation. On September 27, 2016, the Anti-Defamation League declared Pepe a hate symbol ("Pepe the Frog," 2016). During the same month, the Hillary Clinton campaign posted an article on Pepe arguing that it was used by White Supremacists to expand their ideology (Kozlowska, 2016). After a brief but unsuccessful campaign of trying to reclaim Pepe as a "peaceful frog dude," Pepe's creator Matt Furie killed him by posting an image on his Tumblr of the funeral of a dead Pepe in a casket with a portrait next to him (Silva, 2017). The contestation for Pepe's meaning between the Anti-Defamation League and Internet users, the author and the Alt-Right, the Clinton and Trump campaigns expanded Pepe's lifespan longer than the life of an average meme.

Even though Furie tried to kill Pepe in a literary sense, his spirit continued to live. In January 18, 2018, a collection of Rare Pepes in the form of crypto-currencies were auctioned, where the most expensive "Pepe sold for 350,000 units of Pepe Cash," a kind of cryptocurrency, which "was worth $38,500 the day of the auction" (Klein, 2018). A complete new market exploded as original iterations of Pepe were sold as commodities amassing up to $1.2 million worth of his image (Roeder, 2018). The moderators of these markets have made clear that they do not want racist or even offensive Pepes to circulate in their markets ("Submit Your Rare Pepe – Rare Pepe Directory", 2018). Therefore, this development shows the fluidity in Pepe's meaning. Once Pepe moved to the realm of ideology, in other words, when Pepe was identified as a racist symbol by a large sector of the mainstream public, different stakeholders saw the need to address Pepe's link with its racism in trying to rearticulate his already contested meaning. Because artists and traders have a financial stake in the symbol, its contestation for meaning becomes even more prolonged. For many of these artists, it is in their best interest to reclaim Pepe as an art symbol rather than a racist symbol to increase their financial possibilities.

Pepe's evolution shows how an image's meaning evolves along with the speed, movement, and proliferation of memetic media. Pepe continues to circulate on the Internet and it is important to direct attention as to why this particular meme has survived the short attention-span of contemporary publics. In the next chapter, I will argue for the conceptualization of the memegraph and how it gives rise to the constitution and mobilization of publics. In the third chapter, I will do a close analysis of the birth and evolution of Pepe the Frog. As such, I will argue that Pepe's emotional distinctiveness

garnered initial attention and its ambiguity and contestation sustained attention through longer periods of time. Furthermore, I will argue that the speed in which Pepe circulated created fragmented publics as exemplified by Emoji Pepe used by White Nationalists, the central text that compiles the purported journey of Pepe into a god, and a cluster of Pepes being sold by crypto-artists. I will argue that Pepe as a text allowed for the constitution and mobilization of three different but overlapping publics. In the final chapter, I will connect the main theoretical strands of the memegraph, its relationship with other types of texts, and draw the implications for the memegraph beyond memes.

CHAPTER 2

FROM MEME TO MEMEGRAPH: IDEOGRAPHS, MEME THEORY, AND A NETWORKED ENVIRONMENT OF PUBLICS

Scholars have examined the case of Pepe,[1] but few have tracked the evolution of the meme from its birth to its continuing use as it relates directly to ideology. In this chapter, I turn to McGee's (1980) use of the ideograph to explore the ways in which the meme evolved into what I label a *memegraph*[2]. First, I define memes as a diffused unit of cultural transmission that varies, is selected, and retained by an audience who relates it to a group or clusters of other memes. This definition directs attention to the participatory culture of meme-making. Then, I review the literature on ideographs as contextualized in a networked environment where I argue that the role of attention is central to the development of memes. Attention, following Lanham (2006), is broadly conceptualized as the different ways people make sense of information in which rhetoric plays a central role. Following this definition, I argue that attention strengthens the ability of rhetors to circulate their ideology in a networked environment. Finally, I argue that as attention

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[1] Applegate and Cohen (2017) argue that Pepe shows how memes can resist commodification but ignore Pepe's connection with the Alt-Right. Literat (2018) argues that Pepe is a form of "online nonart or vernacular online creativity" in the context of art production. Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) argue that as spectacle, Pepe facilitated the reappropriation of content during the 2016 campaign. Finally, Nagle (2016), DenHoed (2017), and Malmgren (2017) offer commentary on Pepe, the Alt-Right, and the men's rights movement.

[2] If I were to favor accuracy over stylistic choice, the proper name for this concept should be ideomeme rather than memegraph. The non-meme aspect of the concept draws from McGee's (1980) discussion on ideology rather than the "graphic," written/verbal aspect of it. Ideomeme, however, does not carry the same stylistic connotation.

becomes the central component in meme (re)making, if sustained, attention is capable of constituting publics.

Meme Theory, Modes, Distinctiveness, And Human Agency

Drawing an analogy to the role of the gene in evolutionary theory, Dawkins (2016) defined the meme as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*" (p. 192). A meme can be an idea, it does not need to be an image. For example, Dawkins considered the idea of "God" a meme because it has proliferated throughout different cultures. Furthering Dawkins's theory, Blackmore (2000) contended that for evolution to occur "three processes [were] necessary but not sufficient […] variation, selection, and retention" (Spitzberg, 2014, p. 312). For instance, different religions vary in their iteration of the "God" meme, they select a particular interpretation of the "God" meme, and they retain that version through time. Adapting it to Internet memes, however, Shifman (2014) defined "memes not as single ideas or formulas that propagate well, but as *groups* of content items" that share content, form, and/or stance, and were "created with the awareness of each other" (p. 41). Extending the previous example, under this definition, Yahweh, Allah, or Zeus would not be considered independent memes, but they would be considered one meme under the term of "God." Shifman's definition moves our understanding of memes away from Dawkins's limited conception of the meme due to its determinism and limited scope on human agency. Rather than seeing memes as viral ideas infecting their hosts, Shifman sees memes as having a relationship with their audience but also a relationship with other memes.

Seeing memes as co-constitutive with an audience is not new. Hahner (2013) argued that Internet memes work "as forms of visual argument" through the audience's use of frames. Hahner (2013), drawing from Goffman, defined frames as the "normative schemes of interpretations that organize human perception" (p. 153). Thus, memes invite "ways of seeing [that] proliferate through the circulation of an image and change behavior by inviting the viewer to engage […] different frameworks" (p. 156). Memes have a perspective, an orientation, a shared grammar. Jenkins (2014) took it further and argued that the reason memes proliferate is not for its content but for the relationship that exists between the viewer, the meme, and the medium. Jenkins (2014) called this the meme's mode, the "manners or ways of engaging (image-)texts or, alternatively, as relational assemblages, such as the assemblage of image, medium, and viewer constituted in the processes of constructing and perceiving" (p. 443). In other words, each individual has a way of seeing memes, but this way of seeing is informed by the text, medium, and context. These ways of seeing, the meme's mode, regulate the meme's proliferation. For example, if I see a Pepe with a Hitler mustache, I think the meme is *racist*, so I decide not to recirculate it. On the other hand, if a 4chan user sees the same meme, they might think it is *funny*, so they decide to recirculate it. For Jenkins's (2014), it is not the meme itself that dictates whether a meme will proliferate or not, but its mode, the way of seeing, whether it is *racist* or *funny*, that dictates its recirculation. Moving beyond understanding memes as mere texts but co-constitutive with audiences shifts attention from a deterministic to a humanistic view on networks (Milner, 2015; Shifman, 2013). Rather than placing unwarranted agency to the text and/or the medium that renders networks

deterministic, a shift towards a humanistic view of networks gives agency to the rhetor in equal measure to the text, the context, the medium, and the audience.

To shift attention from memes as cultural units to a more constitutive role with audiences is not, however, to center human agency as the sole source of power in memes. As Kennerly and Pfister (2018) argued, "Nor does such a claim fetishize the agency of the maker: That any rhetor is but a point of articulation in a vast network of influences does not blur that point to nondistinction" (p. 212). In other words, the point is neither to conceptually give agents unlimited agency nor totally deprive them of it. Rather, it is to recognize that rhetorical texts not only exist between the text and context dichotomy but that rhetors also produce them. To make and circulate a meme "is an *assemblage* of the human and nonhuman, a point elided by the idea of a 'meme's eye view'" (Kennerly & Pfister, 2010, p. 224). Rhetors do rhetoric; participate in the participatory culture of the Internet (Literat, 2018). In the case of memes, "rhetors often seek the available memes of persuasion" (Kennerly & Pfister, 2010, p. 210). Thus, memes exist as text and context but always tethered by the imaginary of those who create and circulate them. I define memes as diffused units of cultural transmission that varies, is selected, and retained by an audience who relates it to a group or clusters of other memes.[3] This definition gives equal measure to the text and context, rhetor and audience in the construction for the meme's meaning. In the next section, I turn to McGee's (1980) conception of the ideograph and argue that ideographs complement meme theory.

[3] This definition aligns with Shifman's (2014) argument that we ought to see memes as groups rather than individual texts. In other words, a meme is not a meme until the "diffused unit of cultural transmission" is related and reappropriated to other memes.

Ideographs in a Networked Environment and the Role of Attention

This participatory culture of meme creation and circulation aligns with McGee's (1990) recognition of the fragmentation of public discourse. No longer living in a society where "finished discourse" was shared among "an essentially homogeneous culture," McGee (1990) argued that "the only way to 'say it all' in our fractured culture [was] to provide readers/audiences with dense, truncated fragments that cue *them* to produce a finished discourse in their minds" (p. 288). Rather than listening to Presidential speeches from start to end, for example, audiences now reconstructed the meaning of a speech from snippets heard from different mediums. These snippets or parts of a text, broadly conceptualized, are what McGee (1990) called fragments. In enthymematic fashion, McGee (1990) said, "text construction [was] something done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse" (p. 288). In the digital age, where the delineation between consumers and producers often collapses (Literat, 2018) and audience members rely on a shared "cognitive environment"[4] to argue (Tindale, 2017), fragments[5] become ever more salient.

However, McGee (1980) only recognized that verbal fragments could become ideographs. Relying only on the verbal, McGee (1980) defined ideographs as "an ordinary-language term found in political discourse […] a higher order abstraction

[4] Tindale (2017) defined cognitive environment as "a shared space in which epistemic and social values cohere, where ideas, beliefs, and 'facts' are held in common" (p. 582).
[5] Fragments are not only written texts but also include visuals. For instance, if an audience member sees one type of Pepe, they are not seeing a finished product. Instead, they are only seeing a part of the larger cluster of meme-instances that constitute Pepe. Therefore, they have to construct the larger meaning of Pepe based on one part of the whole.

representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal [as] it warrants the use of power […] and guides behavior and belief" while being "culture-bound" (p. 15). For instance, the term <liberty> can be used to "justify a Whig/Liberal government" for the purpose of ideological control as the audience fills the meaning of the truncated term (McGee, 1980, p. 13). Even though the ideograph <liberty> is found in everyday discourse, it is ill-defined, and it can be used to manufacture consent for behaviors that otherwise would be thought as immoral. When a politician invokes <liberty>, it is not to advance a specific policy argument but to call for collective commitment for whatever the politician is advocating. As seen with <liberty>, most interpretations of McGee's (1980) ideographs only focused on the verbal aspect of ideographs and not in the potential for the visual to become an ideograph.

In response, Edwards and Winkler (1997) argued that visuals can work ideographically.[6] Furthermore, Palczewski (2005) argued for the intersection between icons and visual ideographs, extending its usage not only to visuals but also to bodies. In Edwards and Winkler's (1997) study of the *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* image published in different editorial cartoons, they argued that this image worked as a representative form, defined as a visual image that "transcends the specifics of its immediate visual references and symbolic meaning, rhetorically identifies and delineates the ideals of the body politic" (p. 295). In other words, a visual image becomes a representative form when key elements of the image composition are repeated, thus becoming "abstracted into a symbol or concentrated image, and provides an explanatory

[6] See also Cloud (2004) for how images can index discursive ideographs.

model for human motive" (p. 296). In short, in a fragmented society, images as representative forms can work ideographically to guide behavior as the audience enthymematically "fills-in" the meaning of the visual ideograph. Repetitive form is a necessary condition for the visual to become an ideograph. The question that arises particular to the digital age is: How does an image become a visual ideograph?

Synchronic and Diachronic Attention in the Creation of an Ideograph

In his discussion of ideographs, McGee (1980) contends that a fragment can become an ideograph through its *synchronic* and *diachronic* dimensions. In this section, I will define the difference between synchronic and diachronic attention. Then, I will update these concepts to the digital age. In particular to memes, a meme needs to be distinctive to catch initial attention and be ambiguous and contested to maintain that initial attention through time.

McGee' (1980) distinction between the synchronic and the diachronic is based on the ideograph's place in *time*. Whereas the synchronic looks for the ideograph's meaning in the *present* in relation to other cluster of ideographs, the diachronic incorporates the cluster of meanings of the same ideograph that have been synchronically assigned across time. First, when an ideograph is looked by the present moment, "each ideograph is thus connected to all others as brain cells are linked by synapses, *synchronically* in one context at one specific moment" (p. 16, emphasis added). In other words, at any given moment, ideographs cluster with similar ideological terms in a web of meaning.

In the digital age, ideographs not only cluster in a web of meaning, but in a networked environment. The networked environment consists of the material digital

networks in the Internet (the medium), social networks that precede digital networks yet are embedded in digital networks (context), and networks of meaning shared by human minds (rhetor and audience). The medium works to constrain the number of interpretations that an ideograph can have. For instance, as J.D. Johnson (2017) argued, "algorithms shape the world in profound ways," albeit in often invisible ways (p. 197). They constrain, direct, hide, expose, and so on, the flow of information in a network. If I scroll down my Twitter feed, the content that I see is constrained by the people that I follow, the timelines from the people that I follow as they can retweet and share tweets in my timeline, and whatever Twitter's algorithms deem important for my profile. In this way, it is possible for a person to tweet a Pepe, for instance, that I never get to see it. With an overflow of information, it is impossible for the medium to communicate all information at once. Therefore, the medium will always constrain the flow of information by excluding some as it communicates other types of information.

Furthermore, the context in which the ideograph is embedded often precedes the digital network. It relies on preexisting social networks that inform the interpretation of the ideograph. Warner (2002) argued that "a public seems to be self-organized by discourse, but in fact requires preexisting forms and channels of circulation" (Warner, 2002, p. 75). These preexisting forms and channels of circulation are social, historical, cultural, etc. ways of interpretation. Whereas the medium constrains in a networked environment, the context informs the possible interpretations given to an ideograph.

Finally, rhetors and audience members participating in Internet culture have agency as they have to decide to create, circulate, and recirculate content in a network

(J.D. Johnson, 2017). Even as the rhetor and/or audience member is constrained by the medium, they still have power in deciding how to engage with the limited array of interpretations. For instance, it is true that the audience member does not have complete agency over, say, their Facebook feed, but they can still choose to consciously engage with a fragment; to "watch" rather than "look" (Azoulay, 2008). Multiple ways of engaging are still in the audience member's capacity. In short, the network environment helps the critic to assess how fragments appear in relation to other clusters of fragments when looked at synchronically. The medium, text and context, rhetor and audience, all play a role in how a given ideograph is interpreted, albeit in different ways.

A meme's *distinctiveness* becomes the first process that catches the attention of an audience in a networked environment when looked at synchronically. Distinctiveness calls for participation, and the easier it is to participate in meme-making, the more likely the meme will go viral (Shifman, 2014); even create a cult (Jenkins, 2008). In a networked environment, some memes have distinctiveness, "novelty," and stand out by users identifying the "boundaries between that meme and other memes" among different clusters of memes, or as Hahner (2013) called them, memeplexes[7] (Spitzberg, 2014, p. 318). For instance, even though Pepe the Frog and Kermit the Frog share in common their animal personification, they are distinct memes because of the boundaries that exist

[7] There is not much of a distinction between Hahner's (2013) use of memeplex and Shifman's (2014) use of meme. For both, unlike Dawkins (2016), the meme or memeplex consists of different units circulated within the same family tree of the meme. Hahner's use of memeplex draws attention to the distinction between Dawkins' definition of the meme as a single unit and her use of memeplex consisting of different units. Shifman's (2013) definition, on the other hand, goes directly against Dawkins' definition and aims to shift attention from seeing memes as single units to groups of units.

in style, type of humor, usage, etc. There is not a generalized boundary that makes any given meme distinctive. We could not say that style, or humor, or usage, etc. is the defining characteristic that any given meme has to achieve to be unique from other memes. Rather, depending on the specific meme and how it clusters with other memes, a set of boundaries are context specific to each meme. For example, as I will argue in Chapter 3, style and emotion are what make Pepe distinctive. However, the same could not be said for every other popular meme in existence.

After identifying the boundaries, Internet users engage in "meme creation [which] is based on an inherent duality: the demand to follow the rules and codes of meme use exists alongside a contrasting demand for innovation and creativity" (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015, p. 11). Distinctiveness, then, does not mean something "new" or "different," but refers to the breaking of the rules while simultaneously signifying that one knows the culturally-bound rules of a community (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015). It is to create a Pepe meme that is different enough to be distinct from other memes, but yet follows the sanctioned rules of meme-making as to become intelligible. Distinctiveness helps catch audience members' initial attention, but then allows them to participate in meme-making/breaking while following culturally-bound rules.

Second, going back to McGee (1980), when an ideograph finds its meaning in the past and "in isolation, each ideograph has a history, an etymology, such that current meanings of the term are linked to past usages of it *diachronically*" (McGee, 1980, p. 16, emphasis added). The critic, thus, has to reconstruct the meaning of the ideograph, in part, by looking at its "popular history […] novels, films, plays, even songs" where the

ideograph appears (McGee, 1980, p. 11). The diachronic analysis of the ideograph, thus is a rhetorical, as well as historical, project. According to D. Johnson (2007), this project has led to "critical deployments of the ideograph that tend to favor its historical dimensions and downplay its materiality" (p. 35). In other words, the primacy of diachronic analyses of the ideograph have undervalued its synchronic dimensions. To solve this problem, D. Johnson (2007) turned to memes as a way to complement ideographs because of their "emphasis on 'object-ness' of discourse, [which] reinstates the emphases on materiality, speed, and surface," that is, its synchronic dimensions (p. 38). Thus, in a digital age, meme theory can complement ideographic analysis. In fact, memes not only complement ideographs, but, as I will argue, can become ideographs themselves, giving rise to what I label the *memegraph*.

Diachronically speaking, what makes a meme last is a matter of ambiguity and contestation. As D. Johnson (2007) argued, memes "are aided by an apparent slipperiness or ambiguity because these debates over their meaning demand and command attention" (p. 42). This "unremitting debate about memes is what grants them consolidating social power" (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015). Thus, as there is "public recognition of such instability, [it motivates] the continued invention of arguments about [an] image through reproduction and creative manipulation" (Hahner, 2013, p. 153). In other words, ambiguity leads to contestation which leads to sustained attention and, thus, sustained participation. Therefore, one could say that participation through "appropriation and recontextualization appear to be central features of the transformation of visual images into representative forms" (Edwards & Winkler, 1997, p. 305). Not only does Edwards

and Winkler's (1997) theorization of repetitive form account for political cartoons but also memes for the meme's ability to become abstracted, recontextualized, and appropriated by different groups. From an initial synchronic attention to sustained diachronic participation, from distinctiveness to participation due to ambiguity and contestation, the meme becomes a memegraph: a diffused unit of cultural transmission that varies, is selected, and retained by an audience who relates it to a group or clusters of other memes for the purpose of ideological commitment. In the next section, I argue that along with ideographs, attention strengthens the ability of rhetors to circulate their ideology in a networked environment.

Networked Environment: Attention as the Mediating Variable

To better understand the internal processes of the rise of a memegraph, one has to adapt McGee's argument on "time" to the digital age by introducing how *attention* has changed the synchronic and diachronic aspects of fragments. McGee (1980) claimed that when analyzing ideographs, "time is an irrelevant matter *in practice*" (p. 12, emphasis in original). Drawing from Ortega, he argued that "all that diachronism accomplishes is to reconstruct other comparative 'presents' of the language as they existed in past" (as cited in McGee, 1980, p. 12). In other words, given that human beings only live in the present, McGee (1980) argues ideographs are "the building blocks" of ideology and are manifested in the *present* from a constructed, rather than literal, *past* (p. 7). When looking at the past, there is only a material transfer of meaning through the mediation of symbols. For instance, when looking at the original Pepe (Appendix A) in relation to Angry Pepe (Appendix A), I am not extracting the meaning of the original Pepe into the later iteration

of Angry Pepe, but rather, my mind is rhetorically constructing the past in the present and judging them in relation to each other. To understand what Pepe means in the present, I judge them synchronically. There is a paradox here: Even though ideographs are built by the rhetorical force of the past (McGee, 1980, p. 12), the past is always accessed in the present. How, then, do we construct presents from the past and pasts in the present in the age of networked rhetorics?

Attention starts to answer this question. In a networked society, "attention is the commodity in short supply" (Lanham, 2006, p. xi). As such, "if attention is now at the center of the economy rather than stuff, then so is style. It moves from the periphery to the center. Style and substance trade place" (Lanham, 2006, p. xii). This inversion of values, led Lanham (2006) to posit a central paradox in today's society: just as "stuff" (material goods) seem to abound, "we seem to be abolishing it" (p. 1). In other words, when "stuff" abounds, adding material goods to the economy only makes a marginal difference. Instead, the way we talk, we interpret, we assign meaning, i. e. how "we do rhetoric" is what is central in making meaning. Thus, it is the "fluff," i. e. attention, that has cash value in today's society.

As such, to direct attention synchronically (at any given moment in the present time) one needs rhetoric. As Pfister (2014) aphoristically said, "more information demands more tools to focus attention demands more rhetoric" (p. 31). Building on Lanham (2006), Pfister (2014) argued that "rhetoric shapes not only *what* we think about, but *how* we think about it" (p. 30, emphasis in the original). In Burkean fashion, "rhetoric directs our attention to *one* way of perception, thinking, and feeling, and not another" (p.

31, emphasis added). Attention is, thus, synchronically zero-sum, e. g. I can only attend to one Pepe "now" and to a second Pepe in a different "now," but never to both at the same "now." As such, rhetoric modulates our attention; it "shapes *how* we attend phenomena through the valences, emphases, and weightings involved in signification" (Pfister, 2014, p. 31). Synchronically speaking, McGee (1980) might have deduced that as we direct our attention towards an ideological "building block," it garners strength (p. 7). To drop the metaphor of building blocks, since the construction metaphor works diachronically and structurally rather than synchronically and ecologically, the synchronic is a networked environment[8] constituted of fragments that are strengthened as attention is directed to them. Fragments living in a field of potential (Jenkins, 2014) circulate with attention as others remain in static rest by inattention. Just like *Peter Pan*'s Tinkerbell, fragments can go out of existence if they are deprived of attention. Thus, synchronic attention directed at any given moment constructs the meaning of each fragment through time, that is, diachronically.

Indeed, in a networked environment, the synchronic works at the mercy of attention. As long as there is attention, there will be light. Looking at ideographs with this model grounded in attention allows the critic to more easily track the changes of each fragment diachronically. It used to be the case that ideographs were constructed over long periods of time. <Equality>, for instance, an ideograph that dates back to 1398 (OED),

[8] Relate earlier that the networked environment is not only the material constrains of digitalities, but also shared "cognitive environments" of human minds (Tindale, 2017). Therefore, I am defining attention along psychological (Hahner, 2013; Jenkins, 2014; Tindale, 2017), technological (J. D. Johnson, 2017; see also Carey, 1967 for a discussion on Harold Adams Innis' soft determinism), and social/rhetorical (Pfister, 2014) lines.

has held its rhetorical power over long periods of time (Condit & Lucaites, 1993). In the networked age, however, time is not stretched out but diachronically condensed.[9] Each iteration of each fragment changes faster as attention is limited by time. Thus, in a way, the creation, transformation, and stabilization of an ideograph can now be tracked "in real time." By tracking the evolution of Pepe, from his symbolic birth to his symbolic death to his symbolic resurrection, I plan to illustrate how ideographs have changed in the digital age. Moreover, this synthesis of the literature on memes, ideographs, and attention is meant to serve as a model for analyzing future visual ideographs in the digital age. Finally, it also shows how the medium in which visual ideographs circulate change the character and speed for each visual ideograph that gets created, reproduced, and sustained through time.

From the Synchronic to the Diachronic: The Rise of Publics through Sustained Attention

In the first half of this chapter, I have argued for the introduction of the memegraph by centering attention to the creation and sustainment of a meme. This analysis, however, misses a crucial aspect of McGee's (1980) ideographs that are also shared by the memegraph: its "function as [it] guides, warrants, reasons, or excuses for behavior or belief" (McGee, 1980, p. 6). Therefore, in the second half of this chapter, I turn to the meme's ability to condense and mobilize publics. I argue that attention is central to the rise of publics along with a rhetor, text, and discourse. Then, I argue that the disintegration of dialogue along with the ubiquity of visual communication favor synchronic modes of attention. I define synchronic modes of attention as the ways in

[9] I thank Catherine Palczewski for inspiration into this insight.

which attention is selected towards a fragment in the present moment in relation to other fragments. Finally, I argue that active participation and the text's ability to change the medium are necessary to diachronically sustain publics through time. I define diachronic modes of attention as the ways in which attention is sustained through time.

Rhetor, Text, and Discourse: Attention as Central to the Constitution of Publics

Attention is the central component in the constitution of publics. In fact, without attention a public cannot exist. As Warner (2002) argued, "attention is the principal sorting category by which members and nonmembers are discriminated" (p. 61). If a person is not paying attention to what members of a public are, they are left out of the public. In other words, by definition, one cannot be in a public if one does not pay attention to what members in named public are paying attention. There are levels of attention and engagement, but even minimal attention is enough to constitute a public. In other words, "merely paying attention can be enough to make you a member" (Warner, 2002, p. 53). Take, for instance, a student attending a free lecture on campus outside of class. In this lecture, the student falls asleep. Is this student still part of the public? The answer is unclear, but according to Warner (2002), "the act of attention involved in showing up is enough to create an addressable public" (p. 61). To attend is to pay attention, which is a sufficient condition to be part of a public. In the next couple of paragraphs, I will delineate how the text, the rhetor, the audience, and the context all collaborate in the constitution of publics.

First, to gain attention, a public needs to emerge around a text, or a fragment for the modern public. Publics have an inherent paradox to them: Because they are

discursively constituted, the rhetor addressing a public does not have a public until they communicate them into being. As Warner (2002) argued, "a public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself […] It exists by virtue of being addressed" (p. 50). Thus, when a rhetor is trying to address a public through discourse, they only have a *notional* public in mind (Warner, 2002). It is first an *act of imagining* from the part of the rhetor to start constituting a public (Asen, 2002). Imagining, however, "does not emerge through the aggregation of individual thoughts and perceptions. Rather, collective imagining takes shape through discursive engagement among interlocutors in contexts of varying structure, scope, and formality" (Asen, 2002, p. 349). In other words, even though imagining occurs in the mind of a single rhetor, that rhetor lives within a networked environment that they influence and are influenced by. Both the rhetor and the audience, through the text, start to constitute a public. Thus, for a public to exist, there needs to be a text calling an audience's attention and a rhetor creating a text to call an audience.

Just as a rhetor lives within a networked environment, a text is embedded in a larger network of discourses. The public is directly tied with the text. It exists as a rhetor directs the public's attention towards a particular text. In other words, the public does "not exist outside rhetoric, merely addressed by it, but lives inside rhetoric" (Charland, 1987, p. 147). A public is called into being by discourse, and thus is carefully woven into the rhetoric of the text. For Charland (1987), "the moment [an audience] enters into the world of language, they are subjects; the very moment of recognition of an address constitutes an entry into a subject position to which inheres a set of motives that render a

rhetorical discourse intelligible" (p. 147). The constituted public gains a set of goals and values. In short, "to be constituted as a subject in a narrative is to be constituted with a history, motives, and a *telos*" (Charland, 1987, p. 140). A sense of meaning is gained by living within rhetoric. In short, a rhetor, who is influenced by the networked environment they live in, creates a text. The text, just as the rhetor is influenced by the networked environment, is influenced by a larger discourse. Altogether, rhetor, text, and discourse, call an audience's attention and constitute a public. This section, then, delineated the dynamics of the birth of a public. The question as to *why* but not *how* publics emerge in this particular way in the digital age, however, still remains.

Synchronic Attention: Disintegration of Dialogue and Panmediation in the Public Sphere

The previous section about the synchronic selection of attention in memes described *how* attention is selected at any given moment. This section attempts to answer *why* is attention the central component in the constitution of publics. To this question, I offer two answers: because of the disintegration of the unified and dialogic public sphere favors synchronic modes of attention and because the importance of visuals in the public sphere also favor synchronic modes of attention. In this section, I argue that we ought to see the public sphere as functioning through dissemination rather than dialogue.

In a fragmented society, the creation, constitution, and survival of a public no longer relies on the Habermasian, face-to-face, dialogic, and rational public sphere but rather in one based on many-to-many public dissemination (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002). Having conceptualized the public sphere as singular and universal, rational and deliberative, dialogic and face-to-face, Habermas (1993) spurred an explosion in public

sphere scholarship. Scholars, however, have recognized its inaccessibility, both normatively and descriptively, in a fragmented society. For instance, in response to Habermas' (1993) articulation of the public sphere, Fraser (2007) contended that rather than having one universal public sphere, multiple publics, including "subaltern counterpublics" do and ought to take its place (p. 527). Subaltern counterpublics, according to Fraser (2007), are "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (p. 527). This critique, however, still relies on dialogue, albeit fragmented dialogue, to understand publics. As Warner (2002) argued, Fraser's conception of counterpublics "sound[s] like the classically Habermasian description of rational-critical publics with the word *oppositional* inserted" (p. 85). For Fraser, according to Warner's critique, subaltern counterpublics still deliberate rationally but in opposition to a larger public. Although Fraser's conceptualization of counterpublics based on dialogue is still relevant in today's society, a complementary model of publics based on dissemination, however, becomes more apt to understand publics in the digital age.

Displacing a more unified and dialogic public sphere, new media came to diffuse discourse by enabling individual agents to disseminate information to many audience members. The power of dissemination used to be "simply based on access to and control of information. There [was] an insider/outsider dynamic to traditional models of expertise—some people have it, and some have not, and the have-nots are necessarily reliant on the haves" (Pfister, 2011, p. 222). However, with the advancement of the

Internet, networks, and an increase in information, this model became obsolete. As Pfister (2009) argued, “as information becomes increasingly available, interlocutors lose the edge historically provided by knowledge differentials. Instead, advantage goes to those that can creatively connect the information that everyone has access to” (p. 224). In other words, rather than having a centralized agent diffusing information to many, many diffuse information to many others. Networks, in this case, rather than centralized agents, have a stronger impact on the reproduction of the message. In other words, the gatekeeper loses power to the medium. In a McLuhan-esque (1994) sense, the medium becomes more influential in setting and constraining dissemination. For instance, when an anonymous user posts a new Pepe to Reddit, the network takes over the life of the meme. Once the meme lives in the Internet, different users can access it without the need of a gatekeeper. In fact, an Internet user can *google* “Pepe the Frog” and be able to see the meme years after the original posting. In contrast, if the meme is posted to 4chan, the lifespan of the meme is shorter unless it gets circulated to another network. 4chan is known for its ephemerality, “the site has no archive, limiting the amount of threads existing in each board and deleting those with the least activity (usually after no more than a few hours)” (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015, p. 5). Unlike a mass-media newspaper, where a gatekeeper is needed to reproduce the message, as it is the case not only of editors but the production of physical newspapers, there need not be a centralized agent behind the reproduction of the networked message. The message reproduces just within a network. Thus, the Internet gives rise to networked rhetorics; it “indexes a set of communication practices under the conditions of networked mediation” (Pfister, 2014, p.

10). The Internet, as a networked medium, directs the flow of information in some ways rather than others.

This model of many-to-many forms of disseminated information has advantages over dialogic deliberation. Moving away from dialogue reigning "supreme in the imagination of many as to what good communication might be" (p. 62), Peters (2000) argued that "the lament over the end of conversation and the call for refreshed dialogue alike miss the virtues inherent in nonreciprocal forms of action and culture" (p. 34). For instance, dissemination's dictum is, as "Jesus concludes, Those who have ears to hear, let them hear" (Peters, 2000, p. 51). In a bourgeois public sphere "only an elite few" get admitted through rational dialogic face-to-face communication (Peters, 2000, p. 53). In contrast, dissemination is "radically public, exoteric mode of dispersing meanings— even though the hearers often fail to catch the hint—in which audience sorts out the significance for itself" (p. 53). It has the potential to be more democratic than dialogic deliberation because it empowers the audience to decide whether to engage with a text or not. Dissemination casts a wide net, "celebrates broadcasting as an equitable mode of communication that leaves the harvest of meaning to the" text co-constituted by an audience (Peters, 2000, p. 52). Thus, it recognizes agency back to the audience. In other words, "The hearer must complete the trajectory begun with the first casting. Though much is thrown, little is caught" but what is caught is worthy because through the audience's choice to attend to this mode of communication, it empowers end-users (Peters, 2000, p. 52).

In this model of many-to-many forms of dissemination, synchronic forms of attention are favored. Dialogue requires to command your attention to one source of information and engage with it. Since synchronic attention is zero sum, this means that a rhetor or an audience member could only pay attention to one source of information. In the many-to-many networked environment, the audience member floats in an abundance of fragments lying around them and they have to shift their attention from one source of information to another. With an abundance of information, it is nearly impossible to engage in one-to-one forms of communication for any sustained period of time. Therefore, it is easier to move from one point in the network to the next one to one cluster to the other. Rather than being constrained in one place to dialogue with another person, dissemination allows audience members to move from one set of discourses to the next as they scroll down a Twitter timeline, for instance. Movement is favored in this model.

Furthermore, in this model of dissemination, the preponderance of visuals make synchronic attention more likely. New technologies have made images more likely to appear in the public sphere, or to borrow DeLuca and Peeples's (2002) term, the public screen. The public screen, DeLuca and Peeples (2002) argued in supplementing Habermas' public sphere, is "a constant current of images and words, a ceaseless circulation abetted by the technologies of television, film, photography, and the Internet" (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 135). Rather than dialogic, "the public screen is an accounting that starts from the premise of dissemination, of broadcasting" (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 130). Since "television and the Internet in concert have fundamentally

transformed the media matrix that constitutes our social milieu, producing new forms of social organization and new modes of perception," a new understanding of the public sphere was necessary (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 131). Thus, "these technologies' speed, stream of images, and global reach create an ahistorical, acontextual flow of jarring juxtapositions" (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 135). Fragments constantly flow through public screens letting audience members direct their attention from one set of them to another.

The public screen promotes a mode of perception that could best be characterized as 'distraction'" (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 135). Distraction, however, is not "lack of attention but a necessary form of perception when immersed in the technologically induced torrent of images and information that constitutes public discourse in the 20th and 21st centuries" (p. 135). In this way, a citizen in today's society can potentially read a headline in an airport's television, watch a TV news program in their laptop once they get in the airplane, and glance at a different news story from the neighbor's TV streaming. This shortens the public attention-span as "speed and images, singly and in concert, annihilate contemplation" (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 135). In short, the public screen, "In comparison to the rationality, embodied conversations, consensus, and civility of the public sphere, […] highlights dissemination, image, hypermediacy, spectacular publicity, cacophony, distraction, and dissent" (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 145). In other words, it forces audience members to use synchronic attention to differentiate what is important.

Deluca and Peeple's (2002) articulation of the public screen, however, did not originally account for the networked digital technologies prevalent in the Internet,

particularly social media. As Ewalt, Ohl, & Pfister (2013) argued, “The public screen, as an artifact of the mass media, has been decentered in favor of a world of public screens animated by digitally networked communication technologies” (p. 187). These networked technologies allow for different modes of communication. Whereas the public screen favors violent images, as they are able to “critique through spectacle, not critique versus spectacle” (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 134), “the ability of individuals to create their own networked media ecologies allows for gentler images to gain public attention, albeit with smaller circulation” (Ewalt, Ohl, & Pfister, 2013, p. 187). In other words, whatever is more salient and produces spectacle is favored in the public screen but not necessarily in the networked public screen. Participants in these networks can communicate with each other almost immediately and engage in spaces of flows. For Ewalt, Ohl, and Pfister (2013), “flows emanating from networked public screens are multidirectional: individual citizens produce images that circulate through complex networks, moving laterally as well as vertically” (p. 188). In other words, the spaces in which images operate are many-to-many rather than one-to-one or one-to-many. The networked aspect of the public screen just exacerbates the necessity of synchronic attention due to the interconnectedness of fragments, which makes it easier for audience members to move from one fragment to another.

Finally, an aspect that both public screens and networked public screens failed to account for was their panmediation. Brunner & DeLuca (2016) argued that “panmediation, which suggests that, with the emergence of smartphones, we live in mobile spaces of multiple media, immersed in the cloud of Wi-Fi” (p. 286). In other

words, panmediation means that we are always connected to the cloud. The flow of images is even more immediate and abundant. As Brunner & DeLuca (2016) argued, images in a panmediated environment "quickly flit across screens and link disparate networks [which] is far different from the world we inhabited 20, or even 10, years ago […] before images began ceaselessly circulating on public screens, and before smartphones made public screens ubiquitous" (Brunner & Deluca, 2016, p. 282). Visuals are favored "in this environment because they can transmit affect and information quickly. Unlike text, which must be read in a linear fashion, the multiple components of images can be engaged simultaneously, offering a quick and compact communicative package" (p. 284). A user of Twitter can laugh, like, and retweet a meme almost instantly as they continue to scroll down for the next visual to recirculate. They use their synchronic attention to sort information quickly. It is in panmediated networks that theorists "address flows of images rather than singular images" (p. 297). Visuals due to their speed, movement, and abundance make audience members use synchronic attention to differentiate between flows of information, and now that it is panmediated, they do it virtually all the time. Panmediated networked public screens, then, constitute publics through screens all the time. Publics ebb and flow from the torrent of fragments circulating in them. It is diachronic attention, however, that sustains publics.

Before discussing diachronic attention, however, it is not only crucial to include visuals in the study of publics, but to make them central. As Finnegan and Kang (2004) argued, "To the extent that rhetorical scholars rely on a largely talk-and-text model of communication, they may be blind to other ways of envisioning publicity, and their

ability to embrace the hybridity and multiplicity of discursive forms will be limited" (p. 378). Thus, critics will fail to "sight the public" (Finnegan & Kang, 2004). Rather than subjecting images to the logics of iconoclasm, making "visuality subservient to dominant linguistic/rational norms," (p. 396) critics should embrace iconophilia, acceptance towards "images that respects their movements and transformations, challenges conceptions of image culture as a scene in which passive viewers are captive to an endless stream of images passing before their eyes (à la the residents of Plato's cave)" (Finnegan & Kang, 2004, p. 395). Rather than looking at fragments in the way Dawkins's (2016) saw memes, where an endless stream of funny memes hop from brain to brain amusing their passive and agentless hosts, fragments should be seen as products of a participatory culture where producers actively create, circulate, and reference other fragments and their visuality while consumers enthymematically participate in the fragment's constitution of a public. Visuals, in this way, actively construct a public as an audience attends to them and chooses to participate in their construction of meaning.

Diachronic Attention: Active Participation and Changing of Environment

Thus far, a rhetor, who lives within a panmediated networked environment, creates a text which participates in a larger discourse. This text calls upon an audience, who also lives within a panmediated networked environment that does not rely on dialogue but on an endless stream of disseminated fragments abundant in visuals. The stream of fragments forces the audience to use their synchronic attention and thus attend from one fragment to another. There are texts, however, that constitute publics and are not merely ignored for the next text. How, then, is attention sustained to the point of the

constitution of a public? To answer this question, I argue that to sustain attention, fragments need to activate diachronic attention, which consists of active participation from the public and its ability to change the environment around them.

First, to sustain a public, a text must engage its members in diachronic attention, attention through time. Sustained attention is necessarily diachronic because it needs to flow through time. To do so, it must call the constituted public into action. As Warner (2002) argued, "the existence of a public is contingent on its members' activity" (p. 61). Renewed attention requires renewed action. As Charland (1987) argued, "the tautological logic of constitutive rhetoric must necessitate action in the material world; constitutive rhetoric must require that its embodied subjects act freely in the social world to affirm their subject position" (Charland, 1987, p. 141). Otherwise, a public only exists in the imaginary of the rhetor and those captivated by the text for just a moment.

Active participation connects isolated individuals into a distinguishable networked public. As Pfister (2014) argued, "Only with rhetorical action do citizens focus their attention on a particular issue and thus form a public" (p. 35). Focusing their attention towards an issue, a public performs an "active engagement of the collective imagination [which] occurs in situations where advocates explicitly call upon their audiences to rethink relations to one another" (Asen, 2002, p. 351). If a rhetor and text are successful in their call for a public to rethink their relations to one another, they are making their audience observe each other. This creates a tighter networked public that lasts longer because when we are observed, "we socialize" the relationship (Lanham, 2006, p. 10). As Lanham (2006) argued, "We share it with the observer and by doing so it

becomes more real. Because more real, it becomes more worth attending to, more interesting" (p. 10). And so you become more entrenched in the public. Just as fragments need synchronic attention to survive, publics "must continually predicate renewed [diachronic] attention, and cease to exist when attention is no longer predicated" (Warner, 2002, p. 61). A public, thus, discursively constituted requires diachronic attention to keep existing, and active participation allows the reification of a public.

Second, publics are more likely to survive not only if the fragment is able to adapt to the environment but also change it. Fragments change networked environments through discourse. Since publics are constituted discursively, as discourse changes meaning, it changes a public and the network environment in which the public is embedded. Thus, the better a text is at not only adapting but at changing the environment for the convenience of the survival of a public, the more likely the public is to last. There are countless ways in which a fragment can change the environment for the survival of the public, but one way is through circulation. When a public participates in a text's circulation, however, they change the meaning for "even acts of sharing the 'same' meme [as there] are variations, since the meaning of a given meme changes in context, in time, and in space" (Kennerly & Pfister, 2018, p. 208). For example, if a Pepe appears at the Anti-Defamation League website, it does not call forth a public. But as Pepe recirculates in 4chan and White Supremacist websites, the meme reinforces the sense of identification in a public and keeps the public alive. In other words, it is the text's ability over the rhetor and/or audience to influence the meaning of the networked environment that dictates the likelihood of a public's survival.

A different way in which a fragment allows publics to survive is by institutionalizing the public around a text. Given that a text has survived long enough for the public around it to long for its continuing survival, people in the public look for ways to make the public "official" or "legitimate." Members of the public institute mechanisms, such as private message groups, to make a tighter community that is not completely reliant to the text's continuing circulation. They socialize their relations to each other, though with an understanding that it is the text that first bound them together, going beyond the text's need for survival. Although publics go in and out of existence around texts in the panmediated networked public screen, the institutionalized public survives because there is something at stake for the members of the public beyond the adherence to a text. For instance, a public might create an economic market around the text so members of the public have money at stake in the survival of the public. In sedimenting these different mechanisms within a public to institutionalize it, the public becomes more likely to survive as it does not have to depend on the text's continuing circulation to survive.

Just as memes, publics rely on attention to exist and survive. Without attention to the text's calling for a public, a public cannot exist. New technologies now favor synchronic modes of attention, which means that at the micro-level individuals direct their attention from one text to the next one. At the level of publics, however, a networked relation between the text and other texts, the text and audience members, and audience members with other audience members make synchronic attention social. By making it social, publics are more likely to persist. The synchronic, just as it did with

memes, builds upon the diachronic. Finally, as a text changes its environment, it makes a public more likely to survive.

Research Questions

In the age of attention, time becomes crucial. The past, present, and future become insufficient descriptors for the age of networked environments. Consequently, the distinction between the synchronic and diachronic attempt to describe how attention gets selected and sustained through time. Using memes as a fitting example for these processes, this project attempts to describe and explain the ways in which memes circulate in a networked environment from their birth to its continuing existence. With this in mind, I offer the first research question guiding this thesis:

1. In a networked environment, how does a meme get created, circulated, and sustained through time?

Furthermore, if a meme is sustained for a long period of time, it can constitute a public. It is also crucial to better understand the relationship between time and the creation and mobilization of publics. In the age of networked environments, a public can go through a radical transformation in a short amount of time. Through the panmediated networked public screen, members of society are constantly publicized but only few publics survive in the shortening attention span of this age. With this in mind, I offer the second research questions guiding this thesis:

2. In a networked environment, how does a meme constitute, mobilize, and sustain a public through time?

In the next chapter, I will do a close analysis of the birth and evolution of Pepe the Frog. As such, I will argue that Pepe's emotional distinctiveness garnered initial attention and its ambiguity and contestation sustained attention across time. I will do a close analysis of tweets created and circulated by Trump supporters with the frog emoji signifying Pepe. In it, I will argue that Pepe as a text allowed for the constitution and mobilization of publics.

CHAPTER 3

HOW PEPE BECAME A MEMEGRAPH

In this chapter, I analyze the Pepe the Frog meme. I argue that the meme's emotional distinctiveness allowed Pepe to catch initial (synchronic) attention, while his participation in the *Ugly Internet* aesthetic legitimized this attention. Then, I argue that Pepe's ambiguity as a signifier enabled contestation between Pepe's original author and meme users promoting racist Pepes, which led to sustained attention to, and participation in, the meme. The escalating contestation, the appropriation and decontextualization of Pepe for divergent ideological purposes, and the use of Pepe in support of a collection of ill-defined normative goals maintained lasting attention toward the meme, and eventually made him a memegraph. Finally, once Pepe became a memegraph, I analyze Trump supporters' use of Pepe on Twitter to trace the creation of new publics around Pepe and the fragmentation of public discourse. Because Pepe circulated at such a fast pace, each iteration narrowed the possible interpretations for his meaning constituting divergent publics. As Pepe shifted meaning through three different lanes, he condensed three different but overlapping publics: Pepe as a symbol for the White Nationalist Alt-Right, Pepe as a god in the Cult of Kek, and Pepe as crypto-art in the blockchain.

Distinctiveness: Pepe the "Feels Good Man," the Sad, and the Ugly Internet Aesthetic

What is it about Pepe that was able to command and maintain initial attention? Meme-users' created an emotional vocabulary with Pepe that grabbed synchronic attention. This gave him an initial advantage for survival over other memes. To legitimate

this initial attention, meme-users conformed Pepe to the community-bounded rules of meme-making better than other memes.

In the networked environment of 4chan, Pepe had to compete for users' attention against a plethora of other images. Although in a visual culture images garner attention more readily than texts, Pepe had little advantage in this realm since 4chan is a deeply visual forum where "each thread must be initiated with an image in its opening post" (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015, p. 5). Thus, Pepe had to be a distinct image amongst an abundance of other meme-like images. Pepe's success at catching initial synchronic attention lies in his ability to convey a unique emotion applicable to a wide array of situations. The first Pepe posted on 4chan, *Feels Good Man Pepe* (Appendix A), shows the simple-minded hedonistic happiness of a stoner, as Furie intended Pepe to be (Cohen, 2016). The viewer is able to recognize the specificity of Pepe's emotion. Pepe's big eyes, dilated pupils, and statement that it "feels good man," prompt the audience to share Pepe's feeling of relief. The statement originates in Pepe's answer to his friend's comment, "I heard you pull your pants all the way down to go pee" (Furie, 2006). In the initial comic, Pepe simply embraces a hedonistic pleasure in pulling his pants all the way down to pee. However, the subsequent use of Pepe as a sign of relief shows that the "feels good man" statement can refer to a wide array of situations. For instance, if I were to get tenure, I could use *Feels Good Man Pepe* to inform my friends and family rather than explicitly text that I am relieved. The drawing becomes an emotion that is applicable beyond the original meme instance.

Furthermore, subsequent iterations of Pepes distinctly show one particular emotion at a time, thus creating an emotional vocabulary capable of communicating a wide spectrum of human emotions (Applegate & Cohen, 2017). Pepe became his own emotional language that could be used beyond a particular meme instance. In another iteration, *Sad Pepe* (Appendix A), with his big black eyes looking down and his lips closed, contemplates and evokes deep sadness (pepe-leaker, 2015). A universal emotion such as sadness is applicable to a near infinite array of situations. In a conversation captured from 4chan, an anonymous user ponders, "in a universe that is 14 billion years old. What could species learn, create, and do that has 2 or 3 billion year head start on us?" (Sad Pepe Usage, 2016; see Appendix A). To which another anonymous poster replies, "they probably have better memes" with a faded image of *Sad Pepe*. The joke here is self-referential and would not work without Pepe. Pepe's profound sadness adds different layers of meaning as the image can be read as genuine sadness hidden in irony. Following the "logic of the lulz," this meme is a façade for hedonistic enjoyment concealing deep sadness (Milner, 2015). According to Milner (2015), the lulz, similar to shitposting, is an "amusement at others' distress [that] can be employed both to commit great identity antagonisms and to defend those antagonisms as 'just joking'" (p. 136). In this case, the "lulz" come from the sadness that is to contemplate our limited existence in an infinite vast universe, yet there is joy in making fun of such realization. For those who do not follow the logic of the lulz, the alien saying "humans are a bunch of normies," found themselves not connecting with the joke because of their lack of shared knowledge around "normies," a term the people around 4chan use for people who do not abide by

the shared norms of the community. This creates a stronger identity for the group, while alienating others. The conversation is only possible because there is a distinctive emotion portrayed by Pepe that commands attention, albeit subject to different interpretations of given emotion.

This emotional vocabulary created with Pepe not only commands initial attention of individuals, but of larger groups of people. *Angry Pepe* (Appendix A), for instance, with his closed-squinting eyes, his reptile tongue, his popping veins, his little lift-up hands, and the red aura that accompanies him all point towards one particular and unequivocal emotion: rage. The fact that his rage is not directed at anything in particular allows meme-users to direct it to whatever they deem worthy of outrage. Rage can be used as a collective emotion to command the attention of a group rather than individuals. For 4chan users, for instance, this outrage was directed towards normies. The "Fucking Normies! REEEEEE!" phrase became a memeable expression along with *Angry Pepe* (REEEEEEE, 2015). Because REEEEEE! is not easily linked to rage such as the image, only people within the community will understand the power that the text adds to the image. Furthermore, even though 4chan members will use the "Fucking Normies! REEEEEE!" meme when an *individual* breaks the rules of the community, referring to them as normies suggests that this is a condemnation of a *group*. 4channers are not condemning an individual user, they are condemning "normies." Conversely, the use of the meme is not only a reflection of an anonymous user policing the boards of 4chan, but it is the reflection of an individual user speaking for the imagined rage of a larger group populating the boards of 4chan. By directing outrage towards those who are deemed to be

outside the community, i. e. normies, these users appropriate Pepe's emotional vocabulary. It is not only that rage is a distinctive emotion that catches initial attention, but that this rage is part of an emotion felt by a larger group.

As Pepe developed an emotional vocabulary, 4chan users started to interpret these emotions in favor of their own community. Unlike earlier iterations of *Feels Good Man Pepe* or *Sad Pepe*, 4channers used *Angry Pepe* not only to show membership to the community, but also to police those who did not abide by the community sanctioned rules of the site. *Smug Pepe* showed how this metamorphosis was applicable to even narrower instances that applied directly to the sanctioned rules of the community.

Even though *Smug Pepes* were less adaptable to a wider range of situations, they proliferated in part because they conformed to the norms and logics of the community. *Smug Pepe* (Appendix A) became a new iteration of Pepe signifying mischievousness. With his chin resting on his curled-up left hand, his barely squinting eyes, and his lips forming a slight smile, *Smug Pepe* is reminiscent of the stereotypical and mischievous teenager ready to cause trouble (JoeDaEskimo, n. d.). *Smug Pepe*, then, represents a mischievous "playful hurt" that is applicable beyond the original meme instance. To be smug, a feeling of superiority, and mischievous, the feeling of superiority because one is about to hurt the other, is not an emotion as adaptable as happiness, sadness, or rage. However, it can happen often when those emotions are valued within a community. Both are useful for shitposting because it follows the logic of offending someone for humor's sake. It is meant to hurt but in a playful way. As *Smug Pepe* participated in 4chan's logic

of shitposting, it gave Pepe an edge over those memes that did not conform to the community's bounded rules.

For example, in a text conversation (Appendix A), a user reimagined a *Smug Pepe*; he is about to make a joke, but the other person does not know it. The sender says: "I am making dinner tonight you should come." *Smug Pepe* responds: "Okay sure yes." The sender says: "I'm making spaghetti and meatballs," to which Pepe responds: "Swaghetti and memeballs." Finally, the sender looks upset and says: "You are uninvited" and we see a *Sad Pepe* on the ground with spaghetti and meatballs coming out of his pants' pocket (Appendix A). In this exchange, Pepe's mischievousness is playful yet meant to hurt. Smugness is a sense of superiority from knowing something that the other does not know, but when that knowledge is meant to hurt it becomes mischievousness. When *Smug Pepe* says, "Okay sure yes," he knows that he is setting up a joke in which the punchline is the sender getting annoyed. This is central to shitposting because the goal is to offend or even just annoy to get a laugh. Pepe's humor comes at the expense of offending, or at least annoying, another person. This incentivizes lack of respect for the other person in support of a laugh, making it fit right into 4chan's shared norms. As the name also signals, "smugness" shows superiority towards the receiver of this iteration of the meme. In the text conversation, *Smug Pepe* holds power over the original sender because he knows something that the other person does not. Smugness becomes mischievousness when Pepe enjoys the pain of the other; the meme becomes a visual symbol of a kind of *schadenfreude*. By linking smugness to mischievousness, Pepe

has yet another emotion that can be applicable to more, albeit narrow, contexts beyond one particular instance.

4chan users could not rely on emotional distinctiveness alone to maintain initial attention because a meme's distinctive emotional appeal is not a sufficient condition to synchronically command attention in a networked environment. The meme has to abide by shared norms, contexts, grammars, forms, syntaxes, rules etc. of the *memesphere* while breaking them just enough to make them novel (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015). Therefore, there is always a tension between the novel and the familiar in meme-making. The novel aspects of the meme have consequences for the catching of attention while the familiar conventions of meme-making have consequences for participation. On the one hand, if the meme is too novel, it becomes unintelligible, so it is unable to sustain initial attention. If the meme is not novel at all, it becomes indistinguishable from all other memes, so users will not direct initial attention to the meme. On the other hand, following the conventions of meme-making allows participants a space to participate in the community-making of memes. Not following the conventions of meme-making, however, marks the creator as an outsider, and rallies the community to identify them as "normies." For example, uploading a random image that shows a distinct emotion but does not follow the rules of meme-making signals to the community, in this case 4chan, that one does not know "how to meme" in the participatory culture of the Internet (Milner, 2015). The image is ignored at best and ridiculed at worst; a successful image has to codify a sign that shows that the meme-creator knows how to meme. Conversely,

if the meme follows all the shared norms of a group, making it familiar, but is not novel in some way, it will fail to be distinguished from other familiar memes.

In the case of Pepe, clear emotional appeals demonstrated his novelty, but subsequent appropriations of Pepe from the comic book to the memesphere showed how Pepe participates in the *Internet Ugly* aesthetic (Douglas, 2014). According to Douglas (2014), the Internet Ugly aesthetic, as a byproduct of the new technology, is "a celebration of the sloppy and the amateurish [which] have included freehand mouse drawing, digital puppetry, scanned drawings, poor grammar and spelling, human-made glitches, and rough photo manipulation" (p. 314-315). Pepe the Frog, the green, big-eyed, awkward humanoid-looking frog, is ugly; Furie's style is crude. Unlike an impeccable animation of a Pixar character, Pepe's features are low-resolution. Although not as ugly as a freehand mouse drawing, Pepe's contours resemble those of a drawing made of a trembling hand. Pepe is the epitome of the Internet Ugly aesthetic.

An Internet Ugly aesthetic partly becomes compelling because it is easy to reproduce. Since it is easy to reproduce, more people can participate in the creation of the meme. The democratizing aspect of the Internet Ugly aesthetic allows users to claim amateurish art as good while opposing highly technical art that is consumed by the mainstream. Since most people are not highly technical artists, meme creators can claim the Internet Ugly aesthetic as good because it is one of the few avenues for which their amateur art can be praised as good art. Pepe, then, can become the vessel for the Internet Ugly aesthetic that is easy to reproduce. The clear delineation of *Feels Good Man* Pepe makes it easier to alter in Photoshop. There is no need to have high technical expertise to

create your own Pepe[10]. The sloppiness in the drawing of Pepe's eyes makes it easier to draw. The uneven and sloppy lines that make up the contours of *Smug Pepe* give artists a chance to make mistakes that would go unnoticed. Because drawing Pepe does not require immaculate precision, these mistakes would either not be noticed and might even be embraced (Douglas, 2014). Once an artist is able to reproduce Pepe's eyes, lips, and overall shape, they are able to contribute to Pepe's emotional vocabulary to keep the meme alive.

When Pepe lovers started to reclaim Pepe from the "normies," Pepe leaned towards the grotesque, another feature of the Internet Ugly aesthetic (Douglas, 2014, p. 316). *Poop Pepe* (Appendix A), which showed a naked Pepe casually looking back as poop is coming out of a graphic representation of his anus, is a prime of example of the long-list of grotesque Pepes. His long testicles, hanging and holding an attached tray where the poop is stored, also become visible. Note the amateurish drawing of his lower back and the beginning of his bottom. The lines, sloppily drawn, are incomplete. This is because the Internet Ugly aesthetic "creates its own standard of beauty counter to, but not exactly reversing, the mainstream values of symmetry and purity" (Douglas, 2014, p. 315). In this way, Pepe initially showed an understanding of the Ugly Internet aesthetic, which made his distinctive command of attention legitimate. Further "uglification" of Pepe, however, kept commanding attention by simultaneously signaling an understanding of the broader cultural appropriation of the meme from the mainstream. Ugly Pepes are

[10] There is still a need, however, of basic technical skills. I tried to create my own version of Pepe, but my complete lack of understanding of Photoshop made it hard for me to make it. A friend who knew the basics, however, was able to make it in fifteen minutes.

not only novel, thus distinguishing them from other memes and catching initial attention. They legitimize that attention by following the shared norms of the community. This, in turn, created contestation between the original meaning of Pepe and the newly grotesque meaning of Pepe, as the following section shows.

Contestation: Pepe's Ambiguity, White Nationalist Ties, and Death by Representation

In this section, I argue that Pepe's ambiguity in meaning was conducive for racist appropriation. Racist appropriation, in turn, escalated contestation between those circulating Nazi Pepes and the author of Pepe trying to regain Pepe's original meaning of hedonistic happiness. The author's failure to reclaim Pepe, which prompted to Pepe's death, left Pepe ripe for further appropriation. In this process, Pepe went from meme to memegraph not during a single moment in time, but through all the rhetorical work users did on Pepe prior, during, and after the 2016 Presidential campaign. The ability of users to decontextualize Pepe from its immediate historical surroundings was crucial for it to become a memegraph.

Once the constellation of Pepes gained initial attention, it was his ambiguity that led to sustained attention. The only sources of meaning for the original Pepe were his distinct emotional appeals and his ugliness. These characteristics are weak signifiers, meaning that they are flexible signifiers that can be interpreted in a near infinite of ways. Happiness, sadness, and rage are emotions that signify a particular emotion that can be understood by an almost universal public. Yet, the humorous and ironic interpretations of Pepe's emotions only emerge from a community that closely follows the "logic of the lulz." To get Pepe the way 4channers did is similar to what a Reddit user noticed of the

dat boi meme, Pepe "was and is an essential classic. It was revolutionary precisely because it was nonsensical […] It's a meme that feels like it's referencing something - that has a background," but his floating hedonistic head saying "feels good man" will not reveal what that background is (as cited in Literat & van den Berg, 2017). It is only a happy and floating face. For these weak signifiers, emotions, in Pepe to maintain attention for longer periods of time, they had to be connected with stronger signifiers. With stronger signifiers, meaning signifiers that have a narrow set of interpretations, they can be understood by a narrower rather than near universal public. As users started to link Pepe's emotions to larger cultural contexts with *Smug Pepe,* it played for the norms established within 4chan. When it came to the original *Feels Good Man Pepe,* different users started to link him to stronger signifiers as Nazism. The floating head, the lack of context, his nameless and bodiless head carved a space ambiguous enough to be able to defend Pepe as not racist. Nazism in Pepe, on the other hand, allowed for a narrower set of interpretations: Pepe as a racist frog. The ambiguity allowed by the weak signifiers of Pepe allowed the community to defend Pepe as not a racist Frog, escalated contestation for its meaning, and all along kept the meme alive.

To make Pepe long-lasting, meme-makers started to link Pepe's weak-signifying emotions with strong-signifying racist signifiers that would start contestation for his meaning. In other words, Pepe's ambiguity due to his emotionality made it easier to appropriate for ideological purposes, which lead to sustained attention and participation (D. Johnson, 2007; Hahner, 2013). When Pepe started to show up with a Nazi uniform or a Hitler mustache saying "kill jews man," the meme's meaning shifted from the weak-

signification of emotions to the strong diachronic baggage of Nazism (Visit ADL's "Pepe the Frog" for representative examples). Unlike the weak-signification of emotions, Nazism carries a stronger signification because it elicits a much more particular interpretation and response. When most people see a swastika drawn unto Pepe, they interpret it as racist. In hindsight, the internal battle for the meaning of Pepe between Nazism and his emotions was a lost cause for those advocating for Pepe's original but weak-signifying conception. Nazi symbology, with its strong rhetorical force garnered from the past, easily replaced the hedonistic and shallow meaning of the original Pepe. This does not mean, however, that his meaning was completely overtaken by Nazism. Meaning is never fixed. It fluctuates. Therefore, Pepe's lack of seriousness in his original conception can still fight back against Nazism to create a new synthesized meaning.

People defending Pepe as not a racist symbol used his cartoonish features to continue to contest his meaning. This, in turn, kept the meme alive. The contestation between those defending the use of Pepe with Nazi symbology and those opposing it occurred in three levels. First, those trying to defend Pepe as not a racist symbol advocated for his ambiguity while those who saw him as a racist symbol tried to fix his meaning. The ADL declared Pepe a hate symbol, prompting the uninformed reader of the mainstream to fix Pepe's meaning to "that racist frog." On the other hand, for those contesting Pepe's meaning, Pepe was "just a cartoon frog." They defended Pepe by framing the contestation in a second level: form vs. content. For those defending Pepe, the form in which Pepe took made it impossible to see him as a racist signifier. As one Twitter user argued, "pepe is a cartoon and by that logic alone cannot possibly be a Nazi"

(Cuellar, 2016). Pepe's cartoonish features made the case for his ambiguity and complicated his status as a hate symbol creating just enough space to make the tweet above plausible. In other words, those disseminating Nazi symbology could hide behind the fact that Pepe is "just a cartoon frog" to deny Pepe of its Nazi status. My argument here is not to assess whether Pepe was or was not a racist symbol. Rather, it is to show how the contestation of his meaning contribute to the extension of the meme's life.

In the back and forth of Pepe's contestation, Pepe's creator took advantage of Pepe's cartoonish "innocence" by turning it against the logic of the lulz. In a third level, user vs. authorial intent, Furie used Pepe's original hedonistic conception to contest his status as a racist frog. In trying to reclaim Pepe, Furie posted a drawing of Pepe with a red MAGA-like hat reading "Make Pepe Great Again" pissing over a Trump Pepe with his red shorts pulled down (Appendix A). This version of Pepe is no longer participating in the "playful hurt" and mischievousness of *Smug Pepe*. Contestation has escalated. His eyes are slightly more pointed giving him an aura of anger and genuine contempt. His smugness no longer hides behind the sense of superiority of knowing something that the "other" is oblivious to it, as it was in the case of *Text Conversation Pepe* (Appendix A). Now, from the author's side of the contestation, Pepe's sense of superiority comes from explicitly pissing on the enemy. The explicitness makes the enemy know that Furie's Pepe knows that this is war. Furie's drawing suggests that the playful Pepe is here to fight back against those who tried to appropriate him. Yet, even though the conflict is made explicit, Pepe is still ambiguous enough that if someone claims that Furie has gone too far with this drawing, he could still reply: "it is just a joke." This version of Pepe is of a

higher quality than Pepes created by users. The splash made by the pee is cartoonish. Pepe's pulled-down shorts call back to his original, innocent, conception. His bright blue tank top and his backwards wearing hat call back to his "college bro" original persona. By connecting this Pepe to his original conception, Furie allowed himself space to still participate in the "logic of the lulz" while simultaneously moving beyond "playful hurt" to an explicit conflict known to both parties. At this point, both parties know that this is no longer a joke but can hide behind Pepe's cartoonish features furthering contestation.

Unfortunately for Furie, Pepe never regained his original status of "love, acceptance, and fun. (And getting stoned)" (as cited in Cohen, 2016). Rather than listening to the author's plea, people appropriating Pepe redoubled their efforts in creating racist, hateful, and grotesque Pepes (Goldman, 2016). The author, then, decided to kill Pepe and show his funeral to the world (Silva, 2017). In a last attempt to save Pepe, Furie drew a comic strip where Pepe lies with his eyes closed in a coffin next to a picture of him smiling with a red shirt (Appendix A). This Pepe is different from other iterations of Pepe. The color tones are softer; softer rather than electric blues and greens, which are prevalent in older versions of Pepe, pervade the comic strip. Furie tries to evoke a sense of calmness after the storm. He is trying to leave the legacy of Pepe behind. However, by doing so, he unknowingly made Pepe ripe for further appropriation. Furie's failed campaign of #SavePepe and eventual killing of the character signaled that Pepe could no longer be the innocuous and innocent cartoon; that it had moved beyond the realm of authorial representation. Pepe's funeral is Furie's last attempt to try to reverse the inevitable, to try to win a battle he recognized he was losing, to try to

maintain his authorial voice drowned in a cacophony of other voices. In this way, Furie accepted that Pepe was no longer an ephemeral meme, but had become a symbol understood beyond immediate representation (Edwards & Winkler, 1997). It could not solely be a cartoon, or just a Nazi, or the author's creation, it signified something bigger than any particular group could make it. It was now a memegraph.

The Memegraph: The Resurrection of Pepe the Frog

Once Pepe was dead, contestation between 4channers and the original author was over. This, however, did not stop the appropriation and mobilization around Pepe. Rather than contest his meaning with the creator, White Supremacist users deployed the meme in ways that closely align with McGee's (1980) definition of an ideograph:

> An ordinary language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal. It warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable or laudable (p. 15).

In the following sections, I analyze Pepe's use throughout the 2016 Presidential campaign in order to trace how White Supremacists appropriated the meme to demonstrate commitment to ill-defined normative goals in the political arena and argue for behaviors that might otherwise be perceived as antisocial.

Once Furie gave up on reclaiming Pepe's meaning, a conglomeration of the Alt-Right, 4channers, and Trump supporters redoubled their efforts to continue to mobilize

around Pepe. This started with bringing Pepe back to life. A Twitter user in charge of distributing "Rare Pepes" posted an image of Pepe rising from the dead (Appendix A). Taking the same image from Pepe's funeral that Furie had created, this anonymous user appropriated the image, remixed it, and distributed it to contend with Furie's claim that Pepe was dead (Shifman, 2014). The image is obscured. The darkness signals that the people who attended the funeral are gone. This suggests that the funeral is long over. Pepe's eyes, electric green contrast with the softer tones that Furie used and signal resuscitation. Pepe's electric green eyes is a common trope among memes where users add glowing eyes to characters to signal that they are "growing stronger" (Know Your Meme, "Glowing Eyes," 2018). With rhetorical inventiveness, this user furthers the story of Pepe in a well understood mythical and cultural narrative with religious undertones.

Those who circulated Pepes showed their allegiance to a broader ideology by appropriating Pepe's narrative. Levi Smith, whose now suspended Twitter account showed him wearing a Trump shirt in his profile picture, posted, "The Media's obsession over Pepe being killed in a comic shows how far they've fallen, and how much *we're in control of the narrative*" (Romano, 2017, emphasis added). Smith's tweet points to how much Pepe became a rallying cry for those trying to defend Trump. Pepe is clearly not only a frog, or a just a meme, or a dumb cartoon. It is a memegraph, a loaded term that is leveled against another loaded term, "The Media." As a memegraph, Pepe can be juxtaposed alongside and against other highly loaded terms such as "The Media," or "patriotism" as the next tweet shows. Another user on Twitter proclaimed, "Pepe ain't dead, but when he finally does for real he will die a patriot, having given his last full

measure of devotion" (kekster, 2017). Pepe, as a memegraph, is now resurrected as a martyr. To be in support of Pepe is to show "collective commitment" to causes beyond Pepe (McGee, 1980, p. 15). In the kekster's case, it is not only to show commitment towards Pepe but also towards the nation, as Pepe is now considered "a patriot." Finally, a resuscitated Pepe, as a memegraph, no longer needs "to qualify logically as a claim," but rather to condition people "to believe that [Pepe as an ideograph has] an obvious meaning" (McGee, 1980, p. 3). As the user REEE 4 Kek (2017) argued in attempted poetic form,

> Pepe isn't dead,
>
> Because Pepe can't die, ever.

This statement is not about a testable logical proposition that can be refuted. Memes may "die" when people stop directing their attention towards them. Rather, this is a proclamation of victory. Pepe "can't die" because this user asserts it. Pepe will live forever, according to this user, because the collective commitment around Pepe is so strong that they will not let it die. After all, this group now "controls the narrative."

Excuses Belief that Otherwise Might be Antisocial: Pepe and White Nationalism

To further clarify how the memegraph mobilizes publics, I examine Pepe's deployment in the 2016 Presidential campaign and analyze how Pepe started to show signs of ideographic tendencies amongst White Supremacist groups. Although people used Pepe ideographically after his symbolic funeral, his use in advocating for ill-defined normative goals and antisocial behavior through collective commitment are best represented during the 2016 Presidential campaign, as Pepe was becoming a memegraph.

The use of Pepe by White Supremacists might be the best example of how the symbol was used to mobilize publics. For instance, David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the KKK and former candidate for the U.S. Senate, tweeted two Pepes during Donald Trump's Presidential campaign in 2016 (Appendix A). In both instances, the smugness and mischievousness of the original Pepe still exerts some meaning in this new conception of Pepe, but they are much more aligned with Duke's ideology than the "logic of lulz." Along with an image of a *Smug Pepe* that resembles Duke's physique, blue eyes, and blonde hair, Duke tweeted "You filthy, traitorous cucks deserve to be deported more so than some of these illegals – seriously" (Duke, 2016b; Appendix A). The *Smug Pepe* is no longer participating in the "hurtful play" of the original Pepe. In fact, he is no longer participating in any play at all. This *Smug Pepe* is about placing Duke's political views over both conservatives and immigrants in order to hurt. Conservatives are "cucks," a denigrating term used by the Alt-Right and various Trump supporters to insult conservatives (Nordlinger, 2016), who deserve to be "deported," a type of violence. Duke's mentioning of deportation can also be read as a threat. Duke implies that his views give credence to the power of the state to deport people who disagree with him. They are also called "traitorous." Accusing someone of treason assumes that one knows how to serve the nation in the right way. As Nordlinger (2016) pointed out, "The alts believe that the conservatives let dark-skinned people come in and rape their women and take over the country. Hence, they are 'cucks.'" Conservatives are being traitorous to their nation because they do not subscribe to the notion of a White ethnostate. *Smug Pepe* no longer sits above others to play a mean but innocuous joke (See Appendix A), but

rather, his knowledge of how to "correctly" serve the nation is what makes him smug. His slight grin of mischievousness does not come from play but from the twisted joy of deporting "illegals" and "cucks." At the height of the 2016 Presidential campaign, this tweet not only signals allegiance to Pepe as an Alt-Right symbol, but also advocates for a particular but ill-defined normative goal to deport conservatives out of the country. Because the goal is so outrageous and made in the context of Pepe, this does not entail a clear point by point policy plan, but rather, an ambiguous goal that can be hidden behind Pepe's smug and lulz.

Similarly, in the usage of Pepe, David Duke also advanced an Anti-Semitic conspiracy that was so ill-defined that only people within his community could easily recognize and decode it. Tweeting an image of a *Smug Pepe* with a tiny flag that reads "David Duke for U.S. Senate," Duke said, "Don't let these people fool you, they seem 'intelligent' - they aren't, however, they have been (((educated))). #MAGA #VPDebate #LaSen #LSU" (Duke, 2016a; Appendix A). The Alt-Right has used the triple parentheses to identify and harass members of the Jewish community on Twitter (Williams, 2016). Through this coded language, his audience will be able to know what the broader country is missing: college education is Jewish indoctrination, and by that logic, college students may sound smart, but they are actually brainwashed. *Smug Pepe* is an apt choice for his tweet because it assumes that he knows something that others do not, as was the case with the *Smug Pepe* in the text conversation. The tweet has a conspiratorial tone in it, implying that Duke and his audience know something that the broader country does not. He implies that he knows that people are fooling "you" because

"they seem intelligent," but he knows that "they aren't, they have been (((educated)))" (Duke, 2016a). The "they" in this sentence refers to college students and the triple parentheses refers to Jewish people. The directive for antisocial behavior, "Don't let these people fool you," is a direct advancement for believing an Anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. Because it is ill-defined and hard to decode, however, only people within his community will easily see the advancement of the antisocial behavior. Rather than explicitly calling for antisocial behavior, Duke relies on the ambiguity of the three parentheses and *Smug Pepe* to communicate his ideology.

Furthermore, Duke links Pepe directly to his name, his own past, and the Trump campaign. By having Pepe show a tiny flag of Duke's failed U.S. Senate campaign, he diachronically links Pepe with the history of White Supremacy. Pepe, in this tweet, is a political symbol meant to show collective commitment towards Duke's ideology rather than just for the "lulz." By using the hashtag #MAGA, Make America Great Again, Duke is also linking Pepe with a highly loaded term used to mobilize people to vote for Trump. It is in this cluster of highly loaded terms (David Duke and MAGA) that Pepe as a memegraph belongs. Not because there is anything inherently racist about Pepe, but because as a community that has expressed racism continues to circulate him, Pepe serves as a "higher order abstraction" that can be reaped by the likes of Duke (McGee, 1980, p. 15). Pepe is so far decontextualized from his original comic book persona that he can be used for racist motives. David Duke could have used any meme, yet he did not. As a memegraph that has sustained attention for a long period of time, Pepe is easily recognizable and calls for collective commitment to an array of causes, including White

Supremacy. To live beyond textual representation allows the memegraph to be far more flexible in mobilizing publics. Although the original Pepe represented the character within the comic book and Pepe as a meme represented an emotional vocabulary to make funny jokes, Pepe as a memegraph represents collective commitment to ideological bents and normative goals because it is beyond any specific and contextualized representation. The medium, as the next section shows, only enhances this feature of the memegraph.

The Collapse Between Rhetor and Audience, Medium and Text

The medium in which Pepe circulated changes the relationship between the audience and the rhetor. In a networked environment, the relationship between the rhetor and the audience often collapses (Literat, 2018). This feature of a networked environment increases participation in the constitution of publics. For instance, a common practice for those using *Emoji Pepe* was to respond to a tweet with memes. Malik Obama, President Obama's brother and Trump supporter, tweeted, "Malik the Thot Slayer!" (Obama, 2016). This is a sexist inside joke because Malik is tweeting about getting rid of "sluts." Thot is a "denigrative slang term, originally defined as an acronym of 'That hoe over there' but now generally used as a synonym for hoe or slut" for the Alt-Right (Know Your Meme, "Thot," 2015). In a traditional model of communication, Malik Obama would be the rhetor, his tweet would be the text, and his 191,000 followers would be the audience. Since the audience can now participate, however, this relationship changes.

In a networked model of communication (Pfister, 2011) the relationship between the text, rhetor, and audience becomes more complicated. Sixty-two people responded to Malik Obama's tweet mostly with memes, a common practice for those emerged in

meme culture. (DeplorableDanklin), for instance, responded to this tweet with an image of a war battle with two superimposed American and British flags and the photoshopped faces of Vladimir Putin, Nigel Farage, Geert Wilders, Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Milo Yiannopolous, and Mike Pence (See Appendix A). In this tweet, this user said, "we cant be stopped REEEEEEEEE □" (DeplorableDanklin, 2017). In this conglomeration of memes, it is hard to tell who the audience is and who the rhetor is and what text is worthy of the critic's attention. Unlike traditional models of communication, (DeplorableDanklin) along with many end-users become simultaneously rhetors and audience members by producing and seeing texts that are disseminated. To further complicate the relationship between these concepts, (DeplorableDanklin) has their own audience of 828 followers, and they retweeted their own tweet in response to Malik Obama. This means that "we cant be stopped REEEEEEEEE □" works in different levels in relation to the medium (DeplorableDanklin, 2017). First, it works as a positive response of an audience member towards the text produced by the rhetor in the same way a clap signals positive reinforcement towards a performer. Second, it works as a text produced by a rhetor because when (DeplorableDanklin) retweets their own tweet, it gets disseminated to their own audience. Finally, it works as a text better understood as part of a conversation because people who both follow (DeplorableDanklin) and Malik Obama can see the tweet in their timelines without having to look for it. In this way, it is as if a third-party eavesdrops into a conversation unable to distinguish who is the rhetor and who is the audience member. In looking at this meme, the Twitter user understands both (DeplorableDanklin) and Malik Obama as both rhetor and audience member.

In this complicated relationship between rhetor, audience, and medium, the *telos*, the ultimate goal of the community, is also articulated (Charland, 1987). The ability of end-users to readily participate in the construction of the telos promotes community. As a representative example, (DeplorableDanklin)'s meme points to the group's telos in the metaphor of war. Responding to Malik Obama's call to slay Thots, (DeplorableDanklin) assembles Sad Pepe, Angry Pepe, Feels Good Man Pepe with a MAGA hat along with other right-wing figures into battle. The group is going to war against those who disagree with them. It is not a coincidence that (DeplorableDanklin) mentions Evan McMullin, an anti-Trump conservative who ran against Trump for the presidential bid, in his tweet. A telos of war requires enemies to battle. To vanquish "cucks," and slay "Thots," and Make America Great Again all become part of the telos Pepe is used to articulate. Because Twitter has given (DeplorableDanklin) the ability to become a rhetor on top of being an audience member, they are able to verbalize (or, in fact, visualize) the group's telos. Without the ability of end-users to participate, the ability to articulate the groups' telos would be constrained to the leaders; in a networked environment, everybody with an Internet connection and basic Photoshop skills gets to participate.

Finally, as a memegraph, Pepe is able to change the environment in which it circulates. Twitter, as a networked and bottom-up participatory model, is mostly what its users make it. Content in Twitter is dictated by those who use it. (DeplorableDanklin)'s meme in isolation might not account for much, as it only garnered five retweets and four likes, but altogether, these memes change the character of Twitter. When hundreds, if not thousands, of Angry Pepes, REEEEEEEs, MAGA Pepes, and so on flood different

sectors of Twitter, the medium becomes as toxic as the texts that it circulates. To distinguish between medium and text becomes unproductive because both are so tied together that they continuously reinforce each other. In this networked environment, a public is maintained by the constant flooding of Pepes into the medium.

Pepe also changes the speed of the medium. Twitter has always been conducive to speed, as the former 140 character and now 240 character limit shows, but Pepe as a meme accelerates the speed of the medium. It is not only that Pepe's visuality and quick referent towards a shared meaning amongst the community is apt for the speed of the medium, but that the speed of the medium also gets reinforced by Pepe's speed as it circulates. For instance, as I scroll down Malik Obama's responses of his tweet, I see fifty-nine Pepes before I reach (DeplorableDanklin)'s response. When I look at (DeplorableDanklin)'s response I see seven Pepes and four MAGA hats including one in the background (See Appendix A). Rather than carefully analyzing each Pepe and each MAGA hat, the audience member takes them as a totality and moves on to the next image (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002). The details are no longer taken into account. For the most part, these abstracted symbols point to an "obvious" meaning and "annihilate contemplation" (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 135). Unlike a carefully crafted argument, this Twitter exchange accentuates speed over contemplation. Full of highly loaded terms and images (Obama, MAGA hats, Pepes, Emoji Pepe, REEEEEEE, right-wing political figures, the American, British, and Texas flag, etc.) the audience member does not need to spend more time analyzing the argument, but only to quickly understand it with few cues, and move on to the next image.

As Pepe changes the environment annihilating contemplation, however, Pepe can continue to survive because his existence is no longer tethered to the text. Rather, as a "higher order abstraction," Pepe might annihilate contemplation on Twitter but through its high-volume and high-speed circulation, it reinforces "collective commitment" (McGee, 1980, p. 15). The meaning of the memegraph shifts from the text towards the public. Rather than looking for meaning in the text, participants look for meaning through each other. Pepe's meaning lies in only those able to decipher it, which help become members of the public through attention and understanding, as the next section shows.

How Speed Mobilizes and Fragments Publics

In this section, I argue that speed was central for the evolution of Pepe to become a memegraph and condense a public. The speed of circulation is a two-feat accomplishment: it reifies meaning by creating a higher order abstraction and it fragments publics.

The speed in which the memegraph circulates shows the condensation in time for a visual to become an ideograph. In her discussion of pre-digital memes, Shifman (2014) mentions Kilroy, a meme that originated during World War II and was mainly circulated through graffiti. If you were lucky, according to Shifman (2014), you might see one or two Kilroy memes in your lifetime.[11] This is due to the torturous low speed of circulation of graffiti as a medium. Twitter, in contrast, accelerates the process. The reproduction of each Pepe each hour at the height of the 2016 presidential campaign means that if an

[11] In fact, I just recently saw my first non-digital Kilroy meme in the bathroom of a local restaurant.

audience member has seen one Pepe, there is a high likelihood that they will see a second one. Unlike the non-digital Kilroy meme, some members of the audience will see the Pepe meme over and over and over. The fast and constant repetition of iterations of Pepe on the Internet means that the paths of possibility for its meaning become narrower with each new iteration. As the possibilities for interpretation narrow with each iteration, the meaning of the text gets reified. To clarify this process, a discussion on speed is necessary.

Speed, in this case, refers to the ratio between the amount of meme iterations that appear in the networked environment over the amount of time between each iteration. The first necessary condition for the reification of meaning comes from the speed in which the meme circulates. When an uncontextualized visual appears in the Internet, meaning of the fragment, just like a tree[12], can be interpreted through different branches that are near infinite. When *Feels Good Man Pepe* first appeared in 4chan, the branching out for interpreting him (or it)[13] were near infinite. However, the moment he was interpreted as a hedonistic frog, he started to take the first branch of interpretation. For instance, *Feels Good Man Pepe* was not interpreted as depicting deep and meaningful joy but hedonistic and ephemeral happiness. As discussed earlier, however, weak-signifiers such as emotions left other branches for interpretations of Pepe open. The weak-signification for the "happiness" branch meant that this branch was feeble and subject to

[12] I would like to thank Jackson Specker for helping me come out with this metaphor.
[13] Even in describing Pepe as him or it, it already starts taking part of interpreting him, and thus narrowing the paths of possibilities for his meaning. Pepe cannot be a "him" and an "it" at the same time.

lose attention from a stronger branch of meaning. The stronger branch of Pepe was as a Nazi frog. When Pepe started to appear along with Nazi iconography, the branch for being *just* a cartoon, happy, hedonistic frog was diminished. At this point, Pepe's stronger branch takes away space from weaker branches and starts to reproduce in divergent branches constituting divergent publics. For many of the mainstream public, Pepe as a Nazi was the only visible branch for interpreting Pepe as a racist frog. For those in the public who defended Pepe against the charge of racism through his original weak-signification, however, the weaker branch allowed them to interpret Pepe in fluctuating ways that did not confront the stronger Nazi branch. When people started using Pepe in support of Donald Trump, they branched out Pepe's meaning towards the support of the election of Donald Trump whether it was through "it is just a cartoon" branch, its emotional ambiguous branch, or even the Nazi branch. The specter of Nazism does not leave Pepe, but is conveniently set aside, ignored, and forgotten for those who do not want to claim Pepe as a racist frog; best example being when Donald Trump Jr. claimed that he had never even heard of Pepe after posting the Deplorables Pepe meme (Gass, 2016). In other words, people in the public find new ways to branch out the symbol's meaning against narrower interpretations. Having laid out the process for the reification of meaning, how does speed play a role in reifying meaning?

I argue the speed in which a meme circulates helps determine the range of its possible interpretations. First, if the speed in which the meme circulates is slow, then the branches for interpretation for the meme are either narrowed very slowly or not narrowed at all. Take the case of Kilroy. If the speed in which Kilroy circulates is two iterations for

each lifetime, the first interpretation that an audience lays on Kilroy narrows through some branches of interpretation but by the time the second iteration comes around, it has taken enough time that the branches of interpretation will never be narrowed enough to have a more discrete meaning. Kilroy, if never circulated at a faster speed, is parallel to early interpretations of Pepe, just a funny meme. Due to its slow speed of circulation, it stays as a funny meme never able to reach ideographic status as Pepe. Second, from the other end of the spectrum, if the speed in which the meme circulates is too fast and short-lived, then the branches do not garner enough strength that audience members lose interest in the meme. This is what happens to most memes. They become novel, people massively use them to make one particular joke, and then they die. This is because they reach a very specific meaning too fast without laying a strong foundation first. They cannot be adapted for use beyond a very particular joke.

Neither of these two polar opposites ends of the spectrum on speed were, however, the case for Pepe. Pepe reached a speed of circulation that was fast enough to continue to branch out his divergent meanings but not too fast that would kill the meme after a few days. This leads me to the second necessary condition for the reification of meaning for the memegraph: consistency. As discussed earlier, Pepe was *consistently* circulated at a relatively high speed through long periods of time. The sheer volume and repetition of each Pepe narrowed the branches of meaning and slowly shifted meaning from the text and its immediate context to the public. As Pepe continued to be circulated narrowing down paths of possibility, the reification of meaning for Pepe started to conform to the public's interpretation.

Emoji Pepe clarifies this process. Through the constant circulation of the meme, its meaning becomes reified constitutively between those who are circulating it, those looking at it, and the cluster of other memes in which the meme has been linked. This reification of meaning happened throughout the 2016 Presidential campaign. Twitter users disseminating Pepe in emoji form (□) points to the memegraph's ability to become decontextualized yet retain its rhetorical force. According to Roy (2016), "Nazi Pepe made its way to Twitter, where people who regularly tweeted messages supporting White Nationalism and anti-immigrant views quickly absorbed it into their Internet repertoire. People who identify with those movements add[ed] the frog emoji to their Twitter name." *Emoji Pepe* retains its rhetorical force because of the speed in which other Pepes have been circulated. Every time a Pepe was circulated, meme-watchers were able to easily recognize and understand his diachronic baggage of the "logic of lulz," emotionality, contestation, etc. The ability to be abstracted into and circulated in emoji form shows how Pepe's meaning no longer resided in the text, but in the shared consciousness of those circulating and watching him. For someone who has never used Twitter, *Emoji Pepe* denotes a mere cartoon frog. For those, however, who know the evolution of Pepe, Emoji Pepe is a sign that you belong to the group. Emoji Pepe can become <□> because the referents for its meaning no longer belong mainly in the text but have migrated to those in the community that circulate him.

Speed of circulation also leads to fragmentation of the public. Because meaning can change much faster, if an audience member does not follow each step of the evolution of the meaning of the meme, they can find themselves outside of the

community and unable to get the inside joke. Because the emoji (□) does not offer any referents for its meaning other than it is an emoji, a frog, and green, it is impossible to gain access to *Emoji Pepe's* meaning without any contextual clues. Thus, if you understand *Emoji Pepe*, you can become part of the public, but if you do not, you are left out of it. The codified meaning of the memegraph allows publics to communicate amongst those who are in on the joke. Thus, they reinforce collective commitment, as recognizing the meaning behind the emoji allows the satisfaction of being a member of an inside group that understands something the broader public does not.

This does not mean, however, that Pepe alone constituted different but overlapping publics. As the next section shows, Pepe was able to condense rather than constitute publics. Warner (2002) argued that "no single text can create a public […] since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse" (p. 62). Instead, we should understand publics as a "context of interaction" between all the moving aspects of a public (Warner, 2002, p. 62). In a networked environment, every human being is connected to another human being given enough nodes of separation between them. What Pepe does, then, is not constitute a public that was non-existent before his circulation, but rather condense different publics in a cluster around the memegraph.

<u>The Fragmentation of Publics through the Reification of Divergent Meanings</u>

The fragmentation of publics through speed and reification of meaning, however, is not a simple insider-outsider dynamic based on the interpretation and understanding of a text. To understand the nuances and intricacies of this process, I consider three different

but overlapping publics that emerged around Pepe to inductively posit an argument around the commonalities of these three publics. The three publics are: White Nationalists who rallied under the label of the Alt-Right, followers of Pepe who believed him to be a god (i. e. The Cult of Kek), and a mix of hackers, artists, and investors who created, traded, and sold Pepes in the blockchain under the label of the Rare Pepe Foundation. Together, these publics show how the reification of meaning through speed fragments previously condensed publics around Pepe into divergent publics. I will argue that, once created, these fragmented publics are fueled from the beginning and sustained across time through different platforms rather than the constant commanding of attention.

First, there is the case of Richard Spencer and the Alt-Right. In the interview where Spencer is punched in the face, he is wearing a pin of Pepe on his suit (Murphy, 2017). Similar to *Emoji Pepe*, the Pin depicts a bodiless green head which provides no context for the uninformed viewer. Those who "get it," who understand the inside joke, and who have followed the evolution of Pepe within White Nationalist circles will be condensed into a public. Even though Spencer might have not tracked every movement in the evolution of Pepe, he can still be seen as part of the movement because he understands a particular branch of the meaning for Pepe. He understands that Pepe, an uncontextualized cartoon frog, is in fact a symbol for the Alt-Right. For Spencer, it is not necessary to know everything about Pepe to belong in the public as long as he knows something that others outside the public do not. For the White Nationalists rallying under Pepe, it is enough to show a symbol for which most outsiders will not understand.

Second, there is the case of The Cult of Kek. According to this public's manifesto:

> Pepe the Frog isn't a white nationalist symbol.
>
> Pepe the Frog isn't a harmless meme propagated by teenagers on the internet.
>
> Pepe the Frog is, in fact, the modern-day avatar of **an ancient Egyptian deity accidentally resurrected by online imageboard culture**. ("The Truth," 2016, emphasis in the original)

They recognize this sounds absurd, but they still make the argument. They start by explaining two important concepts that are shared knowledge among 4channers: *kek* and *dubs*. In gaming culture, Kek replaced LOL as a way of expressing laughter or mild amusement because in Korean the onomatopoeia for laughing translates into English to the letter "K." When someone expresses laughter in Korean, they would write the equivalent of "KKKKK" in English, which became abbreviated as *Kek* ("The Truth," 2016). Dubs is a bit more complicated. Every post in 4chan gets an "8-digit numerical stamp" that the author of the post only sees after the they have posted. The sheer volume of posts on 4chan makes it impossible to control the numerical stamp any given post will receive. 4chan members started a practice of predicting if something posted by the user was going to happen based on if the last digits of the post were the same, calling them dubs (if the last two digits are identical), trips (if the last three are identical), quads, and so on ("The Truth," 2016). Cult of Kek members point to the moment "a god was born" ("The Truth, 2016; See Appendix A): Posting a picture of Pepe with the caption, "Trump will win," this post from an anonymous user got a numerical stamp consisting of eight

repeated sevens. People in the site interpreted this as Trump being god's chosen candidate ("The Truth, 2016). The eight sevens in a row—literally a one-in-a-million chance—was a divine sign from god that Trump was going to be elected.

But, for which god was Trump going to be elected? Kek is the answer. People in 4chan found an ancient Egyptian deity called Kek, who has the body of a human and a head of a frog, which they associated with Pepe. This could not have been a coincidence but divine intervention, they argued ("The Truth," 2016). Then, they found a statue of the frog in Amazon and noticed that the frog looks as if it was typing into a computer ("The Truth," 2016; See Appendix A). An ancient deity frog typing into a computer just proved that a supernatural power was at play ("The Truth," 2016). Following this discovery, they created a short manifesto explaining the "deification of the primordial concept of darkness in ancient Egyptian religion" arguing that "Kek is using 4chan as a vessel to spread his message and to usher in a new era of light" ("The Truth," 2016; Appendix A). In this manifesto, Pepe is juxtaposed with ancient Egyptian religious icons, linking him to a mythological past. Trump, a photo of a cat that became a meme, and a *Smug Pepe* are directly juxtaposed with an ancient image of a king, a cat, and a frog. Distributing this manifesto before the election, this juxtaposition implies that Trump shall be the President as commanded by the divinity of Kek.

The final coincidence occurred when 4channers discovered their anthem in a song released in 1986 by artist Point Emerging Probably Entering (P.E.P.E) and for which the cover of the song showed a frog with a magic wand ("The Truth," 2016). In the full version of the album, a picture of a clock pointing to a faceless aura with golden hair and

the name of the artist, P.E.P.E., at the bottom proved to this group that Trump was going to become President ("The Truth," 2016; See Appendix A). In this picture, the clock is very similar to a clock near Trump Tower, as a 4channer pointed out, and the aura with golden hair has an uncanny resemblance to Trump's own hair ("The Truth," 2016). All of these coincidences occur above the title "P.E.P.E." Coincidence after coincidence, 4channers developed their own mythology around Pepe proudly labelling it The Cult of Kek. As 4channers developed a mythology around Pepe, the relationship between meme and audience members condensed a divergent public through a particular branch of meaning.

Finally, there is the case of publics circulating Pepe as crypto-art in the blockchain. Prior to the ADL labeling Pepe a hate-symbol in September 2016, people all around the Internet competed to see who would create the most original Pepe. At this time, a group of people decided to start the Rare Pepe Foundation to certify original Rare Pepes and reject those that were not "dank"[14] enough (Roeder, 2018; Rare Pepe Directory, 2018). Similar to a museum curator, they served as the gatekeepers for the first Rare Pepe art collection. They called for people to create their most original Pepes, link them directly with a token which then would be linked with Counterparty (a type of cryptocurrency), pay the 200 Pepe Cash fee (their own type of crypto-currency equivalent to $11 dollars in early March 2018), and submit their artwork to their website (Rare Pepe Directory, 2018; Roeder, 2018). If the artist had any questions, they could message a

[14] Dank is a common term used to describe good memes that follow edgier norms of meme-making.

representative directly using Telegram (Rare Pepe Directory, 2018). Telegram is an app known for its advanced encryption service that is used all around the world (Hamburger, 2014). As one of the creators of the app said, the main "reason for me to support and help launch Telegram was to build a means of communication that can't be accessed by the Russian security agencies" (Hamburger, 2014). They also had their guidelines for what kind of artwork would be officially certified by the foundation as rare. For instance, they asked for no "NSFW [not safe for work] content please. Trying to be keep it light for now. (Pepe has [a lot] of bad press)" (Rare Pepe Directory, 2018). After setting up the foundation, different artists started to upload their Rare Pepes.

Many of these Pepes required plenty of insider knowledge to be able to decode them. For instance, take *Pepe Hodler* ("Pepe Hodler," 2017; See Appendix A). To the mainstream eye, this collage of a meme is near impossible to decode. However, the artist has remixed this meme carefully to point various specific events that are relevant to the community. Let us start with the name. Hodl is a meme that originated in 2013 when a user argued for holding to their bitcoins when there was a crash in the market ("Hodl," 2017). The username, however, misspelled holding, as they proclaimed, "I AM HODLING" ("Hodl," 2017). Hodl became a memeable expression that represented honor in keeping bitcoins during a crash to protect the community. The quote displayed in *Pepe Hodler* comes directly from that original "I AM HODLING" post. The writing is amateurish. "You only sell in a bear market [a crashing market] if you are a good day trader or an illusioned noob [novice]. The people inbetween hold," the anonymous user wisely said ("Hodl," 2017). Realizing that this was a good argument made in a poor way,

many members of the Bitcoin community embraced the motto, including those around Pepe Cash.

Furthermore, the graph comes from the incredible rise of Pepe Cash as a currency. As the meme points out, in six months, the value of the currency increased 2600% capping over three million dollars. The background is another inside joke. When the original user posted "I AM HODLING," a username replied with a meme of a photo of the main character of the movie *300* shouting: "I am… HODLING!!!" ("Hodl," 2017). The background is a reference to that original meme, but also to the fact that Bitcoin had recently broken the 1 to 300 ratio to USD. Surpassing this threshold was very profitable for Pepe Cash holders as it reached one of its highest points in the market. In this meme, Pepe is linked to the history and logic of Bitcoin and getting rich fast. The rocket implies the promise that Bitcoin holds of a meteoric rise from rags to riches. A photoshopped Dave Chappelle, a successful and wealthy comedian, is holding not money but Rare Pepes that have been issued by the same artist. This cropped face of the comedian comes from a skit where he gets rich quickly. The faded image in the background of a sports car perpetrates the logic developed around Bitcoin of making a profit to show off material goods. Although a member outside of the Pepe Cash community may be able to understand the meaning of this meme in a surface level, they will not be able to get each reference that this meme is trying to point out. The Pepe developed around Pepe Cash was highly specific to the Bitcoin community and functioned as a commodity in the crypto-art market.

What does a political, racist, and nationalist movement have in common with a public that most resembles a quasi-religion, and a public that most resembles an art exhibition and market? Each public crafted their own distinct versions of Pepe, reifying its meaning in divergent ways. As each group started to develop their own meaning around Pepe when Pepe's meaning was relatively ambiguous, the reification of meaning diverged to each public's convenience and motivations. For Spencer, Pepe became a symbol of the Alt-Right because he presumably celebrated the racist, White Nationalist, and appropriated interpretations of Pepe that occurred early in the meme's life. For The Cult of Kek, instead of appropriating Pepe as a racist symbol, they appropriated it as a god developing a whole mythology around him. Even though there might be some overlap in the members of these two publics (the Alt-Right and the Cult of Kek/4channers), The Cult of Kek Pepe offers a distinct and unique interpretation. For the Rare Pepe Foundation public, Pepe did not need to be a racist symbol but rather a meme that followed "the logic of the lulz" that could become profitable. This public had strong incentive to claim Pepe was not a racist symbol since they issued their first Rare Pepe card two weeks before the ADL declared him a hate symbol (Rare Pepe Directory, 2018). In this way, each Pepe was first picked up by each public when the meaning of Pepe was relatively ambiguous, leaving a wide range of possibilities for the interpretation of his meaning open. As each Pepe continued to be circulated and reiterated in different publics, Pepe's paths of possibilities narrowed in divergent manners.

The specific meanings that Pepe developed for each community diverged from each other because of the speed in which they circulate. It takes a lot of time to explain

why a happy cartoon frog is a symbol of a White Nationalist movement. It takes time to explain what Kek and dubs mean, how the culture of 4chan operates, why Pepe is a god. It takes time to explain why Hodl is a funny expression and how Bitcoin works[15]. Because these meanings reify so quickly within each community, it is hard to follow the development of interpretations for each Pepe. As one gets caught up with the history of the meaning of one Pepe in one public, the meaning has already changed in another public[16]. The speed for which each Pepe circulates in each public makes it less likely for people to belong to multiple publics around a text.

When a public is fragmented, reification of meaning accelerates as each group is constantly sharing memes in high volumes within the boundaries of an already narrow interpretation of Pepe in an insular community. With each subsequent series of the 36 collections of Rare Pepes, each collection reifies its own aesthetic, specific callbacks and references, and meaning of Pepe. The Cult of Kek develops even a narrower interpretation of Pepe as members of 4chan continue to perpetuate his mythology without the relative intrusion of other reified versions of Pepe. White Nationalists continue to create Pepes in their own circles and communication that further reinforces their own interpretation. Conversely, in less insular and more mainstream sites, Pepe's meaning

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[15] In trying to sell my own Rare Pepe, it took a lot of time in having people within the group explain to me the technical knowledge necessary to buy Bitcoin/Counterparty/Pepe Cash, pair it up in a token with an image, and submit it with the right format. This does not get to all the social norms needed to belong and understand the group.

[16] In a larger scale, this is what happens in academia. There is a finite amount of time, so by the time one gets caught up with the meanings developed in one discipline (usually getting a PhD), the meanings have changed in another discipline. It is impossible to follow-up the meanings developed in all disciplines with a detail that would warrant membership to each group.

stays relatively the same. It ceases to evolve without the constant and fast circulation of Pepes in larger publics of the mainstream. Once Pepe became a hate-symbol according to the ADL, the mainstream public interpreted Pepe as a racist frog. Without either the volume nor insular constraints of fragmented publics, Pepe in the mainstream maintains a relatively stable meaning, while the Pepes in insular communities accelerate his fragmented meaning to a particular reified version of him.

These fragmentations of meaning through divergent publics could not be possible without each group's prior motivations. Each group's motivations carve the paths for the reification of meaning in their own image. Whereas speed makes the reification of meaning and fragmentation possible, motivations direct how meaning will be reified. For instance, Spencer, as a leader of a political movement, has the intention to first get exposure and then recruit people for his cause. He is a partisan for White Nationalism. For Spencer and the Alt-Right, Pepe can be just a symbol by which people can display allegiance to the Alt-Right. Unlike the Rare Foundation Pepe, whose members' motivations are to make money and promote Bitcoin as a legitimate economical market, Spencer does not care much about making money. His Pepe is a symbol; Bitcoin Pepe is art as a commodity. Artists working with the Rare Pepe Foundation adhered to shared guidelines to promote and make money from their memes. It was in their best interest not to promote Pepe as a racist symbol because racist propaganda presumably does not sell as well as funny art. The Cult of Kek, similar to a religion, was to create a virtual community whose goal was to elect Donald Trump. Although there might be an overlap between this public and White Nationalists, The Cult of Kek is not primarily concerned

with ideology as it is more concerned with connecting with a digital community with the logic of the lulz. In short, as different motivations fueled each public, different interpretations reified divergent meanings of Pepe fragmenting each public further away.

Finally, as the structures in place for each public helped perpetrate the meme, they also helped fragment each public. Because 4chan has an anonymous user base and its content constantly vanishes from the site, the social norms that develop around the site incentivize constant usage of the site (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015). A quick look at the site shows how specific the norms, language, and socialization on this site are. Pepe as a god becomes a joke only for those who are constantly using the site[17]. In contrast, the Rare Pepe public mainly gathers in private group chats through Telegram. This group has developed specific social norms, such as using only lowercase in all their messages, but the public's survival does not depend on the shared knowledge of social norms. They rely on having the app and having access to the Internet. In this structure, Pepe does not need to be constantly reinvented to survive because there are more stable and institutionalized structures that do not require the constant commanding of attention for the meme to survive. Through Telegram and crypto-markets, Pepe can survive through platforms such as Telegram's interface or Pepe Cash's crypto-currency. This stabilization in the survival of the meme, however, does not stop fragmentation. A group of users who disagreed with the gatekeeper function of the Rare Pepe Foundation are planning to start a new system in which the users, rather than the curators, decide which Pepes go into the collection and

[17] I was only able to uncover this aspect of Pepe through the account of an insider who chronicled the development of this Pepe in a more stable website.

which will not. As they work on this, they have created a second Telegram group around Pepe Coin (not Pepe Cash) to distinguish themselves from the original group. In these divergent reifications of meaning, speed, motivations, and structures all help fragment each public around each interpretation of each text. A process in which speed allows fragmentation and structures make the threshold for fragmentation easily surpassable, publics keep fragmenting into smaller and smaller publics.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I focused on the conception of a meme; from its birth, to its death at the hands of its original creator, to its afterlife as a visual symbol holding together a variety of divergent publics. By focusing at Pepe's evolution as a meme, I intended to examine the processes behind the making of a visual ideograph. In this way, I showed how synchronic attention of a particular meme works in relation to human participants invested in the meme-making process. At the same time, these participants relate a particular, novel meme to a cluster of other memes in the memesphere. Emotional distinctiveness commands initial attention and commands more attention, which leads to more participation in the meme. This *double duality*, "the demand to follow the rules and codes of meme use exists alongside a contrasting demand for innovation and creativity," point to some of the logics underpinning memes in their nascent state (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015, p. 11). The two underpinning logics identified in this chapter, distinctiveness and contestation, are not meant to be an exhaustive theory of the memesphere. Instead, they are heuristics meant to help the critic navigate the states of

flows in the new networked environment. Thus, critics should command attention to furthering the logics that demand attention in the memesphere.

Furthermore, I showed how diachronic attention is built by each synchronic process of each meme instance. Thus, the relationship between the diachronic and synchronic is always recursive. Ambiguity leads to contestation of the term which leads to sustained attention which leads to sustained participation. However, this diachronic process is not possible without that initial catching of attention, which happens synchronically. Thus, at every single moment the success of the synchronic enables the diachronic to occur but always in a relationship between the two. The synchronic, then, builds the diachronic.

In this chapter, I have also argued that once Pepe did not need to exert its meaning through textual and immediate contextual cues, he became a memegraph. At this point, Pepe transcended "the specifics of its immediate visual references and symbolic meaning," and became a more stable symbol without the need of constant synchronic attention (Edwards & Winkler, 1997, p. 295). Not that synchronic attention ever disappears, that would be impossible, but when meaning is mostly held in the public's consciousness, the need for synchronic attention decreases. This, in turn, allows people in the public to advocate for ill-defined normative and behavioral goals using the memegraph. Emoji Pepe along with the structural flows of its medium, Twitter, enhance the public's participation around Pepe. The collapse of the rhetor and audience member, text and medium make bottom-up public participation a viable option. In this way,

independent of any leaders, the networked environment is conducive for the creation and maintenance of the memegraph.

Finally, speed works to accelerate the process of the making of a visual ideograph and to fragment the public. Pepe was created in 2006, first posted in 2008, went mainstream around 2014, became a memegraph during the Presidential election of 2016, and was killed by his author in 2017. The rapid evolution of the meme into a memegraph accelerates as its circulation increases. With thousands of Pepes flooding various sectors of the Internet, its meaning becomes reified into divergent publics. This process fragments the public. Because of the inability of every member of the public to track every single evolution of meaning of every visual or verbal argument, the public becomes fragmented once they are unable to understand the referent from all its diachronic baggage. That is, when people are unable to understand Emoji Pepe, they are left out of the public discussion around Pepe. This process becomes even more apparent through the fragmentation of the memegraph itself. As distinct but overlapping publics of White Nationalists, The Cult of Kek, and The Rare Pepe Foundation developed their own interpretations of the memegraph, narrowing down the paths of possibility for its meaning, each Pepe became reified in meaning for each public's advantage. Fragmentation continued to occur as The Rare Pepe Foundation became fragmented into two different but overlapping subpublics, suggesting a recursive nature of this process.

To end, I will argue in the next chapter for the broad theoretical underpinnings that constitute the memegraph. Composed of a birth, as an appropriation, as a warrant for power and guiding behavior, as an ordinary term due to high volume and speed, and

constituting a culturally bound public, I will argue how the memegraph differs from visual and verbal ideographs. Finally, I will turn to examples of verbal and visual memegraphs that have not yet been studied such as #HimToo movement and Gritty, a hockey team mascot turned an antifascist symbol for the left.

CHAPTER 4

THE MEMEGRAPH

"What is that?" a reporter asked Richard Spencer, a leader of the White Nationalist movement known as the Alt-Right, pointing to a pin of a green cartoon frog that he was wearing on his three-piece suit. "This? It is Pepe. It has become a kind of a symbol …" Spencer said as he was abruptly interrupted by a protester who punched him in the face (Murphy, 2017). Given that Spencer was unable to answer the reporter's question, I have tried to uncover the network of discourses surrounding Pepe. How did these discourses start? How did these discourses evolve? How did some discourses lose prominence as others gained momentum? Having laid out a theoretical model around Pepe, allow me to take a step back, draw together the main theoretical strands by which a meme becomes a memegraph, and relate them to verbal and visual ideographs. To start, I will summarize the different theoretical strands that underlie the idea of the memegraph. Then, I will lay out the specific main components that constitute the memegraph: A birth, an appropriation, an ordinary term circulating at high volume and speed, a warrant for power that guides behavior, and a constitution of a culturally bounded public(s). Finally, I will relate them to verbal and visual ideographs born in the digital age.

A Theoretical Overview of the Memegraph

Meme·graph: Drawing on Dawkins (2016), I define a meme as being composed of diffused units of cultural transmission that are varied, selected, and retained by an audience who relates it to a group or clusters of other memes. For example, Pepe as a meme consists of *Feels Good Man Pepe, Sad Pepe, Trump Pepe, Nazi Pepe,* and all the

other iterations of the meme that continue to evolve as different people create and interpret new forms of Pepes. I draw the suffix "graph" from McGee's (1980) concept of *ideographs*, fragments that are high order abstractions which guide behavior and warrant the use of power. For McGee (1980), ideographs like <Liberty> seem to have an obvious meaning that allow people to act in antisocial ways when used by a rhetor; e. g. calling listeners to fight for their <freedom>. Unlike ideographs studied in the past, in a networked environment, the critic can trace the beginning and evolution of the memegraph from its birth. In this process, the memegraph first has to command synchronic and then diachronic attention of audience members.

Synchronic attention, initial attention gained in the present moment toward one particular meme rather than other memes, favors distinctiveness. Distinctiveness does not only refer to something "new" or "unique." Rather, it refers to Nissenbaum & Shifman's (2015) concept of *double duality*, where a meme has to offer something new or unique while simultaneously following the rules that have been established within a community to make the meme legitimate. If the meme is too unique, it becomes unintelligible. If the meme is too familiar, it becomes uninteresting. In favoring synchronic attention, the memegraph has to manage the tension between novelty and familiarity. Pepe offered novelty through the users' creation of a flexible emotional vocabulary based in the meme; it offered familiarity through the meme's participation in the logic of the lulz, hurting someone feelings for the sake of humor, and the Internet Ugly aesthetic, an aesthetic that favors the ugly and amateurish over the beautiful and professional. In this way, Pepe the frog was able to gain initial synchronic attention.

In this thesis, I have attempted to draw attention to the relationships that exist between text, context, rhetor, audience, and medium in introducing the networked environment. The networked environment consists of the material digital networks in the Internet (the medium), social networks that precede digital networks yet are embedded in digital networks (context), and networks of meaning shared by human minds (rhetor and audience). As networked fragments embedded in discourses circulate this environment, attention becomes crucial to differentiate between one fragment and the next. Synchronic modes of attention offer a vocabulary to understand how these fragments get selected, adapted, and circulated by rhetors/audience members. To examine synchronic modes of attention is to answer the question: Why was this particular fragment selected over other competing fragments that circulate in the network? The goal in this thesis was not to offer an exhaustive vocabulary for all the different modes in which synchronic attention works. Instead, the goal was to offer a particular mode of attention that worked in a particular instance: distinctiveness in the case of Pepe the Frog. In the future, scholars should aim to develop a more comprehensive vocabulary that captures the different means by which synchronic modes of attention function online.

Diachronic attention, on the other hand, is attention sustained through time. Diachronic attention toward Pepe was sustained through ambiguity and contestation. Ambiguity enables the meaning of the memegraph to be contested, and this ongoing contestation keeps the memegraph circulating. Through the fight for Pepe's meaning between Matt Furie, the author, and members of the Alt-Right who tried to appropriate Pepe, the meme continued to circulate. Internet users made Pepe shocking and racist so

people in the mainstream would stop using him, while the author wanted to maintain Pepe's initial aura of love. Pepe's initial ambiguity came from the weak-signifying of his emotional vocabulary. Pepe's emotional vocabulary was constructed through weak-signifiers (anger, hedonistic happiness) which users could interpret broadly and thus adapt and apply to a wide range of scenarios. As 4channers began remixing emotional Pepes with racist Pepes, these weak-signifiers were contested against strong-signifiers (Nazi Iconography) which only lent themselves to a narrow set of interpretations. For example, I could send a friend an angry or happy Pepe through a text message in many different situations; I could not send a Nazi Pepe for a wide array of situations. In this way, the clash of Pepe's ambiguity against his increasingly stronger Nazi connotations sustained contestation over—and attention to—the meme.

To explain how attention is maintained, I have offered the concept of diachronic modes of attention. The concept is deliberately broad, defined as the ways in which attention is sustained through time. The reason for this is to offer a vocabulary that helps explain how *any* fragment, and not just memes, sustain attention through time. As it was in the case of the synchronic, I have offered two modes of diachronic attention (ambiguity and contestation) rather than an exhaustive list. In the future, scholars should pay attention to those fragments that sustain attention through time, creating a public or publics around the fragment, and develop a vocabulary for more diachronic modes of attention.

Furthermore, I have delineated three different ways Pepe functioned ideographically during the Presidential campaign in 2016. Pepe as a memegraph

commanded collective commitment, justified antisocial behavior through ill-defined normative goals, and became a decontextualized fragment used for ideological purposes. After the failed attempt of the author to kill Pepe in a comic strip showing his funeral, followers of Pepe demonstrated collective commitment towards him and Trump that did not warrant logical arguments by resurrecting him with the creation of different memes. Furthermore, during the 2016 Presidential campaign, White Nationalists such as David Duke advocated for antisocial behavior through ill-defined normative goals, such as the deportation of "cucks" (conservatives) from the country. Finally, the use of *Emoji Pepe* shows how decontextualization of the meme from its original conception can be reaped for ideologically appropriated purposes. Once audiences understood that a simple emoji frog (□) could signify membership to a White Nationalist cause, the meaning of Pepe no longer resided in its original contextualized conception of a comic character but in the minds of different publics. The emoji frog by itself is meaningless, so it is only a signal for White Nationalism because people know the history behind the usage of the particular emoji frog.

As such, the memegraph also condenses publics. As texts, or fragments, call for a public, they condense a public through attention. The ideographic aspect of the memegraph allows it to cluster people together as a condensation symbol (McGee, 1980). The memegraph condenses a public in a panmediated networked public screen, an updated version of the public sphere that is abundant with visuals and contains publics that are connected through networked digital platforms at virtually all times, which favors synchronic modes of attention. In favoring dissemination over dialogue, synchronic

modes of attention are needed to differentiate from one floating fragment to the next. Rather than having a dialogic public sphere, where I can pay attention to one person at a time through a sustained conversation, in a panmediated networked public screen, I have to decide to what to pay attention to as torrents of fragments try to get my attention. Because there is an overload of information, members of different publics need to use their synchronic attention to differentiate from one fragment to the next one. To sustain a public through time, diachronic modes of attention necessitate of participation from the public and the ability of the memegraph to changes its environment. When people start to participate in the creation of the fragment's meaning, there is a hidden commitment that eases the reliance on synchronic modes of attention of the meme to survive. The memegraph can change its environment through the participants' deployment of high volume circulation of the meme and the institutionalization around the memegraph. For example, Pepe changed the environment of Twitter as thousands of Pepes flooded the medium during the 2016 Presidential campaign and people in the blockchain institutionalized him through the Rare Pepe Foundation. In doing so, the memegraph does not need to constantly call for the public's attention to survive since it is already embedded in the daily practices of the institution.

Finally, the speed in which the memegraph comes to being accomplishes the reification of meaning and the fragmentation of publics. As Pepes were consistently created, reproduced, and circulated in the networked environment at a fast speed, each iteration narrowed the meaning of Pepe. For instance, once Pepe moved from being just a happy frog to a Nazi frog, publics had to grapple with his racist connotations in their

subsequent interpretations of the meme. Because the meaning of the memegraph becomes narrower and narrower with each iteration, though it can fluctuate, the public gets fragmented as those who do not understand the reified meaning of the memegraph are not condensed within the public. In creating divergent meanings and fragmented publics, Pepe constituted three different but overlapping publics: White Nationalists of the Alt-Right, 4channers in support of The Cult of Kek, and artists, hackers, and investors from the blockchain. These divergent publics show how the public's motivations and the platforms in the public fuel the fragmentation of the public. In other words, whereas speed makes fragmentation possible, motivations and structures in the public dictate how that fragmentation is going to occur.

The Birth of the Memegraph

Both the synchronic and the diachronic offer the critic a vocabulary to navigate the creation of new fragments in a networked environment. This leads me to the first aspect of the memegraph: its birth. The memegraph, unlike verbal and visual ideographs, is born in the digital age. This does not mean that it has to be born in digital environments, but digital technologies allow the memegraph to become one in such a short period of time. Previously researched ideographs such as <equality,> <man,> <woman,> etc. are terms already existing in the public vocabulary that critics do not need to account for their birth to offer insightful uses of it (Condit & Lucaites, 1993; Palczewski, 2005). They are not born of a networked environment.

If they do account for the ideograph's origin, as it is in the case of Edwards and Winkler's (1997) study of the Iwo Jima visual ideograph, the importance in discussing its

origin is to emphasize the process of decontextualization, not its ability to garner initial attention. For Edwards and Winkler (1997), it is not crucial to explain why the Iwo Jima image garnered initial attention to offer an analysis of the way in which the image moved from its original historical context to one of abstract representation. This is due to the different structures of circulation that existed between pre-digital and digital environments. As top-down models of circulation, the Iwo Jima image was mainly appropriated and distributed through newspapers. Not only are newspapers slower in circulation of texts, but they tap into pre-existing audiences than the ones who exist in the digital age. As institutions, they send newspapers to an audience who is already subscribed and does not rely in initial and renewed attention to the text for its constant circulation. The newspaper reader usually does not read the newspaper because something caught their attention in the newspaper, they read the newspaper as a ritual to become unified to a much larger public: the nation (Anderson, 2016). In a panmediated networked public screen, however, one does not merely choose a particular news outlet to connect to a larger public, but one decides to engage from one fragment to the next in a constant flow of "ahistorical, acontextual flow of jarring juxtapositions" (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 135). Attention, then, becomes crucial in the digital age. In the bottom-up model of circulation of the digital age, attention of end-users is what constitutes publics. In this way, it is crucial to explain why a particular fragment over a different fragment garners initial attention. In a digital age, explaining that first moment in which a fragment garners initial attention is more necessary than it once was before the advent of digital technologies.

An Appropriation: Abstraction Representing Collective Commitment

In their influential study of visual ideographs, Edwards and Winkler (1997) draw on McGee to list four characteristics that make a visual an ideograph: abstraction representing collective commitment, warrants power/guides behavior, ordinary term in political discourse, and culture-bound. Following their lead, I will show how the memegraph builds upon those four characteristics. Having already added a new characteristic for the memegraph, its birth, the second characteristic of the memegraph is that it is an appropriation. In Edwards and Winkler (1997) argument, the Iwo Jima image became a visual ideograph, in part, because it became decontextualized from its original historical context and through repetition, it became an abstraction. They call this process of decontextualization and repetition representative form. The memegraph, as Pepe's decontextualization from its original comic origin and repetition through different emotional Pepes, Nazi Pepes, Trump Pepes, and so on, clearly fits within the existing framework of the representative form. The memegraph, however, is different in three different ways: in the ways power works through appropriation, reification of meaning due to speed, and constitution of a fragmented and culturally bounded public.

Warrants Power and Guides Behavior

Because the memegraph is birthed in the digital age, it needs of contestation to rise to the level of ideographic status. If there is not contestation, the meme will never become popular enough to be able to function ideographically. It fades from public consciousness even after gaining initial attention. Therefore, appropriation in the memegraph necessitates of contestation, whereas appropriation in the verbal and visual

ideograph does not. Even though all verbal ideographs must have a birth, when they get deployed in contemporary discourse, they already exist in the public's consciousness. Its origin is not as important for the survival of the circulation of the ideograph in contemporary discourse. Without the luxury of inhabiting the public's consciousness, the memegraph needs contestation early in its appropriation to sustain attention. Furthermore, visual ideographs such as the Iwo Jima image do not need contestation to become an ideograph since they relied in mass methods of dissemination to exist in a national public's consciousness. Cartoonists use the Iwo Jima image, an original photograph first issued by the U.S. government, and disseminate it in mass produced means of communication such as the newspaper. Pepe, on the other hand, was first made a meme with a single instance in 4chan. Whereas it was contestation between members of 4chan reacting against the mainstream uses of Pepe, or Twitter users' defense of Pepe against the ADL's label of Pepe as a hate symbol, or the author, The Cult of Kek, and the Rare Pepe Foundation reacting against the racist uses of Pepe, Pepe needed of this contestation in order to become a memegraph.

In this way, as the meme becomes a memegraph, it warrants power to a narrow rather than a broad set of interests. The Iwo Jima visual ideograph was appropriated by editorial cartoonists that instead of advocating for antisocial behavior, "the parodied image functions to expose the [antisocial behavior]" (Edwards and Winkler, 1997, p. 301). In other words, cartoonists pointed out a wide range of contemporary problems, from gas prices to LGBTQ rights in the military, through the Iwo Jima image. Through these wide variety of issues, the visual ideograph is unable to coalesce around a particular

public. Even in the case of more particular visual ideographs, such as flag-waving where identification to the visual ideograph occur through national lines (Pineda & Sowards, 2007), the lack of digital technologies does not let the visual ideograph to coalesce around a very particular set of interests. In the case of the memegraph, Pepe condensed multiple publics advocating for different but particular interests. Whether it was the election of Donald Trump, the deportation of American conservatives, the legitimation of Bitcoin as a currency, or the adoption of a new religion, Pepe was appropriated and quickly condensed a particular public with a particular set of interests.

Becoming an Ordinary Term Due to High Volume and Speed

Similarly, through this fragmentation and appropriation, the memegraph becomes an ordinary term in political discourse due to its high volume and speed of circulation. Because the memegraph is born in the digital age, it can only become a memegraph through the fast and high volume of its circulation. In Edwards and Winkler's (1997) compilation of appropriated Iwo Jima images, there were "more than fifty instances" over fifty years of it while there were thousands of Pepes circulating on the Internet at the height of the 2016 Presidential campaign in rapid succession from each other (p. 289). This is, again, due to the digital technologies that allow bottom-up creation and circulation of content. It would be near impossible for cartoonists to create thousands of cartoons in a day, but it is not hard for thousands of users to create thousands of memes in a short amount of time. As mentioned before, because bottom-up users (meme creators) rather than top-down artists (cartoonists) are the ones creating content around a

fragment, particular issues will condense particular publics. Speed will only enhance this feature of the memegraph.

Even though speed and high volume allow the memegraph to become an ordinary term, they also fragment publics. While the speed of circulation of the memegraph is neither too slow to not be able to reify its meaning nor too fast to fail to sustain attention, the speed of circulation of the memegraph is enough to become an ordinary term while narrowing possible branches of interpretation of it. For instance, if a meme is too slow in its circulation, it quickly fades from public consciousness and never becomes a memegraph. On the other hand, if the meme circulates too fast, its meaning is reified so quickly that it fades from public consciousness as publics shift their attention to other memes. Therefore, the memegraph has to be circulated fast enough that it gains attention but not too fast that people lose interest after paying initial attention. In this reification of meaning, the memegraph starts to condense divergent publics. Because it is impossible to track every movement of the evolution of the memegraph, people who are not aware of the particular meanings, references, nuances, i. e. its diachronic baggage, are not constituted into a public. As the use of Pepe by White Nationalists, The Cult of Kek, and the Rare Pepe Foundation's artists show, the memegraph becomes fully legible to a particular and fragmented public.

Constituting a Public that is Culturally Bound

This leads to the last characteristic of the memegraph, and perhaps the most different from the visual ideograph. For all the reasons mentioned above, bottom-up creation of fragments, appropriation of particular interests, and reification of meaning

through high-volume and speed, the memegraph condenses a public in fragmented cultures. Ideographs usually work with large publics based on nationally shared knowledge. The Iwo Jima image works with an American public, flag-waving works with an immigrant public, <man> and <woman> work with a public who understands gender norms that have been perpetrated in a historically patriarchal society, and so on (Edwards & Winkler, 1997; Pineda & Sowards, 2007, Palczewski, 2005). The memegraph only works with a narrow public that understands the ever-evolving diachronic baggage, codification of norms, references, and so on of the meme-instance. Thus, it is hard to imagine Pepe working ideographically at a national level. Instead, Pepe can work ideographically for members of publics who have appropriated him (White Nationalists, Alt-Right leaders, Bitcoin community members, 4channers, etc.) in opposition to a larger public (the mainstream who sees Pepe as a racist frog or has no idea what he is). Even when the memegraph is able to call upon a larger public, when it was able to call forward many Trump supporters on Twitter for instance, it still works ideographically within the bounds of a narrow culture (Internet culture/Trump culture) and against a larger public (Non-Trump conservatives/Hillary Clinton supporters/those who do not get the reference). In this way, the memegraph is still culturally-bound but bounded to a much narrower understanding of culture.

The Memegraph Beyond Pepe: Future Usages of Verbal and Visual Memegraphs

Having laid out the five main characteristics of the memegraph, it is time to show how the memegraph could work beyond Pepe. Going back to Dawkins (2016), the meme does not have to be a visual. Although Internet memes are usually represented in an

image, verbal Internet memes abound (See "Weird Flex But Ok," 2018). Although the differences that exist between the verbal and the visual are worth considering, here I attempt to illustrate the similarities of the visual memegraph to a verbal memegraph. Even though there are more than one memegraph operating in the panmediated networked public screen, such as <Fake News> or <#AllLiveMatter>, I want to focus on <#HimToo> to provisionally illustrate how the memegraph could work verbally[18].

In 1997, Tarana Burke, a woman of color, coined the phrase Me Too as she was listening to the story of a 13-year-old girl who had been sexually abused (Garcia, 2017). In 2006, she created an organization to help women who have been sexually harassed and "gave her movement a name: Me Too" (Garcia, 2017). Fast-forward another decade and celebrity Alyssa Milano tweeted: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet" (Milano, 2017). In less than 24 hours, the hashtag #MeToo had been shared in more than 12 million posts in Facebook (Garcia, 2017). There it began one of the most powerful movements in contemporary politics of the digital age that keeps evolving and unravelling as the writing of this thesis.

Fast-forward a year, #HimToo starts trending. After the Senate held Judge Kavanaugh's hearings for his appointment to the Supreme Court, who had been accused of sexual assault by Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, #HimToo started trending to defend accused men as victims. #HimToo aimed to "recast the movement [#MeToo] as a widespread feminist witch hunt, forcing men to walk on eggshells" (Ellis, 2018). This

[18] I want to thank Abbie Shew for suggesting and helping me think through this memegraph.

appropriation of the #MeToo hashtag follows a similar path to the one outlined in the memegraph of Pepe. Just as Pepe, #HimToo originally referred to an innocent and apolitical sentiment "to any male who was also doing something" (Ellis, 2018). However, due to the speed of circulation, this hashtag kept changing its meaning in divergent ways elevating contestation for the meaning of the hashtag. For some, #HimToo was to raise awareness that men could also be victims of sexual assault; for others it was a way to point and create lists of abusers; for the latest public, it was a way to defend Judge Kavanaugh by promoting the idea that men had been the victims of the #MeToo movement (Ellis, 2018). As Ellis (2018) pointed out of this hashtag, "#HimToo is flexible enough to accommodate many different, even contradictory, stories and ideologies, as long as the pronouns in it are male." In short, an ambiguous term that signified an array of movements became appropriated in direct response to #MeToo.

As contestation for the meaning of the hashtag escalated, the meme survived creating divergent meanings and fragmented publics. For instance, @BlueStarNavyMom3 tweeted a photo of her son with a navy uniform along the text: "This is MY son. He graduated #1 in boot camp. He was awarded the USO award. He was #1 in A school. He is a gentleman who respects women. He won't go on solo dates due to the current climate of false sexual accusations by radical feminists with an axe to grind. I VOTE. #HimToo" (Romano, 2018). For which people in Twitter replied to her by mocking her anti-feminist assertion. As a representative example, @Amyspano1 tweeted a photo of Ted Bundy along the text: "This is MY son, Ted. He worked for Republicans, went to law school, and is described as charming & charismatic. He drives a

sensible Volkswagen. He WILL go on solo dates, if you're interested- even during the current climate of ridiculous accusations against him. I VOTE. #HimToo" (Romano, 2018). In a surprising plot-twist, the son himself decided to create a Twitter account to verify that his mom was, in fact, lying. @Thatwasmymom tweeted, along a picture of himself in the same pose that his mom tweeted of him: "That was my Mom. Sometimes the people we love do things that hurt us without realizing it. Let's turn this around. I respect and #BelieveWomen. I never have and never will support #HimToo. I'm a proud Navy vet, Cat Dad and Ally. Also, Twitter, your meme game is on point" (Romano, 2018). This tweet amassed almost 30,000 retweets and more than 171,000 likes. As the contestation for the meaning of the hashtag continued, other people advocated for reclaiming the appropriated #HimToo hashtag to support men who have been sexually abused while other users redoubled their efforts to advocate for the hashtag to be a counter-movement to #MeToo (Romano, 2018). Regardless of how this hashtag continues to reify its meaning in divergent ways, it is clear that as a memegraph, we can pinpoint to its birth and subsequent capturing of initial synchronic attention, its appropriation to sustain diachronic attention, its change in meaning to become an ordinary term due to its high volume and circulation, its warrant of power and guide of behavior, and its constitution of fragmenting publics.

<u>And Then There is Gritty…</u>

Nearing the end of writing this thesis, I recently told a friend: I wished Gritty had come out a year ago, so I would have written a thesis on Gritty rather than Pepe. The still-evolving story of Gritty is as wild as Pepe's with one significant difference: it happened

much faster than Pepe. His evolving story points that memegraphs like Pepe are circulating our shared networked environment and need to be interrogated. <The Moon Man,> who was a McDonald's mascot appropriated by White Supremacists and "advocates using violence against non-white minorities" in rap songs, or <The Babadook,> who was a horror film character appropriated by the LGBTQ movement as a gay icon, are just two other instances of memes becoming memegraphs (Moon Man, 2010; The Babadook, 2017). The story of <Gritty,> however, is worth telling.

On September 24th, 2018, the Philadelphia Flyers hockey team unveiled their new mascot: Gritty, an awkward, bubbly-eye, tall, hairy, and orange monster (Gritty, 2018; See Appendix A). Due to his odd configuration, Gritty was able to catch initial attention in his unveiling. Many people interpreted Gritty as creepy and weird. "Gritty looks like he's seen some shit," one Twitter user mused, while another wrote, "TFW [That feeling when] you're the most terrifying mascot in the NHL" while posting the same image seen in Appendix A (Gritty, 2018). Nevertheless, Gritty was embraced by Philadelphia, a city with a strong identity, enjoyment in sports, and reputation for its aggressive behavior from its sports fans (McCausland, 2018). In this way, Gritty was quickly assimilated to the sanctioned norms and rules of a community, legitimatizing his initial attention from an audience. The tweet that might best encapsulate Philadelphia's embracement of Gritty said the following:

> *Gritty is unveiled*
>
> Philly: What the f*ck is this?
>
> National Media: What the f*ck is this?

> Philly: YOU LEAVE GRITTY ALONE HE IS A NATIONAL TREASURE (@Sixers2017Draft, 2018).

As embracing it as their own, Philadelphia started to appropriate and contest Gritty's meaning beyond being a simple mascot.

On September 26th, 2018, however, the appropriation for the meaning of Gritty escalated. The leftist magazine *Jacobin* tweeted: "Gritty is a worker" (Gritty, 2018). The transformation of Gritty from the Flyer's mascot embraced by a city to a symbol for the left embraced by Antifa was well underway. On October 2nd, 2018, President Trump visited Philadelphia and many protesters depicted Gritty as a member of Antifa, a leftist group whose mission is to fight fascism, in their protest signs (Gritty, 2018). In one meme, a jolly Gritty is depicted punching an Angry Pepe, who has a swastika sign in his arm, inside a circle that reads: "Good Night – Alt-Right" (Tanenbaum, 2018; See Appendix A). In escalating contestation, Gritty then excuses anti-social behavior (punching) in favor of an ill-defined normative goal from the broader public (fighting fascism). Gritty as a member of Antifa makes sense. He is a hockey mascot, a sport traditionally known for its normatively accepted violence. If Gritty shot someone with a t-shirt gun in the back during a hockey game or destroyed the glass of the penalty box in his debut or threatened to kill the Penguins mascot within the first hour in the job, which all happened, it also made sense that his violence would translate into fighting White Nationalists in the streets (Gritty, 2018). On November 17th, 2018, Antifa organized a counter-protest to a far-right rally organized by the Proud Boys (Sommer, 2018). In it, Gritty continued to be a symbol for the left through chanting, protest signs, distributed

stickers, etc. (Sommer, 2018). After this protest, Gritty was clearly a memegraph due to his ability to guide behavior in showing collective commitment to a group: Antifa.

Following this rally, the Alt-Right set to coopt Gritty from Antifa, making and distributing an array of Anti-Semitic memes with the image of Gritty (Tanenbaum, 2018). Escalating contestation, people from the left continued to defend Gritty as theirs, as one user said: "You keep your filthy alt-right hands off our precious monster boy. YOU HAVE YOUR OWN ORANGE MONSTER ALREADY" (Tanenbaum, 2018). In an op-ed for the *Philly Voice*, writer Michael Tanenbaum (2018) defended Gritty with this closing statement: "Gritty will never go down like Pepe. He will slip on his own ice just fine, thank you." In this still-evolving contestation for the meaning of Gritty, a memegraph is just unravelling. Unlike Pepe's descent into the hands of the Alt-Right, Antifa's appropriation of Gritty happened in less than a week, suggesting that this process is just accelerating. Gritty memes that are only legible to a narrow public already suggests that Gritty is starting to fragment publics through his high speed of circulation (See Appendix A). For instance, the meme of a Philly cheesesteak with French fries and Cheetos as a cover of book written by Gritty titled *The Conquest of Bread* points how only people with a knowledge of Gritty (Cheetos), Philadelphia culture (Philly cheesesteak), and communist writings of Peter Kropotkin will get the joke (Appendix A). Thus, only a fragmented, narrow, and culturally-bound public is constituted by Gritty.

A birth, an appropriation, the high and fast volume of circulation, its warranting of power and guiding of behavior, its constitution of culturally-bounded publics, Gritty might be just the memegraph needed to counteract Pepe. With his orange hair, googly

eyes, dumb, weird, and creepy smile, Gritty might be the memegraph to open some space for memegraphs to come. After Pepe's story, at times wild, at times vicious, at times inspiring, Gritty serves as a counterpoint to Pepe's racist, Nazi, and White Nationalist side. Gritty might be, after all, the memegraph that we all needed. If you allow me then, while running the risk of ending this thesis with the gimmick of a clichéd writing technique rather than organic poetic prose, I'll end with a meme that will only fully constitute those who have closely read this thesis into a public that "gets it."

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APPENDIX A

First Pepe
Source: Cohen (2016)

Angry Pepe
Source: REEEEEEE (2015)

Text Conversation Pepe
Source: JoDaEskimo (n.d.)

Sad Pepe
Source: pepe-leaker (2015)

Sad Pepe Usage
Source: Sad Pepe Usage (2016)

Poop Pepe
Source: Poop Pepe (n.d.)

Make Pepe Great Again
Source: Serwer (2016)

Funeral Pepe
Source: Silva (2017)

Pepe Rises
Source: RARE PEPES (2017)

Kekistan Battle Pepe
Source: DeplorableDanklin (2017)

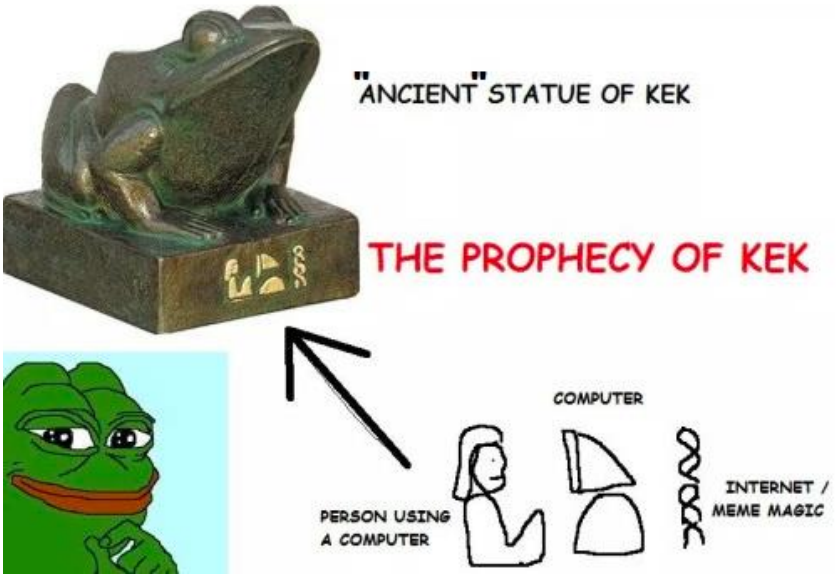
Kekistan Battle Pepe's Twitter Screenshot
Source: DeplorableDanklin (2017)

Duke Pepe 1
Source: Duke (2016b)

Duke Pepe 2
Source: Duke (2016a)

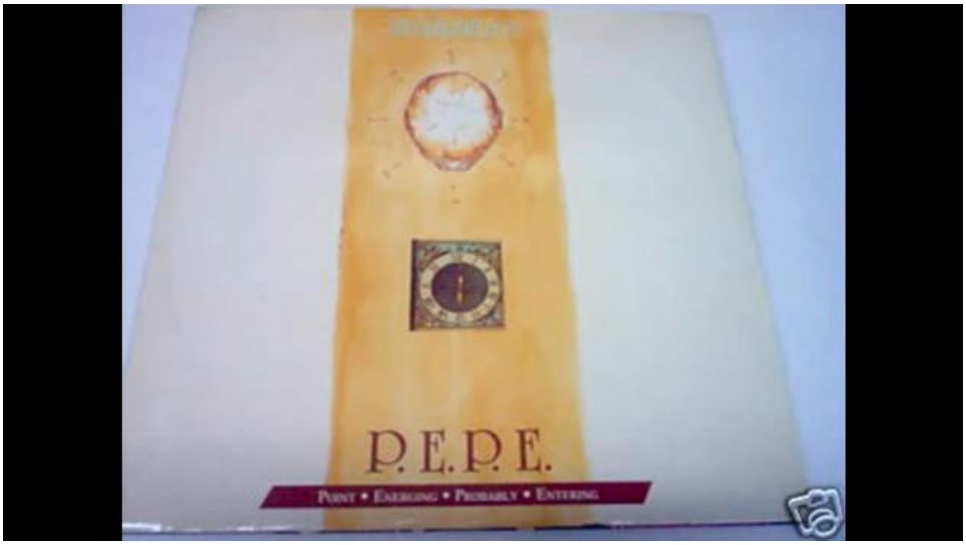
A God Was Born.
Source: The Truth about Pepe the Frog and The Cult of Kek (2016)

Kek Hieroglyphic Statue
Source: The Truth about Pepe the Frog and The Cult of Kek (2016)



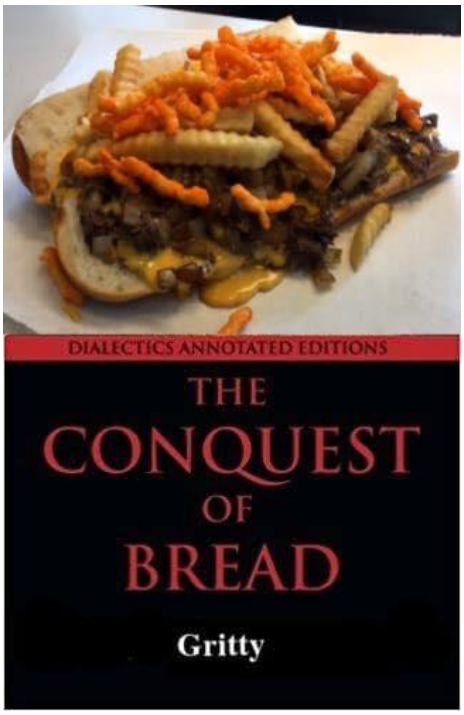
Kek Manifesto
Source: The Truth about Pepe the Frog and The Cult of Kek (2016)

Pepe and Trump as Gods
Source: The Truth about Pepe the Frog and The Cult of Kek (2016)



Pepe Hodler
Source: Hodl (2017)

Gritty
Source: Gritty (2018)

Antifa Gritty
Source: Gritty (2018)

Philly and Leftist Gritty
Source: Gritty (2018)