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## What Do You Meme? Preserving Emojis, Memes, and GIFs as Archival Folklore Objects

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You have probably sent one or seen one today already. Maybe you had a laugh, or thought it was not funny, or even inappropriate. In the digital era, they will inevitably be encountered: GIFs, emojis, or memes. These digital objects are common tools of communication between individuals, clever advertising for companies, and iconic means of identification and association for political figures. GIFs, emojis, and memes are digital objects of cultural importance, and worthy of preservation as folkloric objects in archives and libraries.

Folklore is mistook as being old stories or tall tales pertaining to a specific culture. One of these examples is the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. This tragedy derives from the Sanskrit poem *Ramayana*.<sup>1</sup> Sanskrit is one of the oldest known languages in history, dating as far back as 1500 BCE.<sup>2</sup> There have been dozens of variations of this story, not necessarily with the same names and geographical location, but with the overall plot and outcome is the same or similar. According to Trevor Owens, digital content manager at the Library of Congress, “folklore is about the logic and meaning of the everyday and informal... this mode of preservation comes up the least often, [between artifactual, informational, and folkloric preservation traditions] or is the least likely to be part of most formal definitions of preservation.”<sup>3</sup> Although one may not consider a GIF, meme, or emoji a digital folkloric item, it is difficult to imagine life without them. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, major video conferencing services, like Zoom, have included emojis to communicate to others in the room without disrupting the speaker.

The Library of Congress’s (LoC) American Folklife Center maintains a plethora of materials, ranging from oral histories, to songs, to memes. In 2000, the LoC launched a small pilot project to document websites associated with the presidential election. A year later, the team was planning to take the same approach to the mid-term elections, but the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, on September 11, 2001, drastically changed the initial plans for this project. Today, the American Folklife Center (AFC), along with the Internet Archive, use open-source tools, including web crawlers, to preserve online content as it evolves. The AFC has a designated collection titled “Know Your Meme,” and has also preserved GIFs, and some Facebook Emojis.<sup>4</sup> Know Your Meme documents the history of these culturally complex items and provides explanations and history with the thousands of memes in their collections.<sup>5</sup>

In 2017, the LoC launched two digital collections with the intent to preserve internet/online culture: the Webcomics Web Archive and the Web Cultures Web Archive.<sup>6</sup> The Web Cultures Archive is a smorgasbord of digital formats and objects, including emojis,

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<sup>1</sup> Trevor Owens, *The Theory and Craft of Digital Preservation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Duncan, “10 Oldest Languages in the World Still Spoken,” Busuu Blog, March 2, 2022, [https://blog.busuu.com/oldest-languages-in-the-world/#:~:text=1500%20BC%20\(circa.-,3500%20years%20old\),Buddhism%2C%20Hinduism%2C%20and%20Jainism](https://blog.busuu.com/oldest-languages-in-the-world/#:~:text=1500%20BC%20(circa.-,3500%20years%20old),Buddhism%2C%20Hinduism%2C%20and%20Jainism).

<sup>3</sup> Owens, *Theory and Craft of Digital Preservation*, 22-3.

<sup>4</sup> Kelsey Campbell-Dollaghan, “The Folklore of The Future? It's Meme Culture,” Fast Company (Fast Company, July 9, 2018), <https://www.fastcompany.com/90134928/the-folklore-of-the-future-its-meme-culture>.

<sup>5</sup> Carly Lamphere, “It's a Meme World After All: An Examination of the Cultural Impact of the Internet Meme,” *Online Searcher* 42, no. 5 (2018): 29.

<sup>6</sup> Erin Blakemore, “Why the Library of Congress Thinks Your Favorite Meme Is Worth Preserving,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (Smithsonian Archive and Library, June 15, 2017), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/library-of-congress-meme-preserve-180963705/>.

memes, and lolcats – a photograph of a cat accompanied by a clever or funny caption. This collection’s sole purpose is to document how the internet helps people create and share modern-day folklore, or what would be today’s versions of nursery rhymes or riddles. The director of the AFC, Elizabeth Peterson, said in a press release, “This will help scholars 25 and 100 years from now have a fuller picture of the culture and life of people today.”<sup>7</sup> Since the Library of Congress’ inception, they have gathered over a petabyte of data. This is unsurprising as governments, businesses, and individuals produce significantly more electronic and born digital records now than even ten years ago.

An internet meme is “an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread by various users.”<sup>8</sup> Richard Dawkins’ book *The Selfish Gene*, includes one of the earliest definitions of memes, as they are now commonly known. Dawkins defines memes as “cultural transmissions that, like genes, replicate and mutate with each transmission between people and over generations.”<sup>9</sup> This is clearly a broad definition and could be applied to several images, slogans, or riddles. One of the best examples are the one-liner Chuck Norris phrases that equate him to being an all-knowing, all-powerful human. There are several versions of those phrases and they have evolved over time. One such example is “Chuck Norris doesn’t push himself up, he pushes the Earth down.”

As Dawkins’ definition explains, memes evolve over time. What we know today as a meme is a macro image – which would be a picture or artwork – superimposed with some type of text to convey emotion or information.<sup>10</sup> In terms of evolution, one of the best modern examples is the infamous “what in tarnation” meme. Though it is difficult to trace meme origins, the “what in tarnation” meme format exploded in popularity in early 2017. The original image is of a Shiba Inu dog wearing a cowboy hat, with the superimposed text “what in tarnation,” as seen in *Figure 1*. This meme, according to knowyourmeme.com, is used to express bewilderment or confusion, and the slogan is implied to be used



Figure 2 Original "what in tarnation" meme.



Figure 1 An "evolved" meme from the original "what in tarnation" format.

<sup>7</sup> Blakemore, “Why the Library of Congress Thinks Your Favorite Meme Is Worth Preserving,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (Smithsonian Archive and Library, June 15, 2017), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/library-of-congress-meme-preserve-180963705/>

<sup>8</sup> Lamphere, “It’s a Meme World After All,” *Online Searcher* 42, no. 5 (2018): 29.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

typically by Americans from the Southern regions.<sup>11</sup> There is a seemingly endless amount of variation of this meme format, but *Figure 2* is a demonstration of how a digital meme can evolve.<sup>12</sup> Though the image and slogan are somewhat different, it is easy to see how these memes come from the same family. One of the commonalities between the two is the presence of the cowboy hat. In both images, the dog and the cleaning supplies appear to wear a cowboy hat. The next indicator of meme relation is the superimposed text that usually follows the format “what in (blank)-ation.” The “what in tarnation” memes have touched several facets of everyday life, including the fictional universe of Harry Potter, (What in Transfiguration), science (What in Germination), and modern events, such as Steve Harvey’s mistake in naming the wrong contestant as Miss Universe in 2015 (What in Mistaken Identification).

Much in the way that memes, GIFs, and emojis can communicate modern events, they also have considerable impact on elections, social justice movements, diversity and inclusion efforts, and overall communication. Heaps of literature is published about former President Donald Trump’s 2016 election victory and the critical role memes played in securing the Oval Office. Donald Trump quickly became the mascot of anti-political correctness and a champion for alt-right groups on websites such as Reddit and 4chan.<sup>13</sup> Though Trump never made memes of his own in the macro image, he and his campaign team retweeted several memes made by the alt-right, thus providing a massive social media platform for polarizing messages to gain traction and solidify Trump’s regard for right-wing extremists.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Trump’s persona has been used as a form of communication, specifically in reference to the famous GIF created following one of the 2016 presidential debates, where he just shouts “Wrong!” over Democrat Nominee Hillary Clinton. The former President’s number-one form of communication was Twitter, prior to his banishment from the platform following the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the Capitol Building in Washington D.C. His reliance on Twitter, and viral internet memes, indicates just how much memes have become a part of day-to-day communication for political candidates to connect with their base of supporters.<sup>15</sup>

Emoji’s have had a considerable impact on communication, including diversity and inclusion efforts, and political conscientiousness. In 2016, Apple made headlines with the decision to change the revolver-pistol emoji to a water gun design. Samsung and Twitter followed suit later in 2018. Other platforms such as Google and Facebook have also changed their gun emoji to the water gun design. Although the move to change the design has something to do with conforming to the industry standard of gun emoji design, it is nearly

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<sup>11</sup> What in Tarnation. Digital Image. Know Your Meme. 2017.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1324031-what-in-tarnation> .

<sup>12</sup> 11 What in Sanitation. Digital Image. Know Your Meme. 2017.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1226509-what-in-tarnation> .

<sup>13</sup> Rodney Taviera and Emma Balfour, “How Donald Trump Won the 2016 Meme Wars.” *The Conversation*, November 20, 2020. <https://theconversation.com/how-donald-trump-won-the-2016-meme-wars-68580>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Lamphere. “It’s a Meme World After All,” *Online Searcher* 42, no. 5 (2018): 31.

impossible not to see these design changes as a political statement regarding gun violence and the demand for gun reform laws in the United States.<sup>16</sup> Changes to emoji design, as well as emoji development, are catalogued on the website Emojipedia.com, where emoji variants and their meanings are actively preserved. In recent years, social media platforms have integrated

more inclusive and diverse emoji options, such as LGBTQ+ symbols and representation, deaf and hard of hearing designs, and skin tone variations, both for individual and couple emojis. As of July 2020, there are 3,304 emojis available through various platforms, such as Discord, Facebook, Twitter, Apple, Samsung, and Google.<sup>17</sup>

Memes have been described as “cherished communication artefacts of our

time,” and prime examples of contemporary digital culture.<sup>18</sup> Emojis, GIFs, and memes are important communication tools of our time and they do not appear to be going away any time soon. Attempts to preserve these digital objects pose a plethora of problems for newly-minted digital archivists. Copyright, mass production or variants, and privacy all threaten the preservation efforts developed to ensure these folkloric objects persist long into the future.

Copyright laws in the United States continue to be an issue for any area of digital preservation, which includes folkloric digital objects such as memes, GIFs, and Emojis. These digital objects of today will form the future perception of social and political history, some of which might not be understood without these items. Determining what objects are available to



Figure 3 Graph depicting changes to the pistol emoji from various social media/operating system platforms.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Litman-Navarro. “Google Gun Emoji Is No Longer a Pistol: Here’s Why.” Inverse. Inverse, April 25, 2018. <https://www.inverse.com/article/44132-google-gun-emoji-goes-water-gun> .

<sup>17</sup> Alexandra Chaves. “From 1999 to 2020: How the Emoji Became Part of Our Visual Culture.” The National News. The National News, July 17, 2020. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/art/from-1999-to-2020-how-the-emoji-became-part-of-our-visual-culture-1.1050655> .

<sup>18</sup> Arran Rees. ““Are Memes Worth Preserving?” ACMI, January 17, 2020. <https://www.acmi.net.au/stories-and-ideas/are-memes-worth-preserving/> .

the public with no restrictions is problematic. With any collections policy, there is always some type of donor agreement. This agreement can include a time-hold, such as when those records can be opened to the public, or if the donor wants the objects digitized, or if they are deaccessioned, to whom they would be given back to. Memes are created in droves every day. Though some have watermark identification, most never have an author listed or included. Additionally, determining a copy from an original is impossible. Not only are there copyright collection concerns, but privacy is an issue, as well. With the creation of private Facebook groups, users can circulate memes and GIFs amongst one another, but not share them outside of the group- unless the viewer take a screen capture. That screen capture directly violates the consent of the group and its members to have private conversations. It violates the intellectual property of the individual that created the meme , especially if there is no intent to collect that information in the first place.

Memes, GIFs, and emojis are vital communication tools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These 21<sup>st</sup> century hieroglyphs help to convey emotions between individuals. They serve as gauges of political activism, both positive and negative, as well as diversity and inclusion efforts. These objects will remain relevant in the calls for social justice efforts, such as mitigating gun violence in the United States, affording accessibility to those in the disabled community, and including members of the LGBTQ+ communities. These digital objects possess a significant amount of folkloric material. Dismissing them as child-like, or insignificant, diminishes the way businesses, organizations, and individuals communicate with one another in a world connected through the Internet. There are serious concerns posed by copyright laws, privacy, and mass production against the active preservation of these objects. Know Your Meme relies on user tagging to help trace the origins of specific meme formats. This approach weeds through variations of memes to get to the original, but also is limited by the number of users participating in the tagging. It is also essential for archivists to be vocal when legislation for copyright or other intellectual property laws are drafted in congress – these laws shape the boundaries in which digital preservation might be limited. Archivists will always develop and implement solutions, just as they have for challenges in the field before.

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