Makes a Meme Instead

A Concise History of Internet Memes

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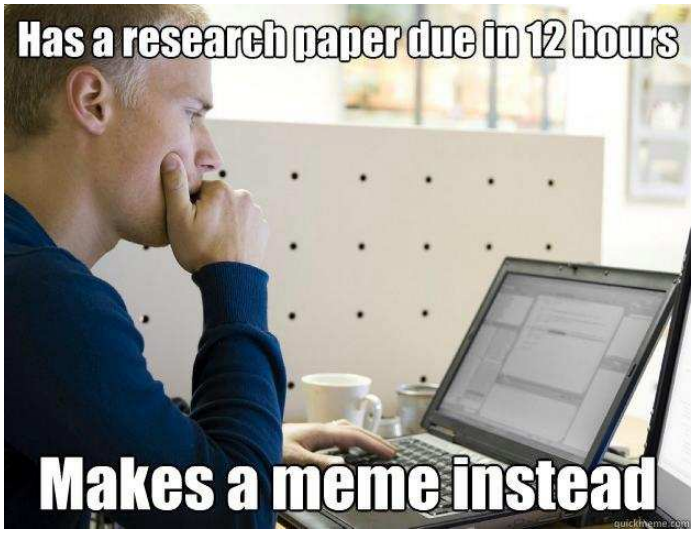


Abstract | The aim of this research paper is to investigate the ontology and history of the Internet meme (a piece of content spreading online from user to user and changing along the way) from the 1980s to the early 2010s. After looking at the question of defining the Internet meme, I will analyse the evolution of the phenomenon from social, cultural and technological perspectives, such as chaos theory, the new aesthetics, generative systems, as well as trace the origins of certain elements of the Internet memes from a media-archaeological aspect.

Keywords | Internet meme, Internet humour, digital culture, Internet culture, media archaeology, new aesthetics

"Used to give a bit of pseudo-academic gravitas to stupid viral shit."

('Meme.' Urban Dictionary[1])

The study of memes and memetics began in 1976 with Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*, the book in which the concept was born. However, of all the different types of memes, the focus on Internet memes – a piece of content spreading online from user to user and changing along the way – is only a recent development. Researchers have mostly tried to capture single moments of the story and produced studies with a synchronic approach towards Internet memes, such as migration (Shifman & Thelwall), appeal (Miltner, of LOLcats) or their role in subcultures (van de Fliert). The history and evolution of the ever-growing phenomenon of Internet memes have been overlooked by academics so far.

The story of memes is crucial to the understanding of digital culture, and not only as a characteristic of an Internet subculture, but as a cultural artefact that is gaining new meaning and function as it is breaking more and more into the mainstream. The aim of this research paper is to trace this process from the earliest Internet memes to the current trends, when memes are not only amassed on specialised humour sites, but the Internet meme is also a way of communication and genre. To understand this evolution, I will try to pinpoint the technological, sociological and cultural reasons for the emergence of the Internet meme culture that is so prevalent today.

Trying to achieve a diachronic analysis of culture, I created a short timeline of Internet memes. For researching, collecting data and fact-checking, I mainly relied upon Know Your Meme, Wikipedia, and an already compiled (yet often inaccurate) timeline on an interactive timeline creating website (Tatercakes). Unfortunately, the sheer amount of Internet memes makes it a difficult task to gather everything (Know Your Meme is the biggest site currently attempting to do this task with numerous volunteer contributors), let alone mention everything, so the timeline and history in this paper is – in a way – incomplete and arbitrary. Instead of setting on a mission that is

[1] Definition by Lord Grimcock, submitted on 23 June 2009 to Urban Dictionary.

most likely impossible, I have chosen a number of examples that all show different aspects of the evolution of Internet memes. They were probably not the first in a certain trend, but they are useful and interesting examples that have a wide reach (i.e. not only a subculture). Attempting a media-archaeological approach, I will use theories such as generative systems, chaos theory and the new aesthetic to find out what is new and what is old about this phenomenon; as well as to analyse the recurring patterns, and the social and ideological influences that shaped one of the most interesting phenomena of digital culture.

Challenge Accepted: Identifying Internet memes

Most definitions of Internet memes rely on a concept in evolutionary biology, coined by English evolutionary biologist and author Richard Dawkins. He proposed the term 'meme' (based on the Ancient Greek word *mīmēma* 'something imitated') to denote all non-genetic behaviour and cultural ideas that are passed on from person to person, spanning from language to the conventions of football (Davison). The concept became highly debated, and "[s]ince then, like any good meme, it has infected the culture" (Dawkins). The debate mainly concerns what is and what is not a meme, but so far, creating a substantive definition has seemed impossible (Knobel & Lankshear). With the emergence of the Internet, the term 'meme' was also applied to content that spread from user to user online. The first "academically rigorous" definition for this particular variation was proposed by Patrick Davison in 2009 in his essay *The Language of Internet Memes*:

> An Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission. (122)

He also developed a framework for analysing Internet memes, which involves the deconstruction of memes into three elements: the ideal, the behaviour and the manifestation. This method builds on the replicability of memes, and it can also help in tracing migration and evolution, as well as in categorisation. Knobel and Lankshear denoted two types of Internet memes based on replicability in their 2005 typology of meme media. They differentiated between high fidelity static memes and remixed memes which

are "replicated via evolution, adaptation or transformation of the original meme vehicle." The largest non-academic website for meme and Internet phenomenon research, *Know Your Meme* makes the same distinction in their definition of memes, arguing that content that is only shared and which has not changed or evolved while being passed on to others is viral content, and not a meme.

Strangely, even though high fidelity static memes are properly elaborated on in their tree diagram, Knobel and Lankshear only add a short description of remixed memes ("collaborative, absurdist humour in multimedia forms") and then list examples (2005, figure 3). Know Your Meme is the most updated, focused meme research site that bases its definition on the regular users' perception of a meme, which (as mentioned above) seems to indicate that the term 'Internet meme' has recently gained a new meaning in online meme culture; Davison's definition is not specific enough anymore. This new genre of the remixed Internet meme is the subject of this research paper.

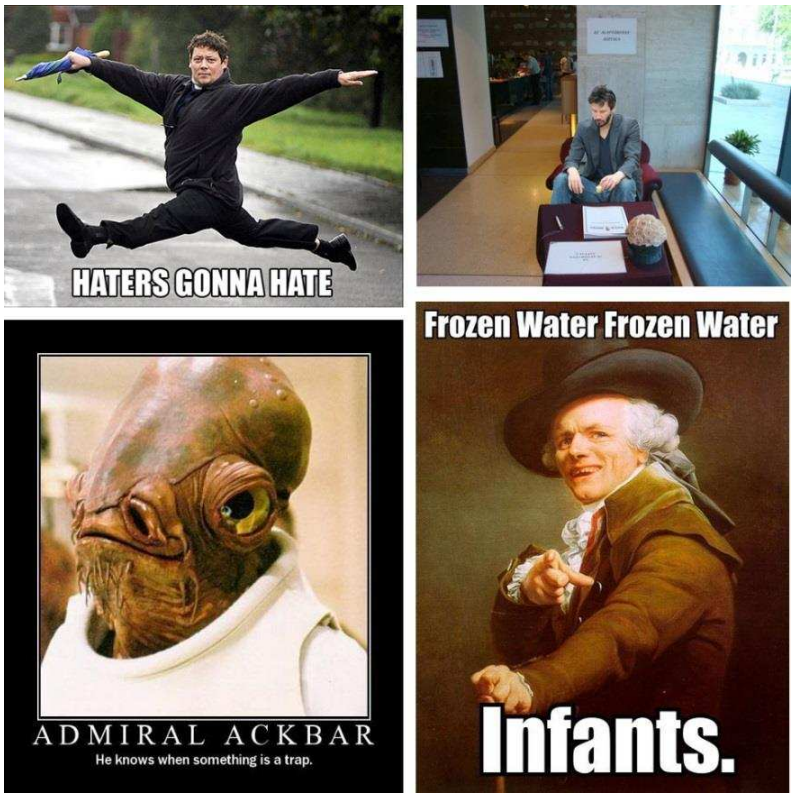


Figure 1. Basis of variation in remixed Internet memes. Haters Gonna Hate: text-based; Sad Keanu with the Hungarian constitution: image-based; Joseph Ducreux and the song 'Ice Ice Baby' by Vanilla Ice, Demotivator referencing a line from Return of the Jedi: image and text style.

Despite these definitions and categorisations, the Internet meme remains a highly subjective concept. Still, there are a number of characteristics that seem prevalent, and these will form the basis of this

investigation. The Internet meme is a form of visual entertainment, which can manifest in many different formats, such as a still image (for example an image macro[2]), an animated GIF, or even a video. For practical reasons, this paper will focus on still images, but all findings should be applicable to animated types as well. Most of these images are simplistic, often low quality and mundane in style. They are not meant to be beautiful or particularly realistic; the focus is on the message. They are often multimodal, however: to single images there are often "additional texts, images and even sound or animation (…) added to enhance the meme's contagious qualities" (Knobel & Lankshear). The ideals of remixed still image Internet memes can be reflected in text and image: the meme can be a phrase, a standalone image, or an image accompanied by text or the expected style of text (fig. 1). The possible sources of a meme are limited 'only by the number of things there are in the world for us to discuss' (Allen, cited Shifman): it can be cinema, video games, celebrities, as well as politics. In one image, a meme can be used with a certain topic, or it can be juxtaposed with other memes. Last but not least, a remixed meme is not only shared online (through email, websites, social media) but also encourages participation, inviting people to often anonymously contribute to the entertainment.

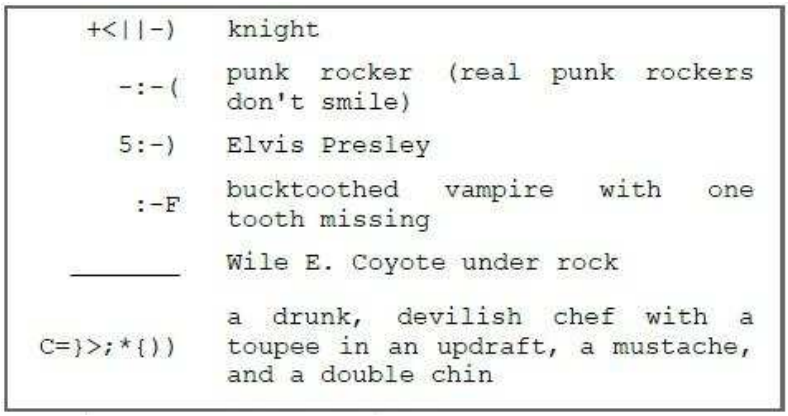
True Story: Beginnings

One of the earliest (and maybe even the first) Internet meme was the emoticon (Davison). The "sideways smiley face" composed entirely of punctuation marks was created on 19 September 1982 by Scott E. Fahlman. An avid USENET user, Fahlman realised that the lack of a visual channel in online communication needed to be overcome to avoid misunderstandings, for example while using humour or sarcasm. He suggested the usage of ':-)' as a way of marking posts that were not meant to be taken seriously. He also created ':-(', which he proposed to be the sign indicating that the post is indeed serious.

The smiley quickly spread to other communities and it soon became a meme. The emoticon, as it began to be called, already displays many

[2] An image with text (generally white letters with black borders, and in Impact font) superimposed. Most widely used format for e.g. LOLCats.

definite characteristics of Internet memes in a very minimalistic form. The early years of the Internet were script-based[3] – like USENET, the "original text-only social network" (Biggs) – and yet visuals were seeping in. Emoticons are pictograms (or icons) of faces, created by putting certain characters (e.g. letters, numbers, punctuation marks) on a regular computer keyboard in a certain order; similar to ASCII Art (which has been around since about 1966) yet simpler, as knowledge of ASCII codes was not necessary. Their function was two-fold: to intentionally communicate specific non-verbal information (Yus 167) and to entertain.



+<||-)	knight
-:-(	punk rocker (real punk rockers don't smile)
5:-)	Elvis Presley
:-F	bucktoothed vampire with one tooth missing
_____	Wile E. Coyote under rock
C=}>;*{))	a drunk, devilish chef with a toupee in an updraft, a mustache, and a double chin

Figure 2. A selection of humorous emoticons from the collection of David W. Sanderson (http://w2.eff.org/Net_culture/Folklore/Arts/smiley2.list)

Their pragmatic use is well-known to all Internet users, as many emoticons are still in use today: they are so much a part of language, of the idiolect, that many people choose their own preferred emoticons, based on fashion or what their peers are using (e.g. whether to use [:)] or [=)]; [:DD] or [XD]). Thus the meme as a vehicle for communicating certain ideas is very much present in emoticons already, especially as Dresner & Herring (qtd. in Yus 166) point out "many facial emoticons do not seem to express a single emotion, or indeed any emotion at all" but they convey more complex ideas or emotional states[4].

The use of emoticons as entertainment is a fad that seems to have long disappeared. For a considerable time, however, people were playing with emoticons, aiming for more and more complex pictograms of faces, often of famous people and funny characters (fig. 2). These emoticons are not

[3] A number of scholars even applauded this quality of the Internet, claiming that it restored "the power that the written word has lost in the 20th century" (Shifman & Blondheim qtd. in Shifman).

[4] A good example is [:P] which is generally attributed to be a sign of teasing, flirting and sarcasm (Dresner & Herring qtd. Yus 166).

necessarily easy to understand, which means these "jokes" work only with the explanation (as in what the emoticon means); it is the surprising "solution" and the simplistic means of creating these images that yield the humour. Multiple books were published showcasing these, such as the *Smiley Dictionary* (1993) by Seth Godin, and with the emergence of text messaging, even telecommunications companies like Vodafone circulated similar glossaries. However, the remixing of emoticons for humour has mostly faded since.

The emoticons were in a way an experiment with a new technology, and this one experiment had a lasting effect. In becoming a meme, and their iconic nature played a crucial part. As Douglas Rushkoff writes, "[t]he simpler an icon, the more universal its application" (55): and so the icon – the meme – will be shared, used, reused, remixed. But it cannot be too simple either, for then its meaning can become ambiguous; as Balázs Karafiáth put it, a meme has to be big enough to have its own substantial meaning (Kurucz). At the same time, it also has to be small enough to not be able to mutate in its basic form (Karafiáth qtd. in Kurucz), and Rushkoff echoes this thought in saying that an icon too detailed "becomes too specific and less widely applicable" (55).

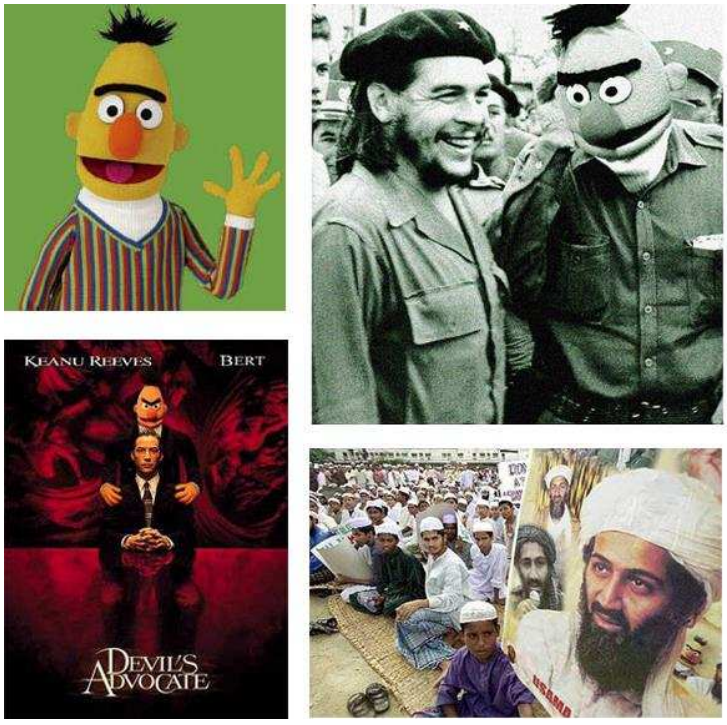


Figure 3. Bert and some compromising pictures. On the far right is the infamous photograph from a Bangladeshi protest.

Another experimentation with new technologies was the website *Bert Is Evil*, which hosts images that can easily be considered examples of the first modern remixed Internet meme (fig. 3). Created by Filipino artist and designer Dino Ignacio in 1997, the site aims to collect "documents and images that show that Bert [character from Sesame

Street] is evil." The whole site is dedicated to proving Bert evil by these pictures[5]. Ignacio made all the images, in which Bert is photoshopped into existing photographs, showing him in incriminating situations (e.g. at the assassination of President Kennedy, or in the company of Adolf Hitler). Every image was accompanied by a short background story to make them seem more realistic.

Bert Is Evil is an early example of online visual humour. Although there are still relatively long texts on the website, the real attractions are undoubtedly the images. The layers feature had already been introduced to Photoshop in 1994, which made the manipulation of digital(ised) photographs easier than ever before (West). Nevertheless, participation in Bert is Evil was not open, as Ignacio was the only one posting images. Half a year after the site began, he started to receive submissions, but only a selected few made it to the site (Ignacio). Nevertheless, this did not stop the Internet from playing with the meme, and soon numerous parodies and mirror sites starting appearing, dedicated to the spreading of the "truth about Bert", even after Ignacio stopped updating the original site (Cassel).

In his books, Douglas Rushkoff alludes to the Rodney King tape multiple times as a "high-leveraged butterfly's wing" (25). Bert is Evil is another example. "Chaos can be disheartening" (Rushkoff 25): Ignacio never expected "the horror", as he phrased it, that would come from him trying to get featured in an underground Internet magazine and to make his friends laugh. On 5 October 2001, Photoshopped images of Bert and Osama bin Laden appeared on countless banners in a pro-bin Laden protest in Bangladesh (FoxNews.com). At that moment, the hurricane spawned, and "[f]rom his bedroom, Ignacio sparked an international controversy" (Jenkins 2006:2). In 2001, Ignacio was frightened by how "reality was imitating the Web[6]." Indeed, the dynamical system of world media (Rushkoff 25) and the

[5] This collective strain was already characteristic of websites, and not only links to interesting content but collecting visual content. One striking, also humorous example was *Fat Chicks in Party Hats* (2000) and this pattern reappears to this day, on sites such as Tumblr (e.g. *Kim Jong-Il Looking at Things* or *Nick Clegg Looking Sad*). Remixed meme versions include *Kim Jong-Il Dropping the Bass* and *Selleck Waterfall Sandwich*.

[6] Ignacio was also not the creator of the Bert-bin Laden image, which came from a fansite. On 11 October 2001, he inactivated his own (the original) Bert is Evil website, as it was not "contained and distanced from big media" any more.

convergence of different media platforms (Jenkins 2006) provide just the right space and atmosphere for memes to flow and be passed on in previously unexpected ways. Evil Bert was one of the first "children of chaos", and definitely not the last.

Yo Dawg I Herd You Like Memes: The Rise of the Internet Meme

The term Web 2.0 was coined in 1999 to describe a number of new technologies that seemed to be changing the landscape of the decade-old Internet. A misleading term, however; as Tim Berners-Lee pointed out, Web 2.0 is just "a piece of jargon", as the Web was always planned to have the possibilities that it offers now: connecting people around the world, sharing content and experiences. Something still changed around the turn of the millennium, and this shows in the story of Internet memes as well. Learning from such popular viral personal websites as Mahir Çağrı's[7], advertising agencies created the first instances of viral marketing, such as *Super Greg* by the Minneapolis based agency, Fallon Worldwide[8]. Memetics was gaining significance.

One of the most significant Internet phenomena in the early 2000s was *All Your Base Are Belong to Us* (fig. 4), a meme that spawned from the badly translated opening sequence of the 1989 arcade shooter game *Zero Wing*. The meme has been popular since 1998, but it has reached previously unimagined heights after November 2000, when the first Photoshop thread dedicated to the meme was opened on the forums of Something Awful. The thread reportedly had 2000 images, and that was only the beginning of a saga that later involved even more manipulated pictures of "[s]treet signs, restaurant awnings, cinema fronts, advertising, cartoons, T-shirts, tattoos, golf balls inserted into turtles, all bearing this new phrase" (Johnston) uploaded to the Internet.

No remixed meme had reached such heights of virality before, and there are a number of reasons why this particular meme became so popular at

[7] Mahir was one of the first Internet celebrities. In 1999, he created his personal website, where he introduced himself in bad English and posted domestic pictures of himself. The unintentional humour of the website made it into one of the first viral websites in Internet history.

[8] Their most notable project include three fictional characters with their own homepages: *Super Greg*, *Roy (Born to Destroy)* and *Curry* (a.k.a. *Rubber Burner).*

Figure 4. The original screen capture from Zero Wing, and some of the variations.

that particular time. One secret for its success lies in the increasing generativity of Internet memes in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Remixed Internet memes are generative systems in that they are "a set of of tools and practices that develop among large groups of people" (Zittrain 74). In the case of Internet memes, one generative system is built on another generative system, the Internet (Zittrain deems this to be often "the best recipe"). In his book, *The Future of the Internet*, Jonathan Zittrain defines five principal factors that affect the generativity of a system or a tool: leverage, adaptability, ease of mastery, accessibility, and transferability (71). The more these qualities are maximised, the more contributors can take part in the system, and generativity can develop and be sustained.

The main leverage for creating memes is provided by graphics editing softwares and the Internet (the generative layer below). Software make the creation possible by having the necessary functions. The Internet serves as the platform for sharing, where the meme can migrate, reach others and evolve. In a recent development, these leverages have even blended to make the process even simpler: this shows in the appearance of meme generators, the most famous being *Memegenerator.net*. These generators are "meme editing software" built into websites, making other software like Photoshop redundant as the whole process can be done on one platform (although this only works for certain types of memes).

In terms of adaptability, we have already seen a few different uses of Internet memes. The most obvious use is the meme as the vehicle for a joke – All Your Base Are Belong to Us is a perfect example. The emoticons are

the first example for using them to express certain emotions and retain non-verbal conversational cues in a medium where the visual and audio channels are absent in communication. This use is also a recurring pattern in Internet memes; one modern example is *Do Not Want* (2005), which most often manifests as a reaction image macro, illustrating disgust and/or disapproval. Their value to marketing specialists and advertising agencies has also already been mentioned, and even more, newer functions and possibilities for Internet memes lie in the road ahead – to be discussed in later paragraphs.

As it has been mentioned before, one of the most important characteristics of remixed Internet memes is their simplicity, and such a simplicity that makes their creation easy with the available leverage. Most of them are made by using two functions at maximum: cut-copy-paste and text tool. The most widely used graphics editing software Adobe Photoshop went through crucial development in the years leading up to All Your Base Are Belong to Us. The functions needed for creating Internet memes have become considerably easier to master; this is not surprising as already from its initial release in 1990, Photoshop was marketed as a "mass-market, fairly simple tool for anyone to use" (Computer Arts). As it has been mentioned before, Photoshop 3.0 introduced layers, to make the manipulation of images easier. Photoshop 5.0 (1998) offered improvements in adding text to images, a crucial element of Internet memes. Photoshop 5.5 (1999) came with the option of adjusting image quality and size so that the image would be fit for Internet use – the 'Save For Web' function. Photoshop 6.0 (2000) again made the layers interface and the text tool more practical (West). Mastering the creation of a meme is thus open to everybody, and the aforementioned meme generators are even easier to use with their pre-made templates and straightforward instructions.

The accessibility of Internet memes first depends on the accessibility of their natural habitat, the Internet. According to demographic reports published by NielsenNetratings.com, "more widespread possibilities of access to the Internet (…) can be dated from roughly 2000 onwards" (Knobel & Lankshear). The growing number of message boards, forums, and social networks offer a platform to share and enjoy Internet memes, and most require only a free registration. Due to it being marketed to the masses, the

accessibility of Photoshop (as a creative tool) was also provided by keeping it at a low price and compatible with all operating systems (not to mention the emergence of peer-to-peer file sharing application in the early 2000s, where Photoshop is available for "free" download).

The last factor, transferability is related to the most important quality of memes: replicability. The simplicity of memes ensures that it can be learned, copied and changed according to the creator's wishes. The Internet offers visibility and unprecedented speed for the migration and evolution of memes. Images also transcend cultures more easily than language, and even if there is text in the image, it is most likely to be in English, the language that "one out of four of the world's population speak (…) to some level of competence" (statistics of the British Council).

Apart from their generativity, an important reason for the success of All Your Base Are Belong to Us is its humour, which is a key component of the meme. It was the desire to continue this joke that sparked the "remixing epidemic" (Knobel & Lankshear), to spread this particular example of "geek kitsch humour" (Taylor qtd. in Knobel & Lankshear). Enjoying the ridiculous outcome of bad translation between languages (here from Japanese to English) is not a peculiarity of "geek culture", however. This type of humour had been popular for many years by then; it is no surprise that All Your Base Are Belong to Us has struck a chord with people on a scale wider than just subcultures. One celebrated earlier example is *English As She Is Spoke*, a Portuguese-English conversational guide written by Pedro Carolino in 1883, containing predominantly incoherent English phrases. A celebrated source of unintentional humour stemming from faulty translation, author Mark Twain heralded the work as a true classic[9]. The real difference between such works and All Your Base Is Belong to Us is in the reaction to the humour – passive enjoyment has turned into active involvement in creating (and adding to) the joke.

All Your Base Are Belong to Us was popular enough to reach out of the circles of Internet subculture into the mainstream. The story was covered in

[9] Mark Twain wrote in the introduction to the US edition of the book: "In this world of uncertainties, there is, at any rate, one thing which may be pretty confidently set down as a certainty: and that is, that this celebrated little phrase-book will never die while the English language lasts. Its delicious unconscious ridiculousness, and its enchanting naiveté, as are supreme and unapproachable, in their way, as are Shakespeare's sublimities." (1883)

multiple major papers in early 2001 (one example is the Guardian article referenced in this paper), and it is one of the most well-known Internet memes to this day. The reaction that crossed media platforms and swept through the world in a matter of days shows again the dynamical nature of the Internet and memes. "The tiniest change within the tiniest detail", such as the surfacing of the Zero Wing video at the right place and time turned the entire media world upside down for a few weeks (Rushkoff 24; Johnston).

Such dynamics provide the perfect environment for spreading false information and hoaxes, as it can be harder to tell what is real and what is not in a chaotic mediaspace. In September 2001, after the 9/11 attacks, a Hungarian man named Péter Guzli took an old picture of himself standing on top of the World Trade Center in New York, and with the help of Photoshop, added a plane heading towards the tower in the background. He sent it to some of his friends, intending it to be just a bit of a joke. The image went viral, however, and a story started circulating about how a camera was found in the debris after the collapse of the towers, with a picture on it of a tourist who had his picture taken just seconds before the collision. The photograph was sent around en masse in emails in all seriousness[10], inciting all

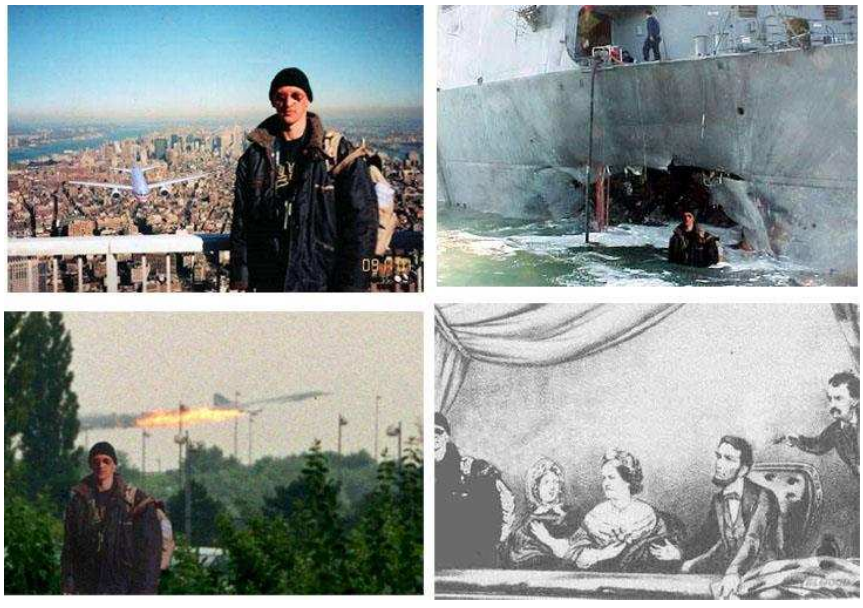


Figure 5. The Tourist of Death "photographed" on the World Trade Center and at various historical tragedies.

[10] Know Your Meme quotes the original text accompanying the image: "We've seen thousands of pictures concerning the attack. However, this one will make you cringe. A simple tourist getting himself photographed on the top of the WTC just seconds before the tragedy … the camera was found in the rubble!!"

kinds of conspiracy theories. The hoax was so efficient, there are people to this day believing the picture was genuine.

On 26 September 2001, the generative machine started working, and a thread appeared on Something Awful, just like in the case of All Your Base Are Belong to Us. Guzli (although his identity still unknown) was dubbed the *Tourist of Death* (touristofdeath.com is the website dedicated to the phenomenon and collecting the remixed images of the meme), and he was photoshopped into photographs of countless other historical and fictional tragedies, from the assassination of Abraham Lincoln to the bomb-rigged bus in the 1994 movie *Speed* (fig. 5).

Although Guzli came forward in November 2001 and admitted to the image being manipulated (Index, 2001), the news of the image being fake did not spread as efficiently as the original hoax, or even the remixes. Guzli issued a public apology in 2011, a few days before the ten year anniversary of the attacks, saying how sorry he was about a private joke going wrong as the police was still receiving calls about the photograph[11] (Orange News). Reality and the Internet entwined dangerously again, and Tourist Guy turned out to be another butterfly's wing, photoshopped to stand at the edge of chaos. All Your Base Are Belong to Us came from an obscure video game already a decade old during the meme's rise to popularity, while Tourist Guy stemmed from an event very real when it appeared. As Rushkoff says, we need to adapt to this life of chaos, of which the Internet meme culture is just a small fraction.

[11] His full apology reads: "It was a private matter – I assumed my friends would recognise me and call me to see if I was alright, but they didn't, they posted it on to other friends and suddenly it was all over the world. … I am ashamed that even now the police still get calls about it, I never did it for money and I never intended to cause any harm to the real victims or their families … I didn't really stop to consider the consequences and never thought it would go outside of my small circle of friends."

Little Fatty (known as Xiao Pang in China; fig. 6) also came from a similarly unexpected source: a private photograph of 16 year old Qian Zhijun from Shanghai. Originally posted on the Internet by one of his teachers in 2002, the image soon ended up in numerous Chinese forums, and people started photoshopping Qian's face onto celebrities, especially on movie posters. Qian quickly became a nationwide celebrity, and in early 2003, the remix meme reached US forums, and soon he was known worldwide. Little Fatty is one of the earliest instances of a meme spawning from private digital photographs uploaded to the Internet.

Figure 6. The original photograph of Qian and some of the remixed images. This meme still appears sometimes, as the image on the far right references a 2012 news story.

The advances in the technology of digital photography, as well as its accessibility to a wider public, resulted in an increasing number of private images appearing online, right at the meme community's disposal. Alongside domestic photographs of people, by the mid-2000s, it was the large amount of pet photos uploaded[12] that played a part in formulating new trends in Internet memes. The two famous instances *Advice Dog* and *LOLCats* are both said to originate from 2006, and they proved very influential in shaping today's meme culture.

[12] As Ethan Zuckerman ironically phrased it: "Web 1.0 was invented to allow physicists to share research papers. Web 2.0 was created to allow people to share pictures of cute cats." (2008)

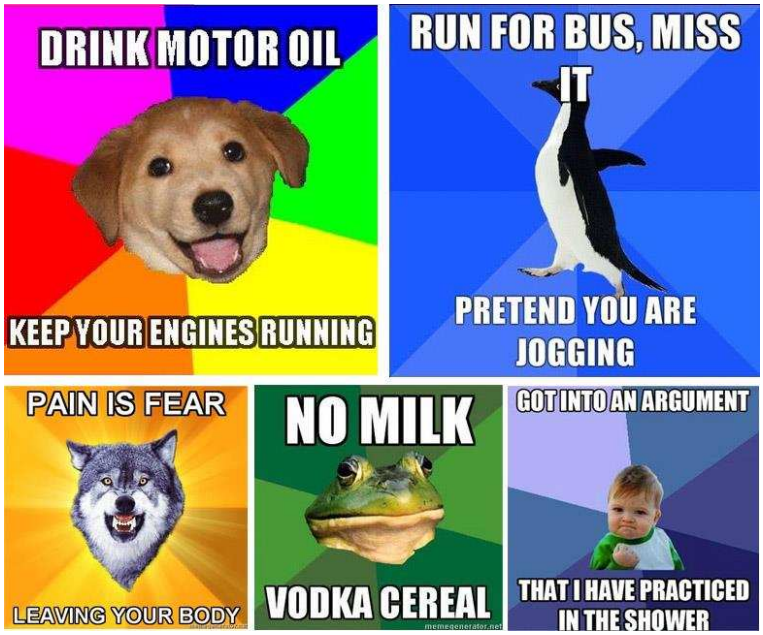


Figure 7. Memes from the Advice Animal series, from left to right: Advice Dog, Socially Awkward Penguin, Courage Wolf (one of the few not necessarily humorous Advice Animals), Foul Bachelor Frog, and Success Kid

Advice Dog is the first example of the *Advice Animals* (fig. 6), a series of Internet memes all based on the same format: a cut-out of an animal or the head of an animal, pasted over a generic colourful background, with text added above and/or below the face. The original Advice Dog was used as a reaction image in a thread on the Mario fansite *The Mushroom Kingdom*. The creator of the thread was asking for advice on having his first kiss, to which user T.E.M. replied with an image of his own dog's head on the colour wheel background, and commented 'Just do it, man'. This original advice was soon followed by not only remixed versions, but multiple spin-off memes featuring different animals (and people[13]), such as the *Socially Awkward Penguin*, *Courage Wolf*, or *Foul Bachelor Frog*.

The history of LOLCats (fig. 7) also began in 2006, possibly on PHP and vBulletin message boards (e.g. General Mayhem), but the popularisation of funny cat pictures happened through and on 4chan[14], especially in their weekly feature *Caturday*[15]. Most of these images were image macros with

[13] Notable examples include: *Success Kid*, *Good Guy Greg*, *High Expectations Asian Father* and *The Most Interesting Man in the World*.

[14] The website that is considered to be the home of countless Internet memes was launched on 1 October 2003. Also known as the base of Anonymous.

[15] The earliest archived thread for Caturday on 4chan was started 26 December 2006, but this is quite possibly not the first ever thread dedicated to cat pictures on the /b/ board. The Livejournal community *Caturday: Post Some Fucking Cats* (caturday.livejournal.com) was created 5 February 2005, also encouraging users to post cat image macros.

Figure 8. The supposedly original LOLCat and some variations. Monorail Cat is often considered a submeme.

the text written in lolspeak[16]. *I Can Has Cheezburger?*, the most popular LOLCat site to this day, opened on 11 January 2007 and with that, funny cat pictures were undoubtedly launched into the mainstream.

The popularity of the Advice Animal series and LOLCats can be attributed to them being a digital reimagining of anthropomorphic animals traditionally in folk culture. In her investigation into the appeal of LOLCats, Miltner noted that people identify with LOLCats; they often see themselves in the animals, and in the situations they are facing. This notion is also the basis of the beast fable genre, which was "a particularly popular continental literary type throughout the Middle Ages" (Treharne 332), and in which animals "speak and behave like human beings in a short tale usually illustrating some moral point" (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms). As Howard Needler writes, "the identification of humans with animals is a reflexive operation of humans seeking to view themselves by 'holding the mirror up to nature,' as it were- albeit to a nature manipulated by human agency" (426).

It is no question that anthropomorphic animals have always been a significant part of culture, and since the Middle Ages they have appeared in fairy tales, animal jokes and Disney films among others[17]. Animals in these stories often have a stereotype attached to them (many of which transcend cultures), such as the cunning fox, the brave and noble lion, or the wise owl.

[16] In her thesis on LOLCats, Miltner describes lolspeak as "the *lingua franca* of the LOLCat world. Its exact origins are unknown, but it appears to incorporate elements of Motherese (baby talk), AOL Chat Speak ("BRB", "LOL") and Leetspeak."

[17] Anthropomorphic animals also appeared in a series of postcards created by Harry Whittier Frees in the early 20th century, which featured the animals dressed up in human clothes, posed in human situations. They even had humorous captions, which also makes them a progenitor of LOLCats.

These memes can be considered the source of Advice Animals, which similarly have certain characteristics attributed to them. The reason why cats as LOLCats are endowed with so many different qualities probably stems from the wide variety of stereotypes associated with them traditionally too, such as the cool cat, the lazy cat, or the evil (black) cat.

Advice Animals and LOLCats also resemble comics, which Rushkoff argues are our key to understand the modern language of visual information – and that includes the language of Internet memes. Just like in comics, where actions, emotions and events are iconic (Rushkoff 57), the ideal that an Internet meme wishes to represent is also done iconically; thus making comics in several ways a precursor to remixed Internet memes. The *Rage Comics* phenomenon (fig. 9) is a very literal example for this parallel. The first of these stereotypical stock characters created with simple drawing softwares, *FFFUUUU Rage Guy*, appeared on 4chan in 2008 in short comics form. This was later followed by a subreddit on Reddit in January 2009 where people could upload their own comics, and soon a great number of new characters were introduced by contributors in and outside Reddit, such as *Forever Alone Guy*, *Trollface*, *"Y U NO" Guy* and *Cereal Guy*. Many of these iconic characters soon were turned into Advice Animal-style memes as well, showing the connection between the two genres.

Figure 9. On the top: a Rage Comic featuring the first character, FFFUUU Rage Guy in the last image. Below, clockwise from top left: Y U NO Guy, Forever Alone Guy, Cereal Guy and Trollface.

Rushkoff explains how one of the most bizarre aspects of the Marvel Universe is that superheroes from different comics set in different times, places and fantasies often appear together in one comic strip; even the drawing styles might differ inside one frame (60). In a way, this is what happened to Rage Guy and his fellow characters when they were inserted into the completely different format of Advice Animals. However, just like Marvel characters "[a]lthough they are divorced of their original contexts, the characters maintain their own iconic identities and traits" (60); similarly, memes are often purposely juxtaposed in one single image but they still retain their character (fig. 9). By communicating mostly through icons, both comic books and Internet memes are teaching readers about understanding such a language – "to recognise new patterns or new combinations of established ones" (Rushkoff 56) – as well as inspiring them to communicate in a similar fashion.

Figure 10. From left to right: Kanye Interrupts & Chuck Norris Facts; This Looks Shopped & Bayeux Tapestry; Sad Keanu & Strutting Leo

I Can Has Cheezburger and Public Opinion

There exists a LOLCat image macro which reads "Memes: inside jokes for people with no lives." For the longest time, Internet memes were seen as a strange output of an Internet subculture, which are separated from reality except on those occasions when a mainstream news article reported on the unusual ways people spend their time on the Internet. In the "chaotic mediaspace" (Rushkoff 49), however, more and more people are in on the online inside jokes known as Internet memes. Websites such as *9GAG* (2008) and *Memebase* whose main profile is to feature user-uploaded Internet

memes are one of the major, most frequented humour sites today (9GAG has an estimated 4 million unique visitors every month, and as of November 2012, it has an Alexa Rank of 252).

As Internet memes are becoming a more and more conventional type of humour, their use is becoming more varied. For a long time, Internet humour was mostly focused on global topics such as sex, gender and animals (Shifman) – fitting for the "global village", greatly outnumbering local topics like politics and sports. The visual form of Internet memes and the overwhelming use of the English language as the lingua franca (the same reasons that make Internet memes an accessible system) have also played in a role in their global nature. Starting from the late 2000s, however, online meme culture has seen a continuous increase in more localised Internet memes. The ongoing process of "glocalization" (Roberston qtd. in Shifman & Thelwall), or blending of global and local, turned the Internet meme into a *global* vehicle (reflecting global culture with its Western influences) that allow people to talk about their *local* topics, closer in time and space (and often language), alongside the more universal themes.

Remixed memes also showcase this change, as seen in the memes that talk about celebrities and mainstream popular culture. On 13 September 2009, at the MTV Video Music Awards, as singer Taylor Swift was accepting her award for "Best Female Video", rapper Kanye West went up stage, took

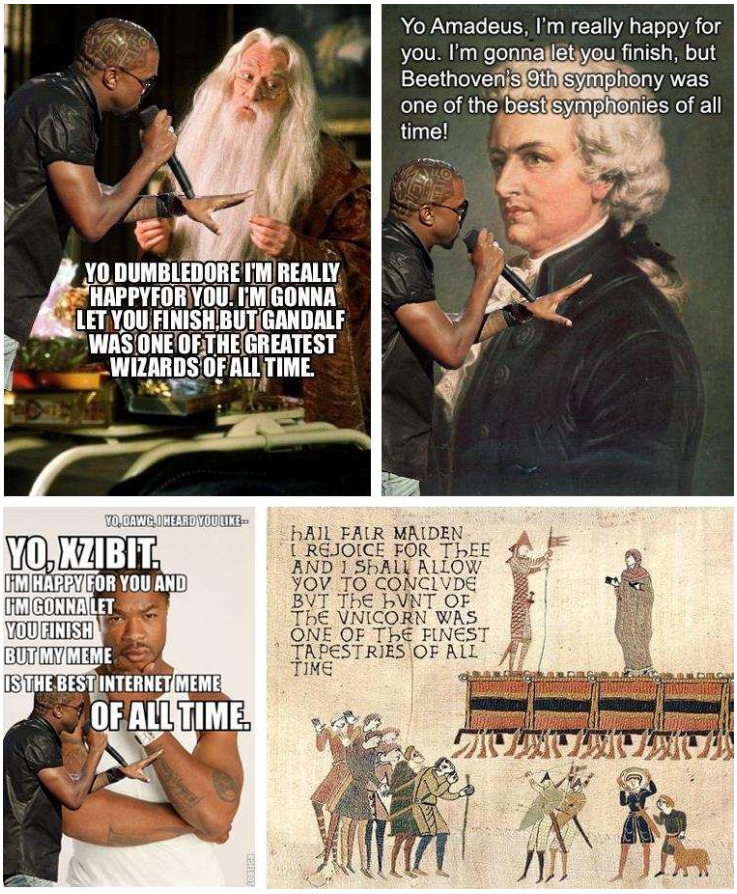


Figure 11. Examples of the Kanye Interrupts meme, the last image a remix with the Bayeux Tapestry meme.

the microphone from her and gave his infamous speech about how Beyonce should have won the award[18]. The event turned into a scandal, to which the reaction of the Internet was the *Kanye Interrupts* meme (fig.11).

Kanye Interrupts and similar memes point to a new trend in Internet memes, which is a result of the increase in cognitive surplus, a novel resource described by Clay Shirky. Cognitive surplus is created from the increasing free time available to educated population, and the spread of public, participatory media (Shirky 27). The Kanye West scandal was not only gossiped about but people put time and energy into creating new content, for example, by using the generative system of Internet memes. As Shirky notes, production and participation can bring enjoyment, and the output is generally shared: a similar thing can be observed with Internet memes, as they are created by millions of enthusiasts around the world.

In the chaotic, dynamical mediaspace, cognitive surplus can be a useful asset in processing the large amounts of information fired at the population at all times. Memes show that, even if at a low level, even if just for the sake of a joke, more and more people are engaging with the news and what is happening around them, trying to make sense of it all. The generativity of Internet memes allows instant reaction and encourages virality, so people can comment on the most current issues, events and people, as well as find an audience. Memes

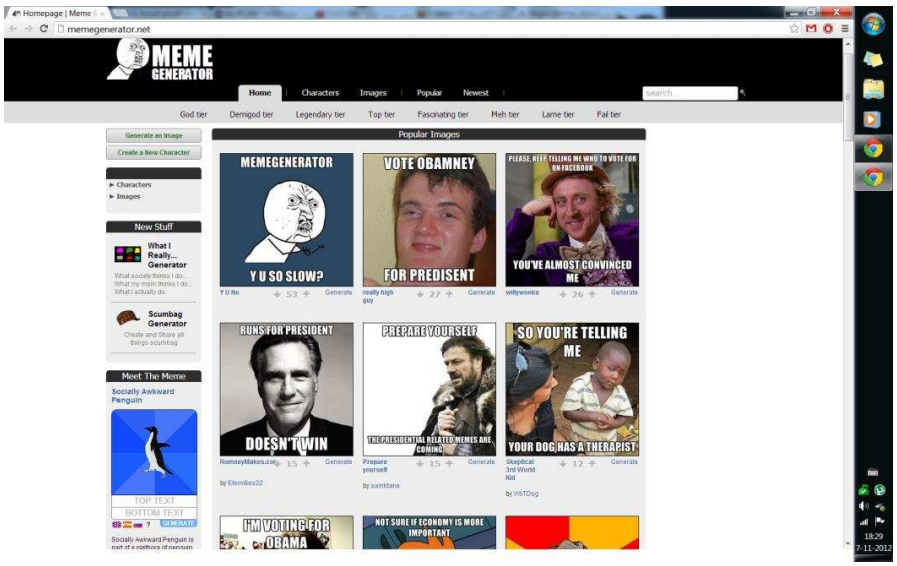


Figure 12. A screenshot of Meme Generator on 7 November 2012, a day after the US presidential elections.

[18] West's entire speech was turned into a catchphrase by the Internet: "Yo Taylor, I'm really happy for you, Imma let you finish but Beyonce had one of the best videos of all time…one of the best videos of all time!"

can "tell the news": sites like Memegenerator reveal that, to this day, the most popular memes at any given time will likely cover important news stories (fig. 12).

Capturing the world in the form of Internet memes fits perfectly into the everyday aesthetics of our age. What Susan Murray realised while researching Flickr and digital photography rings true when looking at Internet memes too. She describes our new everyday aesthetics as "fleeting, malleable, immediate", where one image lasts until the next one appears. Johnston already noted this in relation to All Your Base Are Belong to Us, where not only the life of one image is short but of the meme itself. The information overload of the current media does not permit longer engagement with one piece of news, as the next hour will supply with many new ones. The Internet meme (and its popularity) is a poignant illustration of this condition.

On 8 November 2009 a photograph was posted by then French president Nicolas Sarkozy's official Facebook page of the president at the Berlin Wall on the day it was taken down in 1989. Already the same day, several journalists raised concerns about the photograph being genuine, and inspired by a user comment on their site, Le Post announced a contest for the best parodies of Sarkozy's misfired attempt to raise his reputation on the social network. The Internet meme *Sarkozy Was There* (Sarkozy y était) was born, where mostly French users created manipulated pictures of Sarkozy appearing at famous historical events (fig. 13).

Sarkozy Was There brings yet another comic-related genre into mind: the political cartoon. Similarly "succint, sharp analyses of the events unfolding around us" (Dougherty), Internet memes seem to be the digital age

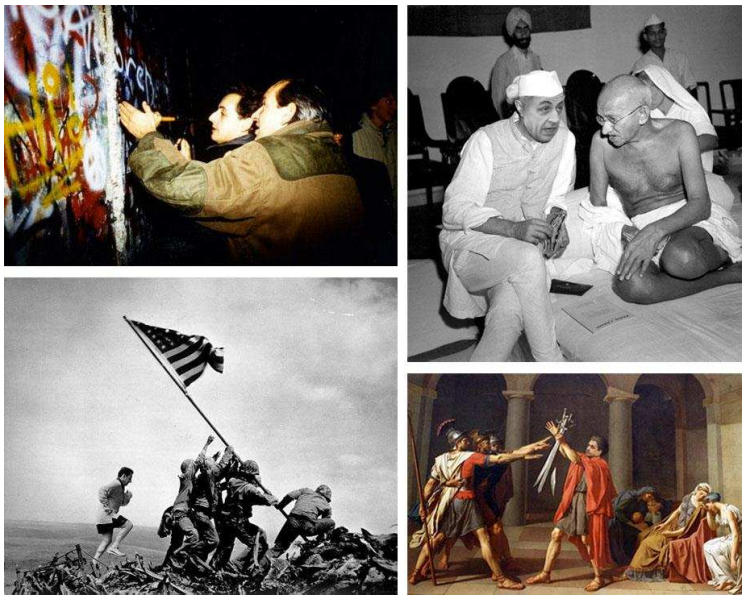


Figure 13. Examples of Sarkozy Was There.

political cartoons, with infinitely extended participation. Addressing political and social issues in a humorous and iconic form, cartoons and memes alike can grab "attention in a way that an article does not" (Dougherty). As Zuckerman phrased it: "My single favorite comment on SUP's acquisition of LiveJournal is a lolcat (fig. 13:1), which sums up the situation better than any angry post could have."

Sarkozy Was There was one of the first examples of a trend that continues to this day. In 2005, Knobel and Lankshear found a mere 5 memes to be social commentary (employing humour) out of the 19 analysed in their study. They reported that these memes were generally high fidelity memes (meaning such content was only passed on and shared), while evolving memes were the vehicle mostly for online jokes with little to no serious content. People often turn to popular culture and humour to find answers to societal dilemmas (Rushkoff 68); in the early 2010s, the Internet meme is one of the ways people are addressing such issues. Their nature and virality made Internet memes a fitting genre to express opinions, encourage participation, and stand up for a cause, be it in France or China[19] (fig. 14).

Figure 14. 1. LOLCat reaction image mentioned by Zuckerman; 2. United States: the Binders Full of Women meme - criticisng statements of Mitt Romney; 3. Hungary: "Brussels is not Moscow... unfortunately", parodying the stereotype of the Hungarian "Socialist Pensioner"; 4. Netherlands: a comment about Dutch politician Geert Wilders; 5. China: calling for the freedom of lawyer and civil rights activist Chen Guangcheng.

[19] An Xiao Mina has analysed many Chinese Internet memes, calling them social media street art, and heralds their use in that they can avoid censorship and still provide political commentary on a range of issues.

Figure 15. Nijmegen Uni Memes.

Internet memes showcase a new kind of understanding of the world, and a new kind of creative and social outlet. In 2012, a student of the Radboud University of Nijmegen created the Facebook page *Nijmegen Uni Memes* (fig. 14) dedicated entirely to Internet memes about "[w]hat's happening at the [university]". In such communities, general gossip, university rivalry, as well as discussions about exams and papers all happen online and by using Internet memes that users submit to the page. Nijmegen Uni Memes is only one of the numerous university meme pages that launched on Facebook, which show how Internet memes have become a part of vocabulary for Internet users. In 2012, the Internet meme is undoubtedly one of the most widespread modes of online communication, and it is not only the emoticon any more.

This development also often serves as proof of the idea that the attention span of the younger generations is decreasing dangerously. Rushkoff not only points out that this is relatively undocumented, but argues that "the ability to piece together meaning from a discontinuous set of images is the act of a higher intellect, not a lower one" (49-50). Internet memes would not be this popular if users did not know how to read them. Similarly to (political) cartoons, memes "require knowledge if the viewer is to 'get it'" (Dougherty). Remixed Internet memes are intertextual by nature, and consequently, people who enjoy and create memes - like readers of cartoons and comic books - are drawn towards a more non-linear way of

thinking, because of the "icons, gaps, and discontinuous relationships" they are faced with (Rushkoff 60).

Problem? Conclusions

Shifman says that humour can be "a unique key for the understanding of social and cultural processes." Internet memes also offer this unique insight into the changes in our perception of the world, the media and our own lives. Although cut-and-paste techniques are nothing new, "such dislocated imagery" has never before been so conventional and in the mainstream (Rushkoff). Internet memes are only a small fraction of the converging mediaspace, where "stupid viral shit" (Urban Dictionary) is just as visible as anything.

Rushkoff writes that as members of a chaotic mediaspace, everybody will have to be "equipped to absorb the data flying across our screens, make sense of the postlinear grammar with which it is formatted, and participate in its production as amateur journalists" (49). He claims children of the late 20th century – the "children of chaos" – are already doing this, and they are ready to face what lies ahead in terms of social and cultural processes. They are making memes.

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