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Meme Ethics

Social media is a large and ever-present part of modern life. One of the most prevalent methods of communicating over social media is that of the meme. The word meme was first used by Richard Dawkins, a British scientist, in his 1976 book *The Selfish Game*. He described it as “a unit of cultural transmission” (“The History of Meme.”). Today, a meme usually refers to a picture or other media which is used to communicate a joke or idea. A current debate is the ethical implications of creating and sharing memes.

First of all, there should not be any laws aside from preexisting copyright, harassment, or slander laws, which govern the way that memes are created or shared. Memes are a way for people to communicate and share ideas. In the United States this falls under the realm of free speech which by the first amendment gives people the right to say whatever they wish, even if some people do not agree or find the speech offensive. It is this freedom that the United States is based off of and it is for this reason that the freedom of speech is the first amendment. Memes are no different than any other form of communication both on and off of the internet and should be treated no differently.

One common question is whether or not a person should be able to ask for compensation in order for their image to be used as a meme. They can ask, but the internet is a place which

cannot be easily controlled. Once something is posted to the internet it stays there forever, and there is no way to control its use. From a moral perspective, if a person makes a direct claim that they do not want to be used as a meme than that request should be honored. However, there is no way to enforce a law that would accomplish this goal without being either ineffective or too far reaching for its purpose. Additionally, there should be no rules or guidelines to making memes. Although some memes last for a long time, the majority of memes would become old and overused.

All this being said, just because something should be legal does not mean it is morally right. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 10: 23: ““Everything is permissible” – but not everything is beneficial.” Using a meme against someone’s wishes, or for purposes of bullying are morally wrong, even if they are allowed. From a Christian perspective it is important to treat people with kindness and respect both on and offline. The ACM code of ethics sections 1.2 states that it is paramount to “avoid harm” against others whenever possible and not be malicious.

An issue with regulation is that a meme can be anything. It is impossible to say definitively what is and is not a meme. However, the main issue when it comes to trying to regulate anything on the internet is that the internet is a place that is nearly impossible to control. The combination of its rapidly changing environment and the general anonymity of its users creates a space where anything can and will be created and memes are no different. This element of freedom is part of what makes the internet great. Memes are a form of communication of a shared interest between many people. They are a source of unity in a divided world. Memes are simply a tool to communicate. They are only as good or as bad as their creators. As such, there should be no restrictions to memes as restricting memes would be restricting free and equal speech.

Works Cited

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