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Ethics Paper: Memes

Memes are an incredibly popular internet trend where someone gives textual context to a video, gif, or photo and then posts it on the internet. Most of the time, the process does not involve asking for permission of the media's owner and the intentions of the meme are to simply get others to laugh. Unfortunately, these memes can turn into bullying and making fun of others. This paper will discuss the current lack of laws and restrictions on meme creating and if anything should be done to address the legal and moral issues that exist. I argue that there needs to be a separation between public use and commercial use, so that laws can be implemented which compensate the original media owners and the creator as well. Morals should be a little more separated from the legal aspect, but not disregarded.

The first issue is the moral ramifications between the owner of the meme content and the creator. The creator has a moral obligation not to cut others down through inappropriate usage of meme content. One of the most convicting verses for me personally, Colossians 3:8, states that one should put away all "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth" (*English Standard Version*, Col. 3.8). This bible verse doesn't have to directly mention memes to be applicable. It is your duty to be considerate of others and kind to simply be a decent human being, and the moral obligation just elaborates on that basic courtesy further. Section 2 of the IEEE Code of Ethics emphasizes intentions to "treat all persons fairly and with respect, to not

engage in harassment or discrimination, and to avoid injuring others” (IEEE). With moral and secular sources pointing to a same goal, I would say it is certainly a big enough issue to address legally. Legally I believe the standard should be consistent with the current movement against character defamation and cyber bullying. That was there is a balance between enforcing the law and leaving some of the moral responsibility to the individual.

Secondly, the owner of the meme content and the creator should be able to benefit from a meme when money gets involved. Section 1.5 of the ACM Code of Ethics states how “Computing professionals should not claim private ownership of work that they or others have shared as public resources” (ACM). To me, this would not necessarily imply prohibiting meme creation from other’s media, but instead that credit should be given for what’s created and more importantly for what’s used to create it. Since memes are meant to be harmless and for free entertainment, I believe that laws on media usage should be requiring only that reference and credit be given to the owners of the media. This should be the creator’s responsibility. Additional legal support should be implemented to fairly distribute money to the creator and owner, if it somehow ends up being a factor for a meme.

The internet can be brutal. So much so that little things intended to be innocent such as memes, are used to harm others. Although some of the moral obligations should be the creator’s responsibility, legal accountability is still very appropriate for both private and monetary use of memes. Concerning content permission and money, I believe that should be exempt from legal boundaries under the grounds of public use besides the requirement of giving credit to the owner’s content. When money is thrown into the equation, I believe that the laws should be way more detailed and monitor much closer so that the owner and creator are fairly compensated: The owner for the content, and the creator for the work in creating and thinking of the meme idea.

Works Cited

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