Internet Memes: Weapons of Mass Disruption

The 2016 presidential election is ripe with opportunity for people to poke fun at candidates. Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook are full of young people making fun of Clinton's failed attempts at connecting with youth and of Trump's gravity-defying hair. These widely and rapidly spread jokes, pictures, and videos are all examples of Internet memes. Memes tell a story about what is happening in the world at a particular time; they act as a time capsule for a brief period of history. Michael Phelps's angry pre-race face was a meme representation of the 2016 Olympics in Rio. Popular among young people, Internet memes offer a twenty first century method of social commentary, particularly in relation to politics. The purpose of this essay is to understand how Internet memes have the capacity to influence people in a way that disrupts normal political socialization.

To understand how memes can effect socialization, one must first understand how important memes have been in Internet culture. Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist, coined the term "meme" in 1985 in reference to a piece of culture or behavior that spreads quickly and effectively through society by non-genetic means (Levinson, 2012). Dawkins likened the way that cultural items are spread through society to the way genes are biologically passed down (Solon, 2013). Cultural items such as speech are imitated and copied by members of a society, changing slightly from person to person. Websites like Tumblr, Facebook, and Twitter allow people to identify and share cultural items (videos, photos, etc.) while providing their own commentary on what they're sharing. Internet memes are a subcategory of memes that are effectively studied because they are easily identifiable, and thus, more easily studied. A strong definition of the concept of the Internet meme is "an image, recreation, catchphrase, or other piece of media that circulates throughout the population as different people mimic its form" (Lawson, et al., 2016).

By distinguishing Internet memes as a subcategory of a broader genre of communication, we can study how Internet memes give young people a voice in the political world. Traditionally, there was a distinct divide between the sender of a message and the audience that receives the message (Creoteau, Hoynes, pg 8). In *Media/Society: Industries, Images, and Audiences,* David Croteau and William Hoynes cite the Internet as the driving force that led audiences to be users of media, too (pg 8). Through social media, people can share their beliefs to a great number of people. In this way, the sender and audience of media are one and the same. Internet memes capitalize on participatory culture, since they must be both consumed and shared in order to spread and become understood by everyone in a particular culture. Memes provide social commentary, and in the case of political memes, act as a modern version of political satire.

This logic allows Internet memes to be applied to socialization. Croteau and Hoynes define socialization as "the process whereby we learn and internalize the values, beliefs, and norms of our culture, and, in so doing, develop a sense of self" (pg 16). Parents are generally perceived as having the most power over the socialization of their children because they are their primary caregivers. However,

in modern times, the Internet has a powerful role in shaping the self. Since access to the Internet is widespread and cross-cultural, what we define as our "culture" is broader than what was usual in the past. Memes have the capacity to disrupt "normal" (at least, normal in the past) socialization by presenting us with opinions that differ from those we are generally surrounded by. For example, if you identified strongly with the culture of your church, you likely wouldn't be subjected to people with different religious beliefs in your everyday life, since we tend to surround ourselves with likeminded people. However, different religious opinions are unavoidable online, whether you're in a comment section or on your Facebook page. This reasoning can be applied to political views, as well. Traditionally, political socialization could be attributed mostly to parents and one's surrounding community. However, different political opinions are seemingly unavoidable on the Internet. Political posts are extremely common on social media sites, particularly Facebook. People are likely exposed to a variety of political opinions expressed in different online mediums, like memes. These varying opinions have the power to disrupt our sense of self. Exposure to political memes, in addition to conversations and debates in comment sections, articles, and blogs can have an effect on a person's political opinions.

A strong example of an Internet meme that sparked a political conversation was a result of the 2011 movement known as Occupy Wall Street. The movement protested economic and social injustices in the United States (Milner, 2013). The long-term protest in New York City sparked smaller protests all over the United States. The Internet meme "Pepper Spray Cop" was born after a photograph was spread of a police officer pepper spraying peaceful protestors at the University of California, Davis. The image was posted onto Reddit, (a popular website for sharing Internet memes) and became a popular Internet meme within days (Levinson, 2012). The police officer was cut out of the picture and superimposed onto other photos so that it looked like the officer was pepper spraying other people who are generally perceived as innocent by society (babies, for example). The meme addressed police brutality in a way that highlighted the problem with using violence to stop a peaceful protest.

When Internet memes like "Pepper Spray Cop" are widely distributed through the Internet, it shapes our political beliefs. When a user of media contributes content by either sharing or creating a form of an Internet meme, they are interpreting what it means and forming an understanding of the world. For example, one popular "Pepper Spray Cop" meme was a picture of the police officer edited so that it looked like he had replaced Lady Liberty on the Statue of Liberty (Levinson, 2012). This social commentary highlighted the use of police brutality in the "land of the free" where we consider liberty, and the right to peacefully protest, to be American institutions. It prompts people to question whether or not the United States actually lives up to the ideals promised in the Constitution. What people take away from this, or any other variation of this meme affects their view of police brutality, which affects socialization. Their sense of self that has to do with political beliefs would change.

Figure 1:

Figure 2:

For another example of the power of Internet memes, one can consider the 2016 presidential election. This election has been rife with memes poking fun at all the candidates. Internet memes have had a particularly strong affect on Bernie Sanders and Ted Cruz's campaigns, with different results. Bernie Sanders had widespread support from young voters; with 29% more votes from people under the age of thirty compared to Trump and Clinton (Blake, 2016). Bernie Sanders memes were popular among his supporters, which cast him in a positive light among young people. While it could be speculated that the memes strengthened his popularity among his supporters in addition to young people, it was not enough to win him the Democratic nomination.

Ted Cruz's campaign, on the other hand, was subjected to countless memes after Cruz was likened to the elusive "Zodiac Killer". Cruz's campaign was plagued by young people jokingly posting "proof" that Ted Cruz was, in fact, the Californian serial killer (Paul, 2016). There is no concrete evidence that proves that Cruz's campaign was negatively affected by such memes, but one could argue that being constantly bombarded with negative or positive memes could influence how you perceive any candidate. If you were subjected to several Ted Cruz memes likening him to the Zodiac Killer, you may start to see him as a less serious candidate. Alternatively, if you saw a lot of positive Bernie Sanders memes online, you might start to subconsciously perceive him in a more positive light, regardless of your political views. Memes in this way can effect your political beliefs, and thus, disrupt "normal" political socialization.

Table 1: Examples of Political Memes.

First	row	2008	Sarah Palin Russia
Second	row	2013	Pepper Spray Cop
Fourth	row	2016	Hillary Clinton Cell Phone
Third	row	2016	Ted Cruz Zodiac Killer

In the age of the Internet, memes are a powerful way that young people can express their beliefs and make a political statement. The seemingly constant subjection to political opinions on the Internet can have an affect on our political beliefs and, in a greater sense, the way we see the world. Politically charged Internet memes are a relatively new form of media that can disrupt our "normal" political socialization. "Normal" socialization is no longer monopolized by family and local communities we identify with. What we perceive as our culture has been expanded with increased accessibility to the Internet. The new "normal" socialization is driven not only by family and friends, but also by people all over the world that we connect with through the Internet. Internet memes are one of the many factors that affect socialization.

Works Cited

Blake, Aaron. "More Young People Voted for Bernie Sanders Than Trump and Clinton Combined — by a Lot." *The Washington Post.* 20 June 2016. Web. 9 Sept. 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/06/20/more-young-people-voted-for-bernie-sanders-than-trump-and-clinton-combined-by-a-lot/>.

Croteau, David, and William Hoynes. "Media and the Social World." *Media/Society: Industries, Images, and Audiences.* SAGE Publications, 2014. 2–30. Print.

Lawson, L., Jones, A., Franklin, C., Pace, G., Wu, H., Block, J., Karlov, J., et al. (2016). Memes in Media, Culture, and Society. *Scalar.* Retrieved from http://scalar.usc.edu/works/memes-1/index

Levinson, Noah. " 'I Can Haz Cultural Influenz?': The Effects of Internet Memes on Popular Culture." *Forbes & Fifth* 1 (2012): n. pag. Web. 9 2016. <http://forbes5.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/forbes5/article/view/21/21>.

Milner, Ryan M. "Pop Polyvocality: Internet Memes, Public Participation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement." *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 7, 2013. Accessed 9 September 2016.

Paul, Kari. "How Memes Shaped the 2016 Presidential Election." *Complex.* 12 May 2016. Web. 9 Sept. 2016. <http://www.complex.com/life/2016/05/election-memes>.

Solon, Olivia. "Richard Dawkins on the Internet's Hijacking of the Word 'Meme'." *Wired.* 20 June 2013. Web. 9 Sept. 2016. <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/richard-dawkins-memes>.