

Article

# Mememes, Magic and What It All Means

On Explaining Current Research When Your Findings Leave You Lost for Words

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I'M NOT SURE I EVER GOT DESCRIBING MY SUBJECT DOWN TO A TEE DURING MY FIRST YEAR OF STUDY. I began my research in 2014, having developed an idea for a thesis whilst in employment. Being from a practical background in art and design rather than a theoretical or academic one, joining Birkbeck to pursue a PhD was something of a sea change. Duly, I encountered the same challenges many would-be-scholars face when adopting the specific, oftentimes novel, sometimes combative-sounding, language of academia: that which reveals worlds within worlds. As a nervous newcomer, I sometimes felt that I was pantomiming this unfamiliar, inevitably loaded phraseology. Worse still, my research topic, internet memes, was not at that time as widely discussed as it is today. As a result, I was occasionally seized by apprehension when asked what I was researching. But neither my new college peers nor my uncle Jim would be well served by the answer I stumped up: 'pictures of cats on the internet!'

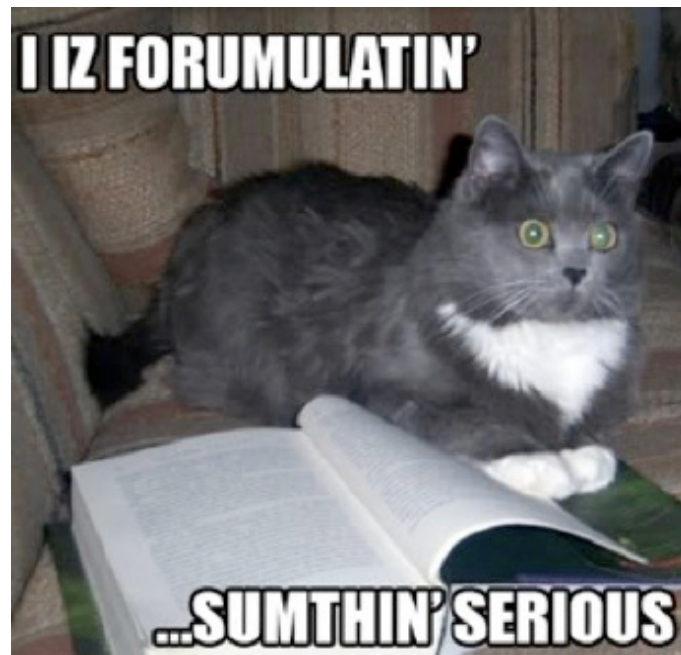


Figure 1. KnowYourMeme

A typical interaction: I'm two months in and letting a colleague know that I have recently begun working towards a PhD. The inevitable (and much welcomed) rejoinder would be something along the lines of: 'Oh great! What's it on...?'. A pause. My answer would be a variation upon a theme. 'Uh... internet memes...'. If the day was sunny and I was full of confidence it would be 'internet memes!', the exclamation point full of conviction. At other, less exuberant times, I would offer a more tentative modulation: 'internet ...memes?', my upward inflection at once apologetic and probing. Occasionally, I would add embellished flourishes for exploratory play, live testing my ideas as I worked them through, simultaneously experimenting with how legitimacy is messaged: 'Internet memes, yeah, I'm currently thinking of it in terms of *sociolinguistics*...'. Frequently, I would simplify the premise: 'I'm basically looking at how people talk to each other on the internet.'

Reactions to whichever answer I gave would vary in the early days, ranging from the genuine fascination to a recalcitrant scepticism of the lingering 'media studies isn't a real discipline' variety. Some of my companions were more or less familiar with memes, either involved in their production, circulation or having encountered them on one online forum or another. Others had zero familiarity with the concepts I was exploring, or with memes themselves.

Yet, one quality was detectable across the gambit of puzzled, enthusiastic, curious, nonplussed responses back then – and that was surprise. Surprise that something so seemingly trivial, so literally immaterial, as internet memes could warrant scholarly attention. I am by no means the first person to research internet memes, with the path-breaking work of Limor Shifman, Ryan Milner, et al., tackling the subject in terms both elucidating and inspiring. Nor am I the first to tackle the foundational principle of memetics, which, though described in different terms, has been addressed by media scholars and folklorists alike for generations. Yet, *internet* memetics remains an emergent discipline. So, to study internet memes, those silly little jokes, somehow seemed like 'overkill'; a delightful whimsy to some, an absurd pursuit to others.

However, over time, I noticed responses to my big reveal starting to change. When those questions were asked and answered, those with unconvinced reactions became fewer and further between. And this, I thought, was in itself interesting to observe.

## Memes Go Mainstream

Between 2014 and 2015 internet memes began to stake their place in the mainstream. I started seeing them on t-shirts on the high street, printed out on office notice boards, and – in what I considered a particular turning point – cynically adopted by the *Mail Online*'s features editor, who would run fluff pieces on whatever 'hilarious internet memes' were doing the rounds on a slow news day. No longer the preserve of a shadowy cabals of hackers, nerds, freaks and geeks; memes were becoming normalised, vernacular, with their existence a point of cultural debate. Whilst the darker, transgressive content continued to be spawned on the infamous message boards 4chan, 8chan and Reddit, many long immersed in chan culture expressed resentment that 'their' memes had become so 'basic'. This family-friendly content was boosted by click-driven sites like *Buzzfeed*, providing more or less sanitised content which flourished on and between Facebook and Twitter, where pop-cultural reaction gifs (an animated image that conveys an emotional response) and relatable memes proliferated. As a result, my explanations about my research were increasingly well received. I could even relinquish my earnestness and make jokes around the topic: 'Yes, I'm looking at a lot of internet jokes... and taking the fun out them entirely!' Gesturing broadly, I would go on to explain that, *of course*, to understand memes as a cultural phenomenon one has to understand both the infrastructural and technical systems that afford them, as well as looking at the situated social conditions that give rise to memes and their genres. So, all flippancy aside, this is really a 'Very. Serious. Business.'

Yet, also by 2015, I was finding it harder to indulge such jokes. Just while internet memes were establishing themselves as a familiar social currency, my research had begun to adopt a more sober timbre. This evolution is perhaps best articulated via the development of one particular meme: Pepe the Frog.

In summer 2015 Birkbeck's Department for Film, Media and Cultural Studies ran a PhD Symposium during which students provided updates on their research progress. My presentation was geared to do just that. At this juncture, I was keen to articulate how memes acquired specific, discrete meanings: how they functioned both as idiolects – language use that is person-specific – and as networked sociolects – associative vernaculars not delimited by geographic proximity. To make this point, I included a short section on Pepe the Frog and the specific significance this meme had to a particular board on 4chan.com called '/r9k/' or Robot9000. The r9k forum is best known as a repository for sometimes extreme stories of social awkwardness. It has a core user base of self-identified male 'NEETs' (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Many of those who frequent the site vent and direct anger towards those they call 'normies' or 'alphas' – perceived to be regular people with active social and sexual lives. The r9k cohort of nerds, trolls and social outliers – characterised as dejected, angry males of a younger demographic – in turn call themselves 'robots' or 'betas'. The Pepe character – a sad looking frog – had become a signifier to this community of awkwardness, outsiderhood and rage; crucially, he had also become a means of reclaiming and casting these qualities as desirable. This specific use of Pepe was determined and reified by r9k-ers

themselves. So, Pepe had a specific meaning within their idiolect. Yet by this time, Pepe was also part of a more general online vernacular. A few months before my presentation, Pepe had appeared on the social media feeds of popstars Nicki Minaj and Katy Perry, the former signalling dejection and the latter physical and emotional exhaustion; neither, of course, was drawing on the deeper well of meaning found within chan culture. The point for this presentation therefore was that Pepe, like all memes, did not mean the same thing to everyone.

During my talk, I had intended to explain why the Pepe character possessed both aesthetic and attributed qualities that resonated with this specific subcultural community, and how, through recursion and remix, Pepe had been further shaped in the community's shared image. This was dark and unhappy territory. I found discussing Pepe as uncomfortable as I had found researching this character. Pepe was part of a lulzy (internet-speak for wry, mischievous or sometimes mean-spirited humour) angry, frustrated, sometimes racist, oftentimes misogynist argot, and describing it necessitated the use or pointed redaction of offensive language, and familiarity with some abhorrent beliefs. To understand Pepe, it was necessary to try and understand those who include the character in their discourse. This was recurrently hard, with exposure to indelible hate speech, inducing repulsion and the glimpses into a situated hopelessness inducing both concern and, by degrees, pity. Moreover, Pepe symbolised a community that was increasingly threatening, increasingly resentful, with greater numbers, yet identifying with the affective qualities Pepe has come to stand for. As both Pepe and his populaces proliferated, it became apparent that the 'betas' abhorred 'normies' more than they hated themselves, and their self-identified inadequacies were reframed as strengths or benefits: from their outsider perspective, they could see society for what it really was. Despite this, a symposium attendee jollily described the character 'a funny little frog' as we discussed the day at the end-of-event social. Looks can deceive, I suppose.

But Pepe was rapidly mutating: some months after the presentation the character could no longer, in certain terms, be described as a 'funny little frog'. Social media managers to the stars would no longer permit use of *that* meme in social feeds. Pepe had emerged as a loaded motif explicitly associated with the angry, the alienated, and the racist. Pepe was offensive – and untouchable. And this was at least in part by design. The users on r9k had previously expressed annoyance that Minaj, Perry and the like had started to use 'their' meme, and decided that Pepe needed to be reclaimed from 'normies'. So, they proliferated versions of the character dressed as a Nazi, saluting or engaging in violent, heinous acts. This 'trollish' distortion was not, of course, undertaken in isolation. Pepe had long been a stalwart of 4chan's 'politically incorrect' '/pol' board. Since 2014, he had been acquiring a distinct significance on rival site 8chan, a 'Free Speech Friendly 4chan Alternative', according to founder Fredrick Brennan. This was a fallout from #GamerGate, a byzantine argument ostensibly about ethics in videogame journalism but more realistically a pretence for festering anti-feminist feeling prevalent within a number of gamer communities. Some embroiled in the 'debate' had doxed (leaked the personal details of) women in the videogame industry and as a result threads on the subject were banned on 4chan. In protest, many 4channers left the site for pastures new. Delighting in its spartan moderation rules, they gathered on 8chan. Within 8chan communities, where 'free speech' and extreme views prevailed, Nazi-Pepe resonated strongly, evinced as a fascist symbol without the dark, diverting ironisation endowed by r9k. Duly, emboldened neo-fascists

cohered under his sign, which in turn led to Pepe's adoption by facets of a newly coined social grouping: 'the Deplorables'.

### It's a Kind of Magic

By 2016 and the US election cycle, the complex of conversations, actions, beliefs and communities to whom Pepe was acquiring an explicitly political significance began to consolidate. Conversations with friends, colleagues and peers were first dominated by attempts to explain away the aberration of Donald Trump's nomination as GOP candidate and his shambolic, successful campaign, before dealing with the reality that a reality TV character, xenophobe, and alleged sex offender could and actually would make it to office.

Of course, this involved breakdowns and analysis of how well Trump seemed to fare within the extant mediatized political discourse – how he benefited from his outrageousness; his meandering, theatrical non-sequiturs; from his 'gif-ability'. Memes were frequently mentioned, and one particular meme received more attention than most: Pepe the Frog, now Nazi-fied and beloved by the 'alt-right', by non-ideological trolls, and by diehard pro-Trumpers alike. By late 2016, no one looked surprised when I explained my research topic to them. Rather, meme-oriented conversations were downright fruitful, with newly enthused friends-cum-research assistants suggesting interesting examples of meme usage, and keenly offering up their perspectives and experiences of meme manifestations. These frequent conversations became piqued with horror as the election neared, and with despondency in the days, weeks and months that followed it.



Figure 2. KnowYourMeme

The US election cycle smacked in so many ways of Baudrillardian hyperreality, that the assignation of Pepe the Frog as a symbol of hate speech by the US Anti-Defamation League was something of a minor detail. Yet, this has been the type of detail I have sought to amass. This was just one point in a reading of Pepe's arc – an arc which affords insights into the myriad situated significances of internet memes within a mediatized culture, as a frog image manifests and reconfigures variously from bulletin boards to *Breitbart*, and subjectively within the minds of individuals. Pepe, in all odiousness, was an imbricated signifier rich with meanings. Needless to say, this didn't make explaining my research any simpler. 'A racist cartoon frog' is not much of an improvement on 'cats

dressed as hotdogs'. And I was soon to go full 'tin-foil hat', because in the closing months of 2016, my experiences of Pepe-watching got weirder still.

A loose coalition of pro-Trump / anti-Clinton / 'lulzy' trolls began to assert that Pepe had occult properties, and with some quasi-earnestness believed that the worship of this character could evoke 'meme magic' – a corruption of the New Age practice 'chaos magick' wherein belief is understood as an active magical force. As I observed this and began to incorporate it into my research, I began to think I had truly entered the Upside Down. This was a turn of events beyond anything I had anticipated. So-called 'meme magic' comprised a crowd-sourced folklore which recast our sad frog as a deity, with narrative and atavistic elements drawn from Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, an Italo Disco record, internet slang, sigils, Batman and numerology. The online proliferation of Pepe, cultists asserted, helped to 'meme Trump into the presidency'. It sounds wild, I know, but at least a core group of pro-Trump meme-magickers, calling themselves the 'Cult of Kek' (most visible on '/pol' and Reddit-threads '/r/the\_Donald') at least half-seriously indulged the belief that Pepe – as an online manifestation of a godhead – played a role in Trump's acquisition of office.

And they may, to a certain degree, have been right, though not because the character had any magical properties of the *Charmed* variety (I have managed to retain *some* critical distance). It was rather due to the increasingly specious and distinct way in which 2016 evidenced how mediatized, attention-led discourse shapes politics; a shift that meme proliferation was rendering clear. The sigils and memetic potency interpreted by some as magic can be understood in terms of confirmation bias, apophenia (the human tendency to perceive meaningful patterns in random data points) and consensus-forming in combination. Simultaneously, they can be seen as a consequence of algorithmic manipulation, the strategies of media and technology corporations, and coding decisions. Crucially, meme magic is contingent on visibility afforded within a networked attention economy. By proliferating Pepe memes, Pepe claimed a place in discourse, and then in consciousness. Meme *magic* is a caprice and once more, the word 'magic' serves to obfuscate the specific conditions that require redress.

It's early 2017 and I'm catching up with one of my oldest friends. He asks me how it was all going. 'Well...', I say. 'Since the events of the election cycle I found it necessary to re-structure my entire thesis! So, I'm on the internet *a lot* and writing about the occult now, ha, ha...ha?'. He shoots me a look of mild concern. We sup our pints and he says to me: 'You know, it's funny. You started out looking at, y'know, LOLcats, which kind of translated into a study of memes and the *generation* of meaning, and now you're studying Trump, and the obliteration of it'. 'Yeah', I murmur. '...Wish me luck'.

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## Works Cited

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