

## **I SEE WHAT YOU DID THERE:**

### **How are the use of memes and tropes by those within online communities building a self-critical approach to contemporary cyber-culture?**

The internet has coalesced over the previous two decades, assembled from a collection of data-communication protocols into the herald of a new 'information age', which had been posited by Negroponte<sup>1</sup> and foreshadowed in the writing of McLuhan<sup>2</sup>. The effect of this new technological epoch is to allow instant access to large swathes of information, but how has this influx of media been received and perceived by culture? As it becomes harder and harder to have a removed subculture within larger society, but easier to participate in an online community, are there examples of critical thinking arising from participation in cyber-cultures?

In this essay I will give examples of online communities that exist concurrently, and how they use specific coded references as a way of commenting on activities within their sphere of influence. It will be possible to show how some of those coded references live beyond their originating community, becoming a meme that can be quoted beyond it's originating sphere of reference. Is, however, the ability to quote - and, in some form, recognise - from an online community indicative of a reactionary critical methodology growing within cyberculture, or is it merely an extension of slogoism in contemporary society?

This essay will look at the way in which new online communities have allowed society to deal with the ideas inherent in an information age by providing a group identity. It is this group identity that allows individuals to comment on elements of contemporary cyber-culture, by providing a counterpoint to their conventional life. The gestalt entity which is formed by group participation is so radically different - and yet comfortable to the user - that it is possible to examine the inherent qualities of the internet as a part of the new information age.

To say that the group participation is comfortable and at the same time different from the average lifestyle may require some clarification. An example of this type of online behavior would be participation in online games, such as World of Warcraft<sup>3</sup>, where to take part means to become a member of a mock-feudal society segregated along artificial divisions. Activity within this gaming community is mainly focused around the combat system of the game, which rewards participation by enhancing the in-game character.

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<sup>1</sup> The long-essay version of this being his novel "Being Digital", which explains the uses of digital systems for an American business class. Nicholas Negroponte, Being Digital, 1995

<sup>2</sup> "In this electronic age we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension of consciousness." as McLuhan wrote in Understanding Media, which as a quote displays the same hopes for electronic media (which would later become digital) as the rest of American culture held for science during the time he wrote it. Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media, 1964

<sup>3</sup> World of Warcraft, released by Blizzard Entertainment in 2004, is currently the most successful online computer game, with Blizzard stating that it has over 11.5 million regular players (<http://eu.blizzard.com/en/press/081223.html>). To put this in context, EU estimates that the population of Greece is around 11.2 million. Source: [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/PGP\\_PRD\\_CAT\\_PREREL/PGE\\_CAT\\_PREREL\\_YEAR\\_2008/PGE\\_CAT\\_PREREL\\_YEAR\\_2008\\_MONTH\\_12/3-15122008-EN-AP.PDF](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/PGP_PRD_CAT_PREREL/PGE_CAT_PREREL_YEAR_2008/PGE_CAT_PREREL_YEAR_2008_MONTH_12/3-15122008-EN-AP.PDF)

It is unlikely that the average playing participant would have the chance to participate in hunting animals in the local woods, nor (at the higher levels) becoming involved in a tactically planned raid on a specific target. However, the reward cycle of the game, and the community aspects of its in-game culture, ensure that participants are pacified by a reward cycle of intermittent reinforcement that allows them to feel comfortable at all levels of the game<sup>4</sup>.

Beyond gaming, there are still reward cycles that are noticeable within cyber-communities. Social networks such as Twitter, Myspace, and Facebook still reward the user by means of a reward cycle, except that these rewards are self-generated by the user. In his essay on the social dynamics of privacy within Facebook, James Grimmelmann notes that users of that service are rewarded and rewarding each other around a triangle of core needs: identity, relationship and community<sup>5</sup>.

Social networks are different from gaming communities in that there must be a certain level of personal exchange - how else will you be identified if not by your name and your photo - which gives an impression of personalising the cyber-community, and anchoring it to reality. As Grimmelmann points out, each of the core needs drives the users to release more information, which depends on the information given by other users. By co-operating within this system, users are rewarded with more of the core triangle, most noticeably an individual online identity.

The common bond of users within social networks is their membership of network. Therefore, the use of one network over another - for instance, preferring to socialise via Facebook - means that they are deeply steeped in the mannerisms of that network. The memes that they exchange might reflect their use of that particular network in the way they regurgitate information - for example, Facebook users from 2007<sup>6</sup> were often encouraged to use an application that collected their friends as fellow zombies, showing their influence by the number of friends 'bitten' reflected in their zombie ranking, thus showing the worth of their Facebook social identity, and their status within that community.

By installing the zombie application at the prompting of somebody else within Facebook<sup>7</sup>, a circle of influence is expanded in a way that is noticeable to those using that social network. The choice of zombies as a medium for the first large-scale success within the Facebook application system is surely not a coincidence, as they can be seen to operate as the same reflection of contemporary consumer culture that they do within the horror genre of film, providing a knowing gesture towards the spread of that particular social network and its overt capitalistic nature.

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<sup>4</sup> For research on this topic, see The Daedalus Project, a research project started by PARC researcher Nick Yee. Specifically, his article at <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000779.php> and his paper 'The Labor of Fun: How Video Games Blur the Boundaries of Work and Play' from 2006 [http://www.nickyee.com/pubs/Yee%20-%20Labor%20of%20Fun%20\(2006\).pdf](http://www.nickyee.com/pubs/Yee%20-%20Labor%20of%20Fun%20(2006).pdf)

<sup>5</sup> James Grimmelmann, "Facebook and the Social Dynamics of Privacy", 2008, available at [http://works.bepress.com/james\\_grimmelmann/20/](http://works.bepress.com/james_grimmelmann/20/)

<sup>6</sup> Confirmed via personal correspondence with the programmers of the Zombie application, contacted via <http://monsters.joyeurs.com/includes/monsters/blog/>

<sup>7</sup> The application asked you to get started by 'biting some chumps', encouraging you to invite your social network to also be zombies. Those who you had bitten would then also be turned into lower-class zombies whilst you raised yourself to a higher class of zombie

Another social network currently in vogue (at the time of writing) is the website Twitter. It is possible to explain Twitter as a granular network for short-text distribution, but that description falls short in regards to the real-life applications that this particular network has been involved with. Aside from its use within the USA 2008 election, in which both major candidates kept their legions of followers involved by means of frequent updates<sup>8</sup>, the Twitter service was also at the forefront of news reports of the Mumbai terrorist attacks in late November of 2008.

During the Mumbai attack, those targetted were able to use the Twitter service to form an ad-hoc network to distribute information essential for survival<sup>9</sup>. One of the reasons that this was possible is that, unlike other social networks, Twitter's core service functions only as a way of distributing text of a length under 140 characters. That text can contain hyperlinks to other information, such as photographs or other media, but when relayed by the service the rich media content will take the form of standard alphanumeric characters. The other reason is that Twitter is a core example of a convergent media product, as its low threshold for transmission means it can utilise SMS messages to mobile phones to distribute and receive 'tweets' (as individual Twitter messages are referred to).

Where Facebook allows the individual to construct an identity for others to interact with, Twitter is relatively focused on the idea of community. Where identity is transmitted via Twitter, commonality (and therefore relationship) is built upon the similarity of mundane actions described through the social network that can be accessed via the Twitter service. Memorable communication via Twitter comes from the transmission of interesting or relevant memes, the viral ideas initially named by Richard Dawkins in his book "The Selfish Gene".

Since the publication of that work, the idea of a meme has itself shifted from its original conception, both within public perception and within the scientific community. Dawkin's conception of the meme was as a culturally transmitted unit of information which might be analogous in its long-term survival to the way that genes replicate themselves into the next generation. The imprecise nature of Dawkin's idea fueled debate and discussion about the possible implications of memetic transference, and various offshoots and misunderstandings about the idea of a meme were conveyed by elements of popular culture.

During the 1990's memetics was of interest to individuals working within the advertising industry, leading to the publication of books such as Aaron Lynch's "Though Contagion" and Richard Brodie's "Virus of the Mind", both of which seek to explain memes as a method of duplication of ideas. Dawkin's himself explores this idea in a 1991 essay, prior to the publication in 1996 of the aforementioned books, noting that duplication of ideas is not always successful - or, as he states, "viruses don't win every time"<sup>10</sup>.

Perhaps by scaling back the medical metaphor of memetics from the genetic level, with its indication of science, to the viral level (which can be understood by anybody who has attended a doctors clinic), there was a reciprocal loosening of scientific rigour. In the wake

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://twitter.com/JohnMcCain> and <http://twitter.com/BarackObama>

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/nov/27/mumbai-terror-attacks-twitter-flicker> for a discussion of Twitter's usefulness to those caught up in the attacks.

<sup>10</sup> Essay "Viruses of the Mind" can be read at <http://cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/Dawkins/viruses-of-the-mind.html>

of the introduction of the metaphor of idea-as-virus to the popular science shelves, Steve Jurvetson was one of the first to attach the term 'viral marketing' to the internet<sup>11</sup>. The property he was referring to was the new email service that his venture capital company was backing, and the act of marketing he was describing in this new way was the unalterable tagline at the end of each email sent by the company - "Get your private, free e-mail from Hotmail"<sup>12</sup>.

Jurvetson's association, and the subsequent success of Hotmail, has helped to alter the common conception of the word meme into alignment with viral marketing and what are termed 'internet memes'. Twitter is itself susceptible to perversion by means of viral marketing by rogue users, who wish to be allowed into individuals online community thereby letting the marketer 'push' what amounts to little more than spam. This rarely works within Twitter, but the fact that it is at all possible and that it is attempted shows a vital difference between Twitter and other networks, possibly connected to its converging of social networks and communication functions, which could make it a precursor to the next wave of spime-enabled spam. Sadly, it would be impossible to explore the correlation between social networks and locative awareness as they are mostly beyond the scope of this essay.

However, within the scope of this essay we can use the example of themed hashtags to explain the spread of memes within Twitter, in particular to the spread of the hashtag #uktrain. A hashtag is a short descriptive tag given to a particular event or thing, named for the hash symbol placed in front of the tag, in order to allow other users to search Twitter for the unusual occurrence of a word with a # symbol in front of it.

On the 17th of December I suggested the creation of a hashtag for users of the UK train system, simply titled #uktrain.<sup>13</sup> This has since been taken up by a growing number of users, most of whom unknown to me, who use it to describe the process of travelling via the UK train system<sup>14</sup>. Because it is possible to update Twitter via a text message, or via a smartphone, #uktrain serves not only as an example of the spread of a meme but the future of social networking, allowing instant commentary on real-life situations. This form of pervasive internet has been identified as something that can which "can only lead to an intensely uninspired, technically awesome, intrusive and annoying world"<sup>15</sup> if purely led by the needs of corporate interests.

As pointed out earlier, even the widespread use of the words viral marketing can be tracked back to corporate interests, in the shape of venture capitalists. The internet's ability to share information rapidly, combined with late capitalism's all-consuming need to make everything available to the market, has eroded the possibility of any subculture being

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<sup>11</sup> For a first-hand account of this term see the corporate document from Jurvetson's company, hosted at [http://www.dfj.com/news/article\\_26.shtml](http://www.dfj.com/news/article_26.shtml). Also of interest in the context of this essay is a picture of Jurvetson from his personal photo-hosting account, wearing a pro-Dawkins t-shirt, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/jurvetson/3186247262/>.

<sup>12</sup> Rick Poyner, "Obey the Giant", 2001, page 182

<sup>13</sup> See <http://twitter.com/petehindle/statuses/1063181898> for correlation

<sup>14</sup> To see the most current uses of the hashtag, you can search the twitter site at <http://search.twitter.com> and find all entries relating that have the word #uktrain. At time of writing there were over 200.

<sup>15</sup> Julian Bleecker, writing at <http://www.nearfuturelaboratory.com/2009/01/12/workshop-on-pervasive-advertising/>

separate from its originating over-culture. This fact was acknowledged by the editor of the *Dazed and Confused*, who, when interviewed by the Guardian newspaper in 2001 on an edition of the fashion magazine themed around rebellion, stated that "[t]here is no such thing as an underground anymore, because corporate culture has infiltrated and co-opted youth culture."<sup>16</sup> However, it is worth noting (in the context of this essay) that this was written before the advent of Friendster, universally regarded as being the first social network, which launched in 2002.

As argued earlier, the advent of social networks allowed for the exploration of identity in spaces not as easily accessible to corporate investigators. Unlike the earlier MOOs and MUDS as researched by Sherry Turkle, the barrier of entry was significantly lower, and in some cases there was no barrier of entry at all. This is the case for 4chan.org, a website which has a strong community based around the creation and consumption of what are termed internet memes. On 4chan, users are not forced into a process of 'signing in', which traps them within the identity that they have built - unlike other social networks, this is entirely optional. Instead, all users of the site may post using the identifier 'anonymous', removing all barriers to entry if given unfettered access to the internet.

With the removal of forced identity, it logically follows that one of the three supporting legs of the triangle identified by Grimmelmann is to be removed. However, this seems to be contrary to what has happened within the community of 4chan, as there is scope for the identity of anonymous to become generated by group effort. Evidence can for this can be seen within the phrase "anonymous delivers", often used within the site, but also for the decentralised movement going by the same name that has held protests against the Church of Scientology.

During 2008, responsibility for a sustained set of actions against the Church of Scientology was claimed by the anonymous group. Claiming to act for a body politic<sup>17</sup>, the initial protests operated in the sphere of the internet by blocking access to pro-Scientology websites, but quickly coalesced into demonstrations in real-life's physical spaces, using non-violent means of protest. These protests continued over the course of the year, causing some inconvenience to Scientology. More importantly than whatever effects the protests had on those of opposing viewpoints, the series of actions prove that a discernible affect from the 4chan community can be seen in today's society.

While other events have been organised via the medium of social networks to take place in real-life situations, notably flashmobs, anonymous' participation is linked to the opposition of the Church of Scientology. The causes of this opposition are ideological in nature, and beyond the ability to describe in this essay, but can be summed up as a difference in appreciation of copyrighted materials which goes as far back as the mid-90's.<sup>18</sup> Moving beyond the immediate issue of a moralistic stance on the purported actions of Scientology, the long-term nature of this disagreement can be taken to mean large-scale transmission of a viral idea.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2001/mar/12/pressandpublishing.mondaymediasection1>

<sup>17</sup> See 'Message to Scientology' video, originally posted at youtube but removed owing to content issues. A copy of the original video is hosted at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Message\\_to\\_Scientology.ogv](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Message_to_Scientology.ogv)

<sup>18</sup> Wired Magazine, 'alt.scientology.war', December 1995, available at <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/3.12/alt.scientology.war.html>

There are, however, a range of small, less issue-led memes being continually produced by 4chan. The ability of the site to produce off-the-wall, humour-led ideas has been noted by that most august publication of American capitalism, the Wall Street Journal<sup>19</sup>, as well as TIME magazine<sup>20</sup>. The Wall Street Journal takes pains to explain the use of Rick Astley's hit song "Never Gonna Give You Up" as linkbait, a process known as 'rickrolling'<sup>21</sup>, but goes on to say that the website is essentially uncommercial owing to "potentially graphic content"<sup>22</sup>. The article does not say that there is no possible way for the owners of the site to gain from promoting a hit song of the 1980's that is not regarded as fashionable. But yet, one video of this unfashionable song, hosted on the well-known website Youtube, now boasts over 14,630,077 views<sup>23</sup>.

Rickrolling lacks the social commentary of the Scientology protests, and although it could be seen as a reflex against the immediacy of gratification via the internet, it lacks a certain flexibility that can usually be seen in satirical texts. Another 4chan meme, originated from the posting of cats on Saturdays<sup>24</sup>, allows a for satirical use of humour by having a much greater pool of variation to draw from. This repetitive use of cats grew into what has been termed 'lolcats', defined as such by the use of specific fonts over the depiction of a cat, using a form of stylized grammar.

The writer and technologist Anil Dash analyzed the use of lolcats, and noted that it has a consistent visual and grammatical structure that can be replicated and transferred to other (non-cat related) memes<sup>25</sup>. This sort of transference of memetic qualities is akin to kleptoplasty, and was identified by Susan Blackmore as one of the consistent ways that memes survived<sup>26</sup>. In the case of lolcats, the website [icanhascheesburger.com](http://icanhascheesburger.com) hosts the replicated forms of the lolcat meme in a way that the fast-moving network of 4chan could not. It serves as a kind of blog-as-repository, capitalising off the humour value of lolcat-related images, and offering a simple way to regurgitate the content of the repository across other social networks and web 2.0 technologies. These are symbols of an adroit adaptation to culture made available by the internet, and as they are reused, either in part or wholly, we see resistance to the ideas of permanence and self-importance granted by the status of publication.

The internet's vast barrage of information contains - for any individual - a wide range of palatable and unpalatable granules. As opposed to previous hot media (as coined by McLuhan) there is little way of choosing a reliable source of information that will always suit the reader's tastes, as there is such a barrage of media. The use of memes, not

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<sup>19</sup> Modest Web Site Is Behind a Bevy of Memes, July 9th 2008, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121564928060441097.html>

<sup>20</sup> The Master of Memes, July 9th 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1821435,00.html>

<sup>21</sup> See The Guardian's article "Taking the Rick" for a further discussion of Rickrolling - <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/mar/19/news>

<sup>22</sup> see footnote eight

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHg5SJYRHA0>

<sup>24</sup> Every Saturday, the users of 4chan's /b/ board would only allow posting of images of cats, hence renaming the day 'caturday'.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.dashes.com/anil/2007/04/cats-can-has-gr.html>

<sup>26</sup> As described in Susan Blackmore's "The Meme Machine", 2000

limited to those identified above, allows the reader to filter the amount of media ingested on an average trawl of the internet by breaking the slickly designed corporate nature of the vast majority of sites. Where previously, publication meant approval by peer review, making newspapers and other journals the hottest of hot media that could inflame situations, now we see all other media as subservient to the internet. The internet has become the hottest media of all.

While this has had the effect of casting some critics, such as Paul Virilio, into proclaiming that there is a panopticon-like effect of mass media being so relentless in its repackaging of real-life, and that this is causing a great leveling of society. In fact, this is just the society that Virilio and his contemporaries were born into, as he acknowledges at the same time as bringing hypothetical technologies such as cyborg implants into a lineage of technological praxis from Roman roads to aerodromes, by turn removing all of us from the safety of what are our natural environments and leaving us stranded in a metaphorical desert<sup>27</sup>.

What Virilio forgets is that deserts are, to some, a natural environment, and that mankind is infinitely adaptable. Just as Turkle showed with her study of relationships within early online game worlds, there is scope for humanity to face the onslaught of available information from the hot media of the internet, and the use of viral memes are one way that it is happening. As society becomes accustomed to interaction happening simultaneously on both the internet and in real life, viral memes will become another version of slang. William Burroughs saw a link between words, images, and viruses<sup>28</sup>, living as he did in an opiated reality of juxtaposed media, and as we gain the facility to focus beyond a marketing-led mainstream, the ability to share insight via any form of language becomes important. Critical thinking, even when done with slang images, sounds, and fragments of sentences placed without care for standard grammar, is still critical thinking.

It is the application of critical thinking which gives the ability to puncture the mediated experience that corporations wish to give us via the internet, turning otherwise bland social networks that function as shopping malls extended virtually into unruly *souks* by use of humour. It probably is that same humour that discredits those who adopt these new methods of puncturing fatuous discourse, as even the internet's (flawed) empirical umpire of wikipedia holds the notion that internet memes are to be 'flagged for speedy deletion' when wikipedia entries sum up their content. Being neither wholly marketable nor wholly intellectual, and often appearing to be neither, it is these memes that will bring colour to our new language of words and media available to us in a mediated sociality.

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<sup>27</sup> See Paul Virilio's "City of Panic", 2005, page 125

<sup>28</sup> taken from the expression 'words begat image and image is virus', used in the Nova Express. William Burroughs, Nova Express, 1964

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