

NEW MEDIA CONTENT – MEME

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Abstract: The ever increasing use of new technologies and digitalization led to significant changes in people’s everyday lives. The new media content produced as a result of it led to change of patterns of behavior, understanding of social, cultural and political developments both globally and locally. One such media product, the meme, plays significant role in creating concepts and understanding. This process is metaphorical and can tackle different issues by drawing people’s attention and engaging their thinking. Furthermore, it can significantly impact people’s biases.

Key Words: new, media, content, meme, metaphor, bias

New technologies and digitalization are irreversibly changing the nature of creating, assessing and spreading media content. One specific type of media content is the meme. Like many other linguistic terms, the term meme has come to reflect the new changes in a contemporary world. Thus the term internet meme originates from Richard Dawking's invention of the word meme in his 1989 book *The Selfish Gene*, aimed to denote the spread of cultural information. His pre-internet meme of "mutation by random change and spreading" (Solon: 2013) has been transformed into a digital unit of cultural transmission. The internet meme added one specific attribute to this meaning and that is placing the concept of meme on the Internet.

The internet meme has become an integral part of digital content. One definition of the internet meme determines it as "an activity, concept, catchphrase or piece of media that spreads often as mimicry or for humorous purposes, from person to person via the internet". (Schubert: 2003) An internet meme may take the form of an image, video, website or hashtag. It may be just a word or phrase, sometimes intentionally misspelled.

Internet memes have the specific property of being related to or analyzed against the background of a topic or context. In addition, their frequency can also be traced. As such, meme representations vary from news to entertainment, from big ideas to banality. This wide application of the memes as media content gives them a key role in dissemination and amplification of ideas. Their visual format and entertaining content added to their widespread use. They are also cross-cultural phenomena because foreign languages do not play a great role. The written messages are easily translated or modified to suit a different context.

Therefore, the internet memes are a global phenomenon reinforced by automated technology. Powerful new tools enabled the unprecedented spread of media content in the 21st century. Social networks and messaging created the perfect arena for the memes. Memes are inviting for multiplication and sharing because of their inherent communicative nature.

Nevertheless, determining the nature of the memes can be challenging. Their concept can be discussed on a different level. Economically, internet memes generate publicity and create the golden opportunity for advertising. Socially, media consumers often neglect the source of the memes as long as they are teasing and attractive. There is no big narrative network to call for accountability in this respect and often there can be no official news company behind them. On the other hand, the content can also be staged and manipulated.

Academically, memes can be viewed as postmodern hybrid creations combining the visual and the written modes of expression. They make use of different artistic forms, genres, modes and techniques. The visual and the written parts form one unit often using radical parody, irony, kitsch, quotations and other stylistic devices. The result is a new media item of rich semiotic content, a metaphor ready to be seen by more media consumers than ever before. It is characterized by its ever-changing and evolving nature trying to follow the newest trends in social media and advertising. Therefore, the question is do memes amplify or decrease popular biases on the internet?

Metaphors are critical features of communication, of understanding ourselves and the world around us. "But our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of. In most of the little things we do every day we simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines. Just what these lines are is by no means obvious. One way to find out is by looking at language. Since communication is based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting, language is an important source of evidence for what that system is like. Primarily on the basis of linguistic evidence we have found that most of our conceptual system is metaphorical in nature." (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 3).

In this respect, since according to Lakoff metaphors explain one thing in terms of another, a metaphor is established to "satisfy a purpose, namely understanding an aspect of the concept" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 97). The concept represented by the memes is trying to fit in our experience through likeness and similarity by highlighting certain aspects and downplaying others. A meme can influence how we perceive, think and what we do. When it comes to facing biases a meme can help check and balance people's beliefs. The aspect of

truth-telling of traditional narratives follows a different pattern from that of the memes. "Truth is therefore a function of its own conceptual system. It is because many of our concepts are metaphorical in nature, and because we understand situations in terms of those concepts that metaphors can be true or false". (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 148).

Memes as functioning metaphors emphasize different aspects of our experience. The widespread use of the memes is due to their metaphorical nature. "Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such action will of course fit the metaphor. This will in turn reinforce the power of metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense, metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:156)

Shana Leibowitz (2015) and Samantha Lee (2015) created a list of 20 cognitive biases as they say "that screw up your decisions". They include the following: (1) anchoring bias, or believing the first piece of information they hear, (2) availability heuristic, or overestimating the importance of the information available to them, (3) bandwagon effect, or when the probability of a person adopting certain belief increases with the number of people who hold that belief, (4) blind-spot bias, or failing to recognize their own cognitive biases as biases in itself, (5) choice-supportive bias, or when you choose something and you tend to feel positive about it, even if that choice has flaws, (6) clustering illusion, or the tendency to see patterns in random events, (7) confirmation bias, or the tendency to listen only to information that confirms our preconceptions, (8) conservatism bias, or when people favor prior evidence over new evidence that has emerged, (9) information bias, or the tendency to seek information when it does not affect action (10) ostrich effect, or the decision to ignore dangerous or negative information, or burying one's head in the sand, like an ostrich, (11) outcome bias, or judging a decision based on the outcome - rather than how exactly the decision was made in the moment, (12) overconfidence or being too confident about one's abilities which might cause risky decisions, (13) placebo effect, or simply believing that something will have a certain effect on them and causing them to have that effect, (14) pro-innovation bias or when a proponent of an innovation tends to overvalue its usefulness and undervalue its limitations, (15) the tendency to weigh the latest information more heavily than older data, (16) salience, or the tendency to focus on the most recognizable features of a person or concept, (17) selective perception, or allowing expectations to influence perception of the world, (18) stereotyping, or expecting a group or a person to have certain qualities without having real information about the person, (19) survivorship bias, or an error that comes from focusing only on surviving examples, causing misjudgment of a situation and (20) zero-risk bias, or loving certainty even if it is counterproductive, eliminating risk entirely would entail no chance of harm being caused.

To illustrate the metaphorical concepts of the memes and their targeting of certain cognitive biases I chose three different popular memes. They are visual memes combining visual and written elements.



Pic 1.



Pic 2.



Pic 3.

The first one, (pic.1), shows picture of a pop culture celebrity in British society next to the phrase "To Brexit or not to Brexit". The fact that a particular role model is chosen to stand by the comment corresponding to the well-known Shakespearian phrase " To be or not to be" aims at drawing people's attention to making their own stand on the issue and that they are bound to take a stand.

The second one (pic. 2), represents a photo of a comedian who does a particular gesture showing the need for rethinking something. The text next to him is in the form of a joke sending a firm message: "climate change doesn't matter (if you stay indoors)". This is a way of using the meme to refer to each and everyone's consciousness.

The third example, (pic.3), shows how a current situation may be perceived when there are either two opposing or competing sides. In this case, the idea of the picture showing a young man who has a girlfriend and is in an established relationship and still looks for other options, has been figuratively transferred to verify one's understanding of their own stand regarding certain issue.

All of the above examples tend to incorporate a number of stylistic devices and genres. This particular combination creates a metaphor sending a unique message. It is important to note that metaphorical conceptualization is manifold and as a result can tackle a number of cognitive biases. Memes create a two way street. On the one hand the conceptual system helps people understand an issue and on the other people fit the issue in the way they understand the conceptual system. In this sense, biases are automatically reviewed and challenged, accepted or rejected.

To conclude, despite their superficial nature, memes can have a profound effect on the modern media consumer. Their innate metaphorical messages can openly challenge a number of biases. Meme's effect can be best seen best if we quantify their popularity when they are grouped in different genres. Furthermore, that would enable further study and analysis in the development of this field.

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