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Reflections on Internet Culture

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Abstract

In these edited remarks originally given at ROFLCon in May 2012, Jonathan Zittrain muses on the nature of memes and their relationships to their creators as well as to broader culture and to politics. The distributed environment of the internet allows memes to morph and become distanced from their original intentions. As meme culture becomes more and more assimilated into popular culture, subcultures like those of Reddit or 4chan have begun to re-conceptualize their own role from just meme propagators to cultural producers. Memes can gain commercial appeal, much to the chagrin of their creators. More strangely, memes can gain political traction and affiliation, like American conservative commentator Bill O'Reilly's 'You can't explain that' or Anonymous' 'Low Orbit Ion Cannon'. Can meme culture survive becoming not just the property of geeks and nerds, but part of the commercial and political world?

Keywords
cyberspace • internet culture • memes • ROFLcon

It may seem conceited to speak of, and then celebrate, 'internet culture'.[1] The internet has become so fundamental, and adapted to so many appropriately disparate purposes, that it may make as much sense to think of an internet culture as it does to think of an 'electricity culture'. But early adopters can end up shaping later uses, and the phenomenon of internet memes may be rightly associated with internet culture. For the uninitiated, and, as I suspect memes may not last for decades, for the historical record, an internet meme is a picture or drawing (usually from an unwitting source) that's taken on a shared, iconic quality, coupled with a resonating message (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Example of the 'Disaster Girl' meme.

A meme at its best exposes a truth about something, and in its versatility allows that truth to be captured and applied in new situations. So far, the most successful memes have been deployed by people without a megaphone against institutions that often dominate mainstream culture. ROFLCon has played a role. It is an extraordinary gathering of the people who make the web sing, if in an off-key note. And the demographic is one of comparative outsiders. More specifically, there is a large number of people here who were kicked around on the high school playground.

There is some element of this that finds its way into the shaping of internet memes, both in the way that they can have an edge – the change of the vowel from Lols to lulz – and in the way in which memes seek to capture something authentic in the world, including its pathos. At the base of a lot of the memes is an authentic, unguarded, involuntary moment. The communities around internet culture enforce this as a norm. If the authentic kernel that makes a meme relatable leads to commercialized popularity, it can retroactively detract from its authenticity. Pop-culture-inspired fashion retailer Hot Topic experienced this first-hand for daring to feature a meme-based t-shirt. The commercialization its use of the meme represented angered Reddit users, who decided to retaliate by giving the meme racist connotations – an operation designed to reclaim it from commercialization by poisoning it. If the Redditors weren't going to have it, no one was going to have it.

'Disaster girl' – featured in the sample meme above – is a perfect example of unsought fame of a sort. She is not superimposed in the photo. She is actually standing in front of that house. The element of authenticity that this photo captures so well, though, means there is a real person implicated as it starts to go viral. In this case, Zoe, pictured, and her dad didn't mind, and

there is something about that we like – we are pleased to see her embrace her inadvertent success.

It is one thing to be famous for being a serendipitously adorable little girl, but it's quite another to be Star Wars Kid, who gained notoriety for embarrassing himself as an awkward teenager to the tune of 28 million hits on YouTube. The video of him wielding a golf ball retriever as a double-bladed lightsaber was, so far as he knew, footage that would be completely private. He didn't realize when he turned the borrowed camcorder back in at his school that the footage was still on it, or that his so-called friends would put it online. Star Wars Kid did not want this kind of fame – this was not an ambivalent lottery. This was, 'I did not buy a ticket. I do not accept the prize.' In response, Star Wars Kid turned to the court system, and filed a host of lawsuits against the school, the kids, their parents, etc., contributing in part to the drama that made this an interesting story. As it turned out, the saga was notable enough to warrant a Wikipedia page, but there was a question about whether or not to name him. His name is clearly part of the story, but should the Wikipedians respect his clear desire to dissociate himself from this unwanted attention?

The discussion of whether to identify Star Wars Kid unfolded on the talk page with a wonderfully earnest, non-ironic back and forth on whether or not it is right for Wikipedia, a knowledge depository of record for humanity, to have his name in it. Ultimately, through Wikipedia's own utterly byzantine decision-making process, they concluded that the name would not be included, despite the fact that the mainstream media had named him several times. To alert would-be editors, a strict message was placed on the page explaining that any addition of a real name would be reversed immediately. Remarkably, most of the people who had been arguing in favor of including the name fell into line once the decision was made. I cannot help, as a law professor, but respect Wikipedia's development of the concept of procedural due process. Users upheld the decision, despite their disagreement with it. I think there are ways in which we can build an infrastructure of meme propagation that, like Wikipedia's discussion over the identification of Star Wars Kid, is capable of acknowledging and respecting preferences of the real people impacted by these virtual phenomena. [Note: at the time of this talk, Wikipedia editors had decided to include Star Wars Kid's name in its article on the phenomenon after he spoke to the press about his experience ten years later.][2]

In September 2007, the venerable 'List of the Day' blogspot site featured an entry of awkward family photos.[3] One of them, before disappearing from the post entirely, had substituted for its image: 'Image removed at request of owner'. It's not clear what realistic legal action the subject of the photo would have to force its removal – unless, perhaps, in copyright. Most likely the owner simply expressed an interest in having it removed, and the person running the site deemed that reasonable. There were enough funny images above and below that the site didn't need this particular one. Whether or not the transaction unfolded that way, we should develop technologies to

facilitate such discussions. We can develop an infrastructure native to the web and its most common applications that allows the subject or creator of an object or meme to declare something about it and her relationship to it, and then lets people choose to respect it or not (see Zittrain, 2014).

Something akin to this already exists in the realm of web-crawlers. Robots. txt is a little file on a website that indicates to search engines and other robots what subdirectories the owner would prefer they not crawl. This is not a digital rights management tool, as it is not seeking to bar uses through technological fiat. The use of robots.txt does not represent a legal claim, and it is not grounded in any official internet standard. Rather, it amounts to a polite request, one that Google, Microsoft, and Yahoo all respect. Courts, in turn, are utilizing robots.txt when they put documents online. They want to make the documents publicly available, but do not want to enable anyone to pull up an entire court record by simply searching a name.

Something akin to this system would be great in an offline context as well. Imagine being able to wear some form of identifier, perhaps with an associated RFID tag, that would indicate to a camera – think Google Glass and its successors – that you would prefer not to be recorded, giving the photographer a chance to decide whether to respect your request. Again, this is not about DRM or censorship – the photographer can still choose to ignore the request. It's about understanding that there is an ethical dimension – that there are ingredients on the input side with impacts on the output side, and that it might be worth giving people a chance to respect the balance therein.

The story of Star Wars Kid is the story of an online phenomenon having an undesirable offline impact. But sometimes, real-world impact is sought by communities that overlap with the ones originating memes. One of the best examples of action in this online/offline space occurred when the WikiLeaks website was hit by DDoS attacks, and Anonymous, a network of hacktivists, began pro-Wikileaks attacks in response. It was serious, in that the attacks really brought down websites, but it was also so clearly ironic. Take the main tool Anonymous hackers used: it was called the Low Orbit Ion Cannon. It proved to be quite an effective DDoS weapon of choice, despite its preposterous name.

If this tool had been designed non-ironically – if it were named The Website Destruction Tool – it might not have gotten as much use. Somehow, the retreat into irony, being serious while not taking oneself seriously, is what lends internet culture its power and force. The old guard of the hacker community took a different stance. The famed hacker club 2600 put out a press release saying that it condemns DDoS attacks because they value freedom of speech, and DDoS, whether for or against anything, should never be a tool.

Shortly after the attacks, security firm HBGary Federal stepped forward, saying it was going to name the members of Anonymous. Anonymous struck back by seizing HBGary Federal's website and posting a message reading:

> You have blindly charged into the Anonymous hive, a hive from which you have tried to steal honey. Did you think the bees would not defend it? Well here we are. You've angered the hive, and now you are being stung.

Serious and playful at the same time.

Such behavior is of a piece with the phenomenon of internet memes, but it will face real-world consequences now that it has extended into the realm of action. But what do authorities that depend, in part, on fear for their power do when the action of online actors falls short of warranting a legal response? These power structures may depend on the sheer force of their own proclamations – rather than on requests based in shared values like the understandings reached among Wikipedia editors when Wikipedia is working well. How vulnerable is that system to the kinds of actions or even ideas that, at their heart, poke fun at things? An old-school example of this might be Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, which faced possible censorship in Britain for fear of angering the Nazi regime (see Short, 1985). (The outbreak of war mooted the issue.)

But even as we see examples of real-world consequences from online activity, the two still feel dissociated. Take, for instance, the concept of 'permanent death'. Distinct from clinical death, which is the technical term for when a real person dies, permanent death is when a character in a role-playing game dies and cannot reenter the game. Predictably, this feature is becoming less common in games, as players want more lives. The movement away from permanent death leads me to wonder how much people in this zone feel they are partaking in a phenomenon in which they have endless lives – to what extent is there an element of permanence that makes it hard to dissociate the fun of the game from the serious realities of outside life.

Several years ago, there was a wake in World of Warcraft for a player who had died. The character hadn't died – this is clinical death we are talking about. Her friends in her guild chose to hold a wake for her, and they lined up, virtually, to pay their respects. While they were doing so, another guild, Serenity Now, came and (virtually) killed them all.[4]

Here is permanent death – not clinical death – in the first degree. Did Serenity Now act unethically? It's unclear. The wake was an attempt to take a game and make it real – to recognize that there are living, breathing people behind the characters. While there is something appealing about making that human connection, it certainly remains vulnerable to the criticism that it's just a game and they are taking it far too seriously. It is not easy to resolve the impasse between the authentic and the ironic. But this impasse lies at the heart of internet culture, and lends it its power.

To what extent is this the sort of escapism often sought by those kicked around on the playground? Some who don't get why internet culture should be taken seriously would invoke Corinthians, saying it's time to put away childish things.[5] But there is also CS Lewis's wonderful quote:

> When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty, I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.[6]

To me, the key word there, narrowly beating out childishness, is fear. The bullied geek may learn not to apologize for who he or she is – to acknowledge it, to own it, to say, 'You know what? So be it. This is who I am.' That genuine self-ownership is the least ironic thing I can think of. Granted, internet culture expresses that thought in its own ironic way, but underneath is this declaration that difference is okay: that authenticity is what matters.

How could this force be deployed? In some way, the most countercultural way to deploy it is against the unfunny cynicism of our contemporary mainstream institutions. We always think the world is falling apart. Our religious institutions, our media institutions, and our political institutions all have such deeply embedded cynicism that even individual members of these institutions don't feel they can escape. If you are the CEO of a major news organization, or the chair of a political party, it may not seem apparent that you can do anything to change what even you do not like. In this environment, the actual subversive move is represented by something akin to the Reddit sub-board on random acts of kindness – looking for ways to (semi-ironically) take people one at a time and actually make their lives better.

As the internet grows, memes may not persist. But the phenomenon represents something more than the trivial yuks that appear at first glance, and it points the way to an element of the modern networked sphere that we dismiss or abandon at our own peril: the ability for anyone to reach anyone else without mediation, and for groups to form around shared ideas, expressed in common forms owned by no one and everyone.

Notes

1. This essay is drawn from the transcript of a keynote given by Professor Zittrain on 4 May 2012 at ROFLCon, a convention on internet culture held at MIT. For a YouTube video of the original talk, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6UbsvmsDyE&feature=share&list=PL2CB3D6908888A8F7. For further information on ROFLcon, reference http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ROFLCon
2. For further information on this debate, see the Wikipedia 'Talk' on Star Wars Kid, available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Star_Wars_Kid#Name_issue_revisited:_He.27s_out_there_connecting_himself_to_the_incident_as_an_adult
3. http://listoftheday.blogspot.com/2007/09/great-olan-mills-photos.html
4. http://www.gamesradar.com/the-wow-funeral-raid-four-years-later/
5. The bible quote in question is Corinthians 13:11: 'When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.' See http://biblehub.com/1_corinthians/13-11.htm

6. For the entirety of CS Lewis's 'On Three Ways of Writing for Children', see http://mail.scu.edu.tw/~jmklassen/scu99b/chlitgrad/3ways.pdf

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