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Weaponizing Memes: The Journalistic Mediation of Visual Politicization

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Abstract: This article develops the concept of ‘mimetic weaponization’ for theory-building. Memes recurrently serve as identificatory markers of affiliation across social media platforms, with ensuing controversies potentially proving newsworthy. Our elaboration of weaponization refers to the purposeful deployment of memetic imagery to disrupt, undermine, attack, resist or reappropriate discursive positions pertaining to public affairs issues in the news. For alt-right memetic conflicts, impetuses range from ‘sharing a joke’ to promoting ‘alternative facts,’ rebuking ‘political correctness’ or ‘wokeness,’ defending preferred framings of ‘free speech,’ or signalling cynicism, distrust or dissent with ‘mainstream’ media, amongst other drivers. Of particular import, we argue, is the politics of othering at stake, including in the wider journalistic mediation of a meme’s public significance. Rendering problematic this contested process, this article focuses on Pepe the Frog as an exemplar, showing how and why variations of this mimetic cartoon have been selectively mobilized to help normalize – ostensibly through humour, parody or satire – rules of inclusion and exclusion consistent with hate-led agendas. Digital journalism, we conclude, must improve its capacity to identify and critique mimetic weaponization so as to avoid complicity in perpetuating visceral forms of prejudice and discrimination so often presented as ‘just a bit of fun.’

Keywords: memes, mimetic weaponization, civic engagement, digital news ecology, editorialization, imagery, visual politics

Satiric imagery in journalism is recurrently acclaimed for its revelatory character, with familiar pictorial genres – political cartoons being the most salient in historical terms – inscribing the enduring normative tenet the press should afford spaces for subjective expression to complement ostensibly objective reporting. ‘Today is the day of the picture,’ the historian and cartoon collector Isabel Simeral Johnson observed in 1937, explaining:

The public has neither time nor wish for the great editorials which formerly did so much to mould political history. The cartoonist, no longer just a commentator on the passing show, has become an editorial writer who produces a leading article in the form of a picture. At his [*sic*] best the contemporary cartoonist is an intellectual with something of the prophet, the philosopher as well as the humorist, in his make-up. He is quick to gather ideas and to concentrate them into a form immediately transferable to the reader who runs (Johnson, 1937, p. 44).

Her reference to the ‘reader who runs’ resonates intriguingly, especially when considered against the paradigm shift visual journalism has undergone in digitalized environments. How the world is observed is always prescribed within sociotechnical possibilities, conventions, and limitations, as Crary (1992) perceptively noted almost three decades ago. Further, he anticipated the dominant modes of vision in the analogue era were being ‘left behind’ as computer-generated imagery severed processes of visualization from the ‘real, optically perceived world’, with visuality becoming ‘situated on a cybernetic and electromagnetic terrain where abstract visual and linguistic elements coincide and are consumed, circulated, and exchanged globally’ (1992, p. 6). For digital journalism, this has meant ‘mainstream’ audiences becoming networked and niche, media channels fragmented, opportunities for participation elevated, and engagement virtualized. For newspapers effecting institutional transitions to align with these redefined digital priorities, longstanding editorial commitments to openly politicized visual commentary are being recalibrated accordingly. Further compounding matters are business model imperatives, where cartoons may be regarded as simply too expensive to warrant publication, particularly in light of changing readership interests, tastes or preferences in online contexts.

‘Memes are the thing now, and there is debate over whether memes are taking over as the new cartoons,’ Australian cartoonist Fiona Katauskas believes. She is convinced it is less a matter ‘that cartoons haven’t been able to translate to digital, as much as digital hasn’t been able financially to support cartoonists’ (Katauskas cited in Funnell, 2020). As the journalistic status of editorial cartoons is being recast, the affective play of memes once associated with insider web humour or satire is becoming progressively pronounced in public affairs reporting. ‘Memes operate as stitching devices, which meld platforms, ideology, and geopolitics within social networks and political campaigns,’ Burroughs (2020) contends, ‘making them an important site of study for the weaving of fake news and misinformation into the fabric of political discourse and, ultimately, political deliberation’ (2020: 191). Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) have described how memes can be brandished as ‘discursive weapons,’ not just to deliver pointed criticism or insults, but also ‘to project a favorable position in the social field and to justify judgment, condemnation, and exclusion of others’ (2017, p. 495). In this way, memes used in vernacular terms thrive when they are contested, and as such are endemic to a politics of othering over the awarding or denial of legitimacy within the terms of caricature. ‘While the acts are often derogatory,’ they write, ‘the language, shared by a small group of people in the know, sends a constant signal of affiliation’ (2017, p. 498).

In this article, we aim to delve into this process of *memetic weaponization* for purposes of further conceptual elaboration. Where this process that has been highlighted in digital journalism reporting and commentary, it typically amounts to ‘attention hacking’ in the service of political propaganda (Olsen, 2018; Varunok, 2020; Zannettou et al., 2018). In contrast, we seek to discern the *purposeful deployment of memetic imagery to disrupt, undermine, attack, resist or reappropriate discursive positions pertaining to public affairs narratives in the news*. Few scholars would dispute the importance of examining digital journalism’s evolving commitments to visual critique or editorialization, yet as Schill (2012, p. 119) pointed out almost a decade

ago, the ‘visual aspects of political communication remain one of the least studied and the least understood areas, and research focusing on visual symbols in political communication is severely lacking.’ Matters have improved considerably over recent years, particularly with respect to investigations into the ‘weaponized’ uses of visual content and strategies – notably in coverage of election campaigns, social movements, protests, resistance, civic activism, and the like – impacting journalism’s evolving relationships with its digital publics (Authors, 2019). Despite this heightened attention to the visual, however, pertinent enquiries continue to grapple with conceptual and methodological commitments, especially where analysing the potential import and impact of memes (amongst other types of affective imagery, tropes, metaphors and analogies) inflected across different platforms is concerned (Highfield & Leaver, 2016).

Recent years have seen the ‘us versus them’ binary oppositions of ‘fake’ versus ‘real’ news become increasingly prevalent in public affairs debate, with photographs, infographics, data visualizations, charts, diagrams, and the like, routinely attacked for distorting or manipulating the reality of a given situation (see also Thornton, 2020). Compounding matters for news organizations are the visual politics of social media sites, where fierce contestations over images potentially prove newsworthy in their own right, but are often challenging to explain with adequate context for those without first-hand experience of online cultures. This article’s examination of memes as a crucial aspect of these politicization processes needs to be situated within these evolving contingencies of insider appeal and access. Memes, we shall show, are typically identificatory markers of affiliation articulated across social media platforms, often for reasons which may not be readily apparent. In the case of alt-right memetic conflicts, for example, impetuses range from ‘sharing a joke’ to promoting ‘alternative facts,’ rebuking ‘political correctness’ or ‘wokeness,’ defending preferred framings of ‘free speech,’ or signalling cynicism, distrust or dissent with ‘mainstream’ media, amongst other drivers (see Denisova, 2019; Lee, 2020; Topinka, 2019; Wiggins, 2019). Of particular import, we argue, is the politics of othering at stake, including in the wider journalistic mediation of a meme’s public significance. In rendering problematic this contested process, this article focuses on Pepe the Frog as an exemplar, showing how and why variations of this mimetic cartoon have been selectively mobilised to help normalize – ostensibly through humour, parody or satire – rules of inclusion and exclusion consistent with hate-led agendas.

Memes as the ‘new cartoons’

The term ‘meme’ is a conflation of ‘gene’ and ‘mimetic’ in most usages. Its origins are generally attributed to the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins’ book *The Selfish Gene*, where ‘meme’ is coined to propose a parallel theory for how certain cultural behaviours and traditions transmit, replicate, and alter over time. This encompasses everything from sayings and expressions, to song fragments, symbols, gestures, and beyond. In current digital environments, memes are understood in popular parlance – that is, from an emic perspective – to refer specifically to visual commentary or editorialization around cultural phenomena and socio-political debates, which often intersect and overlap. Although the vast majority of memes do not ‘go viral’, those that do can be characterized by their ‘extensive and swift mutation rate’, more precisely defined as: ‘(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stances, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the Internet by many users’ (Shifman, 2014, p. 41). A ‘new language of memes’ is forming, Stryker (2011, p. 29) wrote in an early study, describing it as ‘a new visual way that people succinctly communicate emotions and opinions,’ in effect amounting to the ‘visual vernacular’. Flash-forward, and the widespread use of memes to convey personal perception in public affairs – a 2018 study analysing Twitter, Reddit and 4chan detected some 2.6 billion mimetic posts on politics, utilizing 160 million images (Zannettou et al., 2018) – makes them a key site for ongoing enquiries into digital participatory cultures. The creation, curation and circulation of memes in the digital news landscape: refashions journalism’s communicative relationships with its various publics; recalibrates people’s civic

orientation to news and current affairs; and re-appropriates visuals in increasingly sophisticated ways for strategic political ends.

This complex, uneven process of ‘memeification,’ whereby an image becomes a meme tipping toward the viral, may well prove to be inherently contradictory. Seemingly inscribing a contrary spirit of satire, parody, or subversion, such visual re-workings will be most likely inflected in and across ‘mainstream’ media spaces at dazzling speed. Journalists are hardly immune to their popular appeal. Tracing memes has become normalized in a monitorial loop, where news reporting and commentary recurrently privileges them as indicators of public opinion otherwise eluding more traditional measures or categories (Authors 2019). Memeification is likely to be perceived as political, and thereby newsworthy, to the extent it reaffirms routinized adjudications of news value, not least controversy or, even better, two-sided conflict (Dean, 2019). In this sense, memes characterized as ‘political’ speak to questions of creative engagement on varied terms, possibly engendering civic persuasion, partisan advocacy, grassroots action, expressive deliberative discourse, or even democratic rebellion (Shifman, 2014: 123). Recent scholarship has shown how memes play an increasingly salient role in the discourse of everyday politics (Highfield & Leaver, 2016), visualizations becoming central to quotidian civic engagement around longstanding considerations of governance. From challenging institutional force and state power (Bayerl & Stoykov, 2016), to debating norms of ‘good citizenship’ (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016), and disputing ‘political realities’ (Wiggins, 2019), memes are key to contemporary sensemaking around public affairs (Smith, 2019). Moreover, where the mobilization of memes is ‘weaponized’ to create or sustain ‘us’ versus ‘them’ binaries, it lends support to underwrite charges of ‘fake news’ intended to subvert the legitimacy of ‘mainstream’ news reporting.

Like many phenomena indicative of the interactive cultures of the web, memes are frequently considered to be as spontaneous as they are self-perpetuating, with relations of agency difficult to distinguish. Surveys of ‘successful’ memes, when set in relation to the far greater number that fail to claim a purchase, points to this complexity, revealing them to be: often unattached to any particular political ideology (a practice of both the ‘right’ and ‘left’); malleable as an interpretive signpost to diverse issues (all newsworthy events contain memetic potential); fluctuating in terms of participatory, often ephemeral affordances (they are repurposed, recreated, and recalibrated in different communicative contexts); and attributed with critical, radical, disruptive or hegemonic potential (much depends on the eye - and normative position - of the beholder). To the extent it is possible to generalize, most memes remain largely unknown outside a select interest community, although their protean, affective qualities can ‘translate’ despite unfamiliarity with any one specific, anchored referent. Bearing these analytical caveats in mind, the remainder of this article explores several implications of memetic weaponization, as we have characterised it thus far, in relation to a qualitative exemplar. In so doing, we aim to contribute to theory-building, namely by striving to help pinpoint varied, inchoate drivers of engagement, so as to encourage further empirical studies of the journalistic mediation of social media politics.¹

Memetic weaponization in digital news ecologies

In choosing to focus on one exemplar for purposes of theory-building, rather than conducting a comparative, quantitative survey of related examples in the hope of identifying wider patterns or trends, this article seeks to build on previous conceptual scholarship to heuristic advantage. Research on the visual dimensions of digital journalism has much to gain from exploring points of connection with social media-centred perspectives, we are arguing here, such as where insights into ‘spreadability’ serve to demarcate tensions, including precipitous boundary disruptions or transgressions. A prominent case in point is the cartoon frog with the human body named Pepe, created by Matt Furie for his indie comic *Boys Club* in 2005. ‘It started off quite modestly,’ Furie told *Esquire* magazine years later. ‘The comic itself represents that post-college zone of living by yourself with a bunch of dudes and pulling pranks on one another. The vibe of the comic is very chill and mundane and absurd’ (cited in Miller, 2016). In one issue,

Pepe is observed by one of the other characters urinating with his trousers pulled down to his ankles. When asked to explain himself, he responds: 'Feels good, man.' Caricatures of Pepe, often accompanied by this catchphrase, would rapidly transition from an inside-joke across 'no rules' message platforms such as 4chan and Reddit into an iconic alt-right symbol – much to the alarm of cartoonist Furie. If Pepe was harmless, silly, just a light-hearted diversion, in the view of some users, others believed the meme had become effectively weaponized to help drive hate-led agendas, including white nationalism, in part by playing on ostensibly innocuous readings.

Weaponization is not a singular, unified process, nor is it straightforward to determine how it works, or why. In digital news ecologies awash with memes, Pepe's 'very simplicity' seems to explain what 'catapulted him to the top on Tumblr's reblogged memes' in 2015, according to journalist Lauren Sarner (2015). 'He may be a frog,' she wrote at the time, 'but he's got a face for every situation and internet browsers can see whatever they want to in his green cartoon visage.' Regrettably, while some users employed it as an innocent, amusing reaction face on personal experiences (such as the singer Katy Perry, who tweeted 'Australian jet lag got me like' with accompanying crying Pepe cartoon), others sought to capitalize on its potential as a means to normalize extremist views they sought to promote. Inflammatory variations of the meme were surfacing across social media platforms throughout the US Presidential campaign, evidently encouraged by Donald Trump himself. In October 2015, Trump re-tweeted an image of himself as Pepe, standing at a presidential podium in front of the country's flag, with the caption 'You Can't Stump the Trump' (see Figure 1). The tweet, already circulating within the social media accounts of right-wing news organizations Breitbart and Drudge Report, linked to a video created by a member of 4chan's alt-right, 'politically incorrect' message board, part of a series showing Trump attacking the 'establishment', including news outlets. In September the following year, during the final phase of a campaign epitomized by chants of 'lock her up' and 'fake news', son Donald Trump Jr took to Instagram to share a reworked movie poster inserting Pepe's face as a fellow 'deplorable' among conservatives, prompting rival candidate Hillary Clinton to condemn the 'sinister' cartoon frog as a 'horrifying' symbol associated with white supremacy. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) agreed. 'Once again, racists and haters have taken a popular Internet meme and twisted it for their own purposes of spreading bigotry and harassing users,' CEO Jonathan A. Greenblatt declared in an ADL (2016) press statement. In a *Time* magazine piece written by Furie (2016) shortly afterwards, he announced his ambition to reclaim Pepe from this 'nightmare,' insisting it was never about hate. 'I understand that it's out of my control,' he wrote, 'but in the end, Pepe is whatever you say he is, and I, the creator, say that Pepe is love.' On 6 May 2017, the cartoonist conceded defeat. He announced the 'death of Pepe,' portraying him in an open coffin, with subsequent panels simply showing his friends mourning him at the funeral.

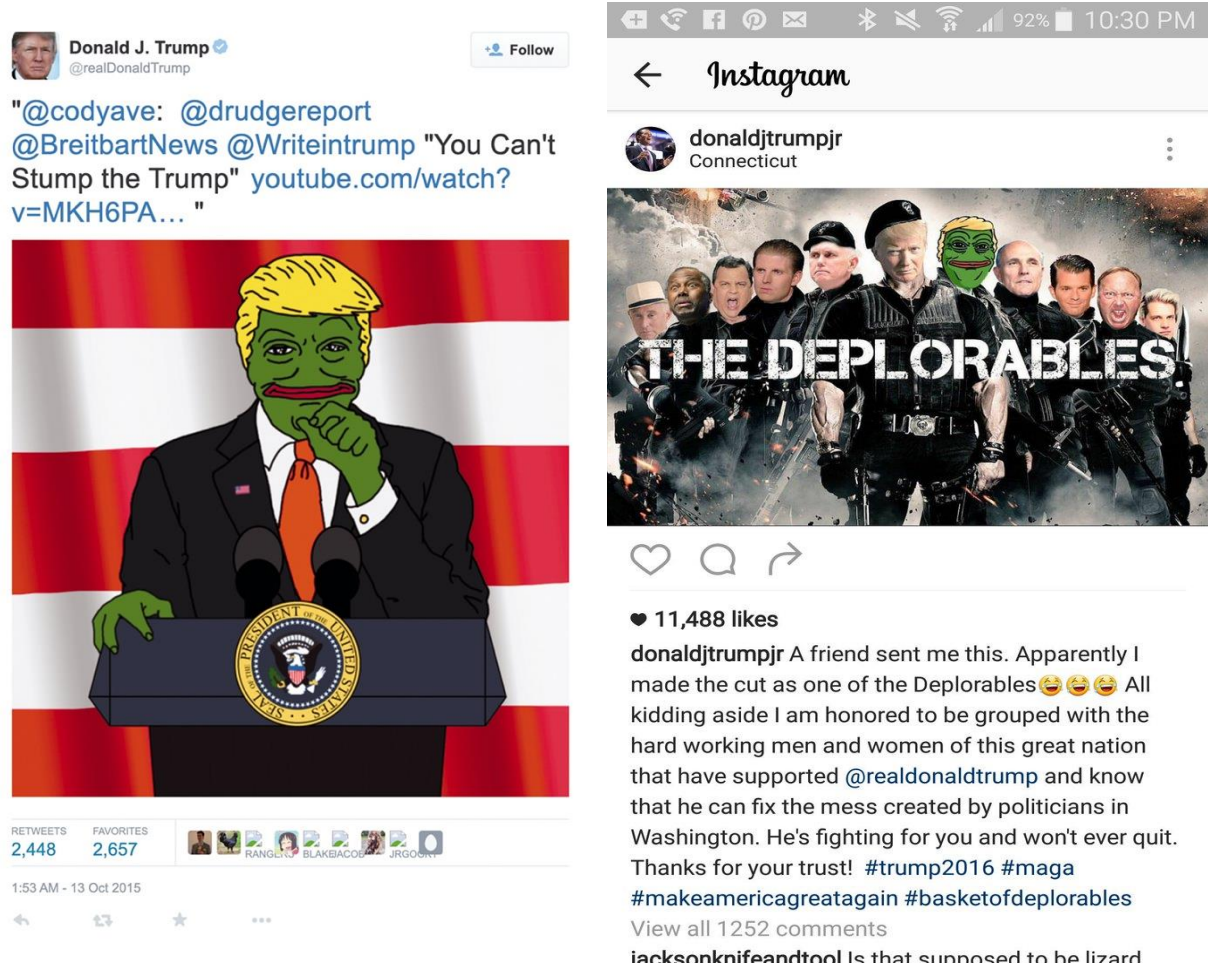


Figure 1. Pepe the Frog's mainstream appearance in populist discourse²

A Niemen Journalism Lab summary of academic analyses of the 2016 and 2020 election points to the significance of memes – and Pepe in particular – for journalism; everything from a *Washington Post* headline a few days after the 2016 election noting, 'We Elected a Meme', with an image of Pepe accompanying it, to articles linking Trump's appeal to the alt-right and 'outsider' status to his embrace and amplification of Pepe, as opposed to his campaign trying to create its own memes (Benton, 2020). 'After Trump's 2016 victory,' Topinka (2019) points out, 'alt-right partisans began claiming the election as a turning point in a meme war that most mainstream audiences nevertheless knew little about until mainstream journalists began publishing "explainers" on the subject.' Such explainers, he adds, risked redeeming a sense of 'meme magic,' thereby rendering 'racist politics as something obscure and inscrutable rather than familiar and intractable.' As Singer and Brooking (2018, p. 188) observe:

Pepe formed an ideological bridge between trolling and the next-generation white nationalist, alt-right movement that had lined up behind Trump. Third Reich phrases like "blood and soil," filtered through Pepe memes, fit surprisingly well with Trump's America First, anti-immigrant, anti-Islamic campaign platform. The wink and nod of a cartoon frog allowed a rich, but easily deniable, symbolism. When Trump won, Pepe transformed again. The green frog became representative of a successful, hard-fought campaign – one that now controlled all the levers of government.

This ‘toxification’ of Pepe, as Gagnon and Diniz (2018, p.2) concur, was not accidental. On the contrary, it was purposely enacted by in-group users intent on bringing to bear their digital remixing skills to promote Pepe as a means to combat an infowar on messageboards and social media sites conceived of as battlespaces. Strategically deployed, memes afforded tactical functionalities (visuality, appropriation, repurposing, adaptability, shareability, etc.) to encourage relations of co-presence (affiliations with far-right discourses, groups, message boards, etc.), shaping – but not determining – possibilities for agentic action (see Hutchby, 2001). Reclaiming perceived slurs of loserdom to advantage, Pepe was embraced symbolically (in some instances by some as part of a pseudo-belief termed ‘Kek’) to foster a contrarian value system rooted in a culture of hopelessness, one which sought to reveal how the ‘system was rigged’, unabashedly embracing spiteful mockery or partisan sniping to further exacerbate this disruption. This performative bricolage of ‘mainstream’ presidential politics with previous ‘fringe’ perspectives through the memeification of Pepe increasingly came to stand in for the ‘demonstrative breaching of established cultural norms’, and thus ‘part of a concerted attack on democratic consensus’ (Anderson & Revers, 2018, p. 31), or proclaimed consensus, at least.

From a journalistic perspective, viewing Pepe as ‘just a right-wing meme’ risks underestimating the strategic work underpinning the creation and maintenance of its symbolic status, its hostility to the normative precepts of democratic politics, and its epistemic resonances for audiences likely to question the integrity of ‘mainstream’ news organizations. Weaponizing this cartoon frog, a tactic actively pursued to re-align him with extreme right politics, affords users with a simple visual entry point to a like-minded community while, at the same time, setting in motion exclusionary prohibitions based on prejudice and discrimination. More often than not, research suggests, memes rooted in ‘dark participation’ (Quandt, 2018), where producer/consumer distinctions (Wiggins, 2019) blur, are strategically-intended to capture groundswells of anger and resentment by those who claim to be ignored at best, denigrated at worst, by the ‘liberal’ news media. The symbolic power of memes to help foment a visceral politics of dis/engagement thus demands careful unpacking by journalists and scholars alike, as well as other interested stakeholders. In a recent *Atlantic* article about meme culture, Helen Lewis (2020) notes that while humour and absurdity have long been linked to right-wing thinking to give plausible deniability for its less-palatable aspects, what is new is that ‘because much of the discussion is happening in closed groups, regular internet users can be happily oblivious to its scale.’ Once properly recognized, the relational affordances inscribed by alt-right internet cultures becomes readily apparent. ‘In other words, don’t be distracted by the silly cartoon frog that extremists have appropriated; worry about the existence of so many extremists posting Pepe memes,’ Lewis writes, pointing out that attention to memes is central to understand the vernacular of such groups. Memes matter, simply put, if we want to understand in what ways – and to what extent, knowingly or otherwise – journalism practice re-articulates counter-public sentiment, if not outright antagonism, in the digital media ecology.

Ever since being declared dead in 2017, Pepe has lived on regardless, sometimes in surprising ways (see Figure 2). In Hong Kong two years later, for example, numerous student demonstrators engaged in the anti-extradition bill action chose to make Pepe a ‘resistance symbol’ for placards, stickers, reaction images or emojis on encrypted messaging apps, stuffed toys, posters, spray-painted walls, and the like, in order to express their aspirations for democratic reform. Evidently unaware of, or untroubled by, the meme’s pernicious far-right associations, Pepe became the ‘face of the faceless protestors’ in numerous guises (e.g., wearing a yellow hardhat, enduring tear gas with his umbrella, holding an anti-government sign, working as a journalist), embodying the youthful spirit of resistance to an authoritarian state (Victor, 2019). Despite his instantly recognizable appearance, this version of Pepe proved to be ‘a different frog,’ Brittan Heller (2019) pointed out in the *New York Times*. ‘It provides a real-time demonstration of how hate speech can be defanged, based on shifting circumstances, expanded frames of reference and varied common usage.’ When a young woman suffered an eye injury, evidently from a police projectile, new iterations of Pepe with a bleeding eye, or wearing an eyepatch or bandage, rapidly

gained traction. Where in mainland China, Pepe was a long-established ‘sad’ frog meme, the fervour surrounding its ‘rebirth’ as a Hong Kong ‘everyman’ cast social distance into sharper relief. ‘Pepe’s dual life as a symbol of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong and a quirky-but-apolitical meme on the mainland encapsulates the cultural tension between mainland China and Hong Kong,’ journalist Ryan Broderick (2020) maintained. ‘As protesters challenge Hong Kong’s “one country, two systems,” this is what happens when there’s one frog meme, two meanings.’



Figure 2. Pepe the Frog’s ‘resurrection’ after 2017³

Such contradictory deployments illustrate the potential ‘multi-accentuality’ (Vološinov, 1973) – or polysemy, in the usual parlance of those studying meme – of a specific meme, which from the perspective of digital journalists undoubtedly complicates any easy accounting of its communicative politicization. Conceptions of ‘weaponization’ risk glossing over the sometimes subtle, nuanced – even counter-intuitive – dynamics they should be at pains to elucidate. ‘Far from challenging the alleged Alt-Right meme by exposing it to light,’ Wark (2016) argues, ‘the media’s association of the Pepe meme with the Alt-Right has simply reaffirmed and accelerated the shitposter’s trick of conjuring something — confusion, hatred, frustration — into being.’ Such challenges, we argue, warrant greater attention from digital journalists. Even casual remediations of memes such as the Pepe, often intended to echo a buzzy, edgy or trendy appeal, may well be calling forth harmful associations. Memes emerging from conspiracy theories and hate speech exacerbate a politics of othering, reinforcing social divisions and hierarchies (such as those of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and so forth) by normalizing extreme viewpoints, including those espousing violence, as authentic expressions of frustration with the status quo.

Ongoing efforts to exploit polysemy to advantage are becoming professionalized, with ‘social media consultants’ one of the preferred titles for political operatives tasked with the job of trying to create memes that resonate with desired constituencies or demographic profiles (Bowles, 2018). In the case of grassroots and national political campaigns, memes are increasingly used as tools of both advocacy and

delegitimization (Ross & Rivers, 2017), with the ability to easily create and circulate memes becoming hard currency in pitched battles over the narrative framing of public affairs issues (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Mimetic weaponization of imagery opens up new, fluid spheres of contestation, and raises searching questions about participatory identities potentially affirmed, policed, undercut or radicalized within these broader public deliberations in online spaces. Better understanding its lived materiality in everyday contexts, we believe, will enhance journalism studies research into civic engagement within digital news ecologies.

Conclusion

The visual dimensions of digital journalism's reportorial forms, practices and epistemologies warrant much closer scholarly attention than they have typically received to date. Seemingly innocuous on their own terms, evolving mimetic repertoires give shape and direction to what Lippmann (1922) famously called 'the pictures in our head' about the world outside our direct experience. In questioning how and why these visual cues are rendered meaningful, we warn against continuing to use an analogue vocabulary to explain digital phenomena; that is, the 'reader who runs' described above with regard to editorial cartoons in the 1930s is now far more likely, almost a century later, to engage with imagery in a scrolling glance, typically engendering fleeting impressions at best. Moreover, traditional appeals to fair comment as a rationale for editorialization in the public interest seems a poor fit to describe many of the 'darker' uses of symbols. One need not subscribe to a full-fledged conception of weaponization to recognize how certain memes are intended to ignite ideological skirmishes to puncture the veneer of appearances or evoke a deeper revelation, often in ways seemingly indifferent to consensus-making, if not hostile to democratic politics altogether.

'The cartoonist's armoury is always there in the workings of our mind,' the art historian EH Gombrich (1963) once pointed out, making 'it easier for us to treat abstractions as if they were tangible realities,' effectively mythologizing the world of politics (1963, pp 128, 139). 'When perplexed and frustrated,' he added, 'we all like to fall back on a primitive, physiognomic picture of events which ignores the realities of human existence and conceives the world in terms of impersonal forces' (1962, pp 139-140). The physiognomizing of Pepe as an expression of alt-right discordance with 'mainstream' politics has proven to be effective, as we have seen here, but care needs to be taken not to overstate the impact or influence of memes in changing individuals' personal beliefs (see also Nadler, Crain, & Donovan, 2018). Our elaboration of 'mimetic weaponization' as a heuristic thus represents a departure from theory-building that tries to differentiate causative links or associations in the symbolic realm. Rather, it is a term we have sought to inscribe within digital news ecologies, where the affective 'hit-and-run' clash of memes and counter-means can have lasting consequences well beyond the left-right polarities of party politics.

Meanwhile, Pepe continues to thrive. As of the date of writing, he figures in various guises in an array of discursive fora concerning the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) converging across journalistic and social media spaces. Examples abound of how 'Covid Corona Pepe' and related variants have been weaponized in subversive challenge to the exercise of government crisis management, including with regard to resisting lockdown measures, countering scientific expertise with allegations of hoaxes and conspiracies, or to simply bask in the chaos of the pandemic. Once again, the mobilization of Pepe appears intended to reaffirm boundaries of inclusion for those who belong, 'who get the joke,' in opposition to those to be marginalized, trivialized or even targeted with hateful exclusion. The 'Know Your Meme' website features one of the milder examples, in this case a cartoon Pepe, wearing personal protective equipment, stating: 'Waiting for the Corona virus to kill off a couple million boomers so I can buy a nice ranch house for 37 cents.' For some researchers, it may seem that the very ephemerality of a passing meme makes it too elusive a quarry to deserve critical attention. Certainly a language of media effects will be of little use in tracing its unruly affectivity with adequate precision, such as when its perceived influence on public opinion is at issue. Still, as we have endeavoured to show in this article, a

critical interrogation of mimetic weaponization can facilitate efforts to enrich digital journalism's capacity to identify and critique the identificatory affiliations and alliances of social media platforms, and in so doing avoid complicity in perpetuating visceral forms of prejudice and discrimination so often presented as 'just a bit of fun.'

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¹ For more comprehensive accounts, please see book-length treatments by Shifman (2014), Milner (2016) and Wiggins (2019). On the relative advantages and limitations of the single case exemplar for theory-building and empirical research schemes, see Flyvbjerg (2006).

² @realDonaldTrump, 13/10/2015; donaldjtrumpjr, 11/09/2016.

³ @denise_tsang23/08/2019; <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1764606-covid-19-pandemic>