

Julia Göke

History Makes Memes. Memes Make History

Abstract: This chapter explores the complex nature of history memes, examining their role in bridging past and present through reinterpretation. Categorized through four dimensions – productional, communicative, receptive, and historical – it delves into their creation, circulation, reception and impact. Furthermore, as versatile sources, history memes offer insights into everyday culture, shape contemporary discourse and play a crucial role in community building. However, using memes as historical sources presents challenges, requiring new approaches.

Keywords: history memes, digital history, social media history, digital communication, internet memes

The French advertisement of Liebig's Extract of Meat Company depicts the arrival of Louis IX of France before Damietta (Fig. 1). Jokingly, Olivier Varlan added the phrase "Au début l'eau est froide mais une fois dedans, elle est vraiment bonne!"¹ and suddenly, the historic advertisement became an internet meme.

The creator of this meme, Olivier Varlan, has a PhD in History and posts many memes about history. Without a doubt, history is often entertaining, and it seems that historians are also funny, or at least think they are. Kim Wilkins (2014) published an article about this phenomenon, "Valhallolz: Medievalist humor on the Internet", which is one of the earliest scientific papers on history memes, or historical memes. Still, it was only in the late 2010s that the research on history in social media gained traction and with it, research on memes. Meanwhile, since around the mid-2000s, memes have already been an intensively discussed topic in other disciplines, like political sciences or media studies.

Memes and history have a rather polyvalent relationship. On the one hand, memes have a history of their own. Since the word "Meme" is a rather elusive term, it is difficult to identify the first internet meme. Generally, they evolved alongside the World Wide Web and the corresponding internet culture. Since the history of social media differs, for example, in China and Japan (see McLelland, Goggin and Yu 2017), the history of memes differs there and in other non-English-speaking internet cultures (Miltner 2017, 415–420).

1 "In the beginning, the water is cold, but once you are in, it feels really good!" (our translation).



Olivier Varlan
@VarlanOlivier

...

"Au début l'eau est froide mais une fois dedans, elle est vraiment bonne !"



2:39 PM · 25 juin 2023 · 7 358 vues

Fig. 1: Tweet by Olivier Varlan 25 June 2023. Accessed 25 June 2023. <https://twitter.com/VarlanOlivier/status/1672947543020568577?s=20>.

Richard Dawkins famously coined the word in the late 1970s in his book *The Selfish Gene*. How exactly the transfer of the meme concept to the internet came about is not known. However, it may be traced back to Mike Godwin (see Godwin 1994; Milner 2016, 17) or, more generally, to the growing public interest in the concept during the late 1980s to 1990s (see Burman 2012, 97–98). In 1990, Godwin noticed the frequency of Hitler and Nazi comparisons in online discussions, which he called the “Nazi-comparison meme”. He reacted to it by developing “Godwin’s Law of Nazi Analogies” (or for short “Godwin’s Law”), which states: “As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one” (Godwin 1994). As noted above, this is an early example of the connection of the meme concept to an internet phenomenon. This “Nazi-comparison meme” might even be the first viral history meme, a kind of meme specifically linked to history, like the post by Olivier Varlan.

This chapter aims to provide a formal definition of history memes through an extensive typology that introduces methodological frameworks to use them as sources. The first part focuses on historical memes as a reinterpretation or appropriation

of historical images or narratives. As researchers, “perceiving the precise nature of these appropriations is vital not only for understanding how iconic photographs [and history] create meanings over time around shared values but also for distinguishing between memes that enhance democratic public debate and those which degrade it” (Boudana 2017, 1228). The second part then provides some perspectives on the questions historians may ask themselves when working with this genre of sources.

1 History Makes Memes

It is not easy to clearly define a history meme since it evokes the fundamental question of what history is and where it starts – the political meme of today is the history meme of tomorrow. It is becoming even more complex, since history memes are more about modern views of history than substantiated historical narratives. Mykola Makhortykh proposed an initial definition of the type:

Both political and historical memes are constituted by groups of digital content units, which share common features (e.g. content or form) and used for communicating group identities [sic]; yet, unlike political memes, historical memes are explicitly related to a particular historical event or a personality and often refer to existing memory practices by satirising, strengthening or propagating them online. (2015, 64)

While this definition is certainly not wrong, I would like to broaden it: History memes refer to historical events, personalities, or imagery. As such, they appropriate history from a modern perspective and often shape, reaffirm, or play on existing historical tropes. Therefore, they have no claim to historicity; instead, they mirror current mindsets and experiences (see Makhortykh 2015, 88; Göke 2020).

History memes are often categorised by the time period they are supposed to depict, for example, Medieval Memes (Razzor and Williams 2015; Göke 2020), Ancient History (Di Legge, Mantovani and Meloni 2022, 413–414), or World War Two (Makhortykh 2015). Sometimes, they are also sorted by type, like the Bayeux Tapestry Memes (Wilkins 2014), or in the case of Juan Manuel González-Aguilar’s and Makhortykh’s study about Anne Frank Memes (2022). Another approach is to classify them by their topic, such as, Military History Memes (Di Legge, Mantovani and Meloni 2022, 414–415), Soviet Leaders Memes (Borenstein 2022, 25–32), or, more generally, Totalitarianism Memes (Di Legge, Mantovani and Meloni 2022, 415–416). History memes as a whole can be classified using the following dimensions Tab. 1:

Tab. 1: Classification of History memes.

Productional Dimension	
creator	popularity; profile
modality	print/digital; audio/macro picture/video/text
complexity/ elaboration	changes from the emergent meme, number of layers, the relation between layers
purpose	Social commentary purposes, absurdist humour purposes, fan purposes, hoax purposes
Communicative Dimension	
exclusivity/ accessibility	publicity of the meme (private forum/small forum/big forum, hashtags/keywords); use of codes/references (general know codes/references, exclusive codes/references)
Receptive Dimension	
participation	interaction with the meme (viral reach, affective evaluation, message deliberation)
circulation	spread across platforms
longevity	duration of interaction, reuse
Historical Dimension	
media	use of historical imagery (historical material – reimagination of historical material), use of contemporary memes
content	use of history as a topic (historical narratives – fake history), modern phenomena transferred to a “historical” backdrop.

The productional dimension focuses on how a meme is produced. The creator of a meme is an important factor. Like an author, their profile “serves to classify and group together separate works, much in the same way tags and keywords allow distributed digital media to be searched and sorted” (Davison 2012, 132). While meme creator profiles can act like an author, it is important to note that memes have no author per se. Rather, “they are [. . .] frequently incorporated into systems and among practices that actively prevent and dismantle attribution” (132). Furthermore, most profiles stay anonymous, which “enables a type of freedom” (132). Still, the creator, or the person who posts the meme, is a key factor in the virality of a meme. Under the aspect of “positioning”, Limor Shifman describes this aspect as follows: “There are two types of preferred users for seeding: ‘hubs’ – people with a high number of connections to others; and ‘bridges’ – people who connect between otherwise unconnected parts of the network. Sending the initial message to these highly con-

nected individuals has proved to be much more effective than sending it to ‘regular’ users” (Shifman 2014, 71).

Furthermore, memes are not a single medium but a genre that appears in various media (see Shifman 2014, 99–118; Wiggins 2019, 40–54). However, not all internet memes stay digital. Books like Rob Ward’s *Classic Art Memes* from 2018 show that there is also a demand for internet memes as prints.

Another point in which memes are widely different from traditional media is their level of complexity or elaboration. From a semiotic perspective, a meme is a sign that operates on different multimodal elements. These elements together construct the meaning of the meme. These elements must be identified and their interaction analysed to be understood (see Nowotny and Reidy 2022; Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017, 567). However, before a piece of digital content becomes a meme, it undergoes a certain transformation, which will be illustrated using the Pepe the Frog meme below (Fig. 2). In the beginning, there is a piece of “spreadable media” that is consumed without any alteration (Collins 2015). At first, Pepe the Frog was a character from a comic called “Boy’s Club” by Matt Furie on My-Space. Later, this character was taken out of that context and slightly altered, through which it became what is known as an “emergent meme”. By further altering and reusing it, it then becomes an “internet meme” (Wiggins 2019, 43–47).

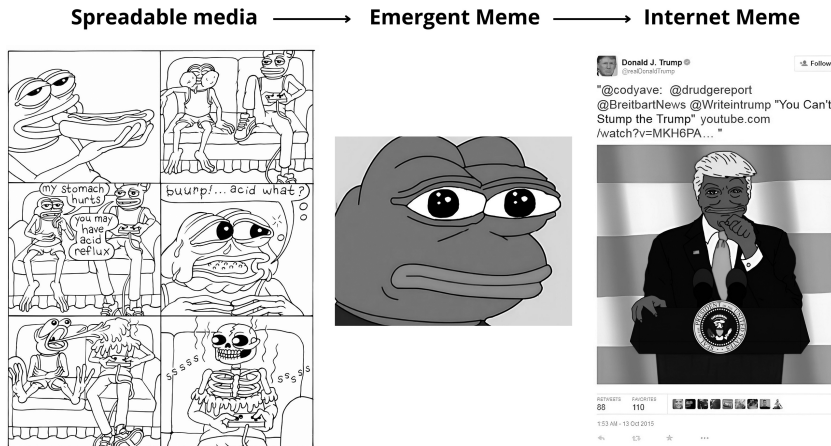


Fig. 2: Transformation of a Meme. Spreadable medium: Accessed 19 April 2023. <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/937797-pepe-the-frog>. Emergent Meme: Accessed 19 April 2023. <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/95218-feels-good-man>. Internet Meme: Accessed 19 April 2023. <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1028964-donald-trump>.

These elements of alteration are the layers that make a meme more elaborate or less so. They can underline or alter the original meaning of the meme (see Davi-

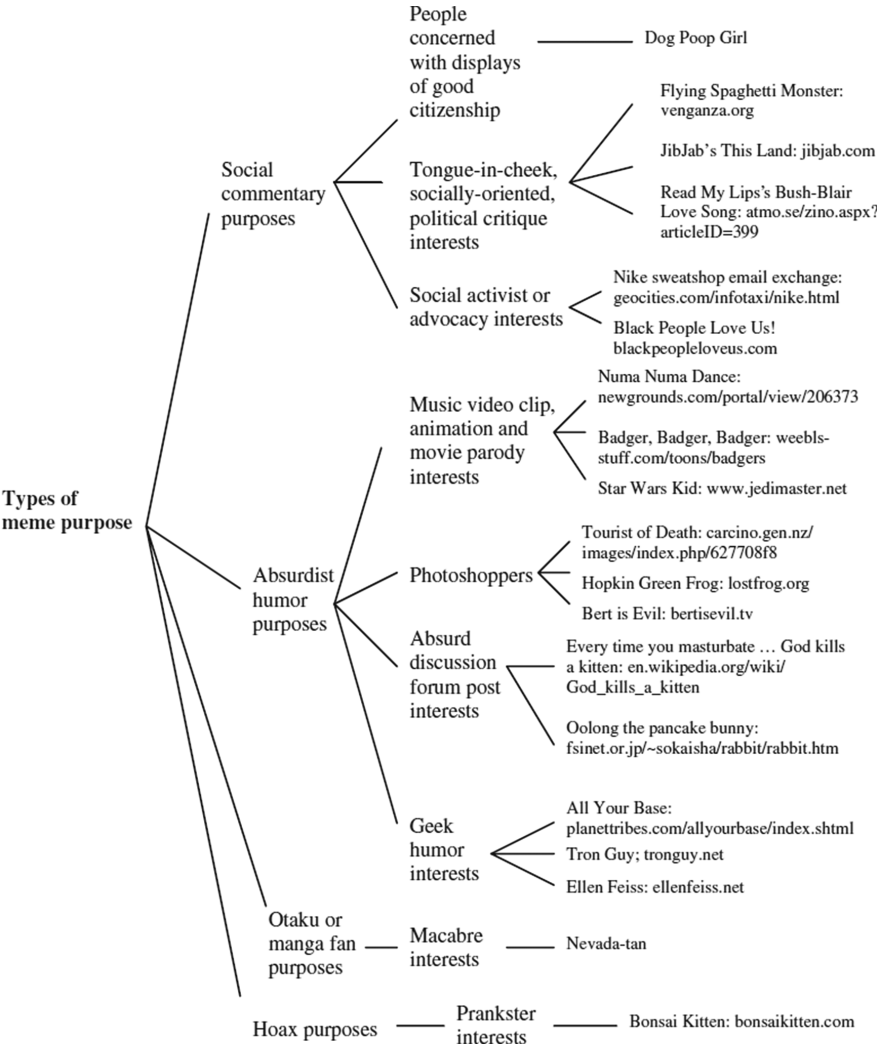


Fig. 3: Typology of different meme purposes (see Lankshear and Knobel 2007, 218).

son 2012, 127). In the case of memes about former Soviet leaders, Eliot Borenstein compares memes to “politically themed matryoshka dolls” (2022, 28).

Mememes are not objective and are primarily for entertainment and humorous purposes (see Shifman 2014; Milner 2016). However, Lankshear and Knobel propose that there are way more purposes that are conveyed through mememes (2007, 217–219):

The typology Lankshear, Colin and Knobel provide (Fig. 3) is provisional, but it offers a good overview. However, I would like to broaden the category of “Otaku or manga fan purposes” to the more general “Fan purposes”, although the line between “Fan purposes” and “Social commentary purposes” can be blurred, as in the example of Pepe the Frog. Benecchi et al. (2020) observed that “people who transformed Pepe into a ‘Nazi Trump supporter and Alt-Right symbol’ are labelled as ‘fans’ of white supremacy and political figures perceived as an incarnation of radical and extremist ideas, such as Donald Trump” (344).

As Makhortykh suggested in his definition, history memes are also often used to convey their creators’ ideology (see 2015, 64). In that way, they are a memorial practice that not only communicates group identities but also builds them, as often seen in Holocaust and World War Two memes as well as Alt-Right memes (see Makhortykh 2015; Schmitt, Harles and Rieger 2020; González-Aguilar and Makhortykh 2022; Strick 2022).

The communicative dimension is mainly defined by the exclusivity or accessibility of the meme. A big part is how much public access the meme. While creators and users seed a meme, their positioning on social media is important as well (see Pailler and Schafer 2023, 126). Some memes circulate in small private groups, while others are on social media sites like Reddit, X (formerly Twitter), etc. The bigger the platform a meme is being posted on, the bigger its outreach. This can also be determined through its views or the click-through rate (see Alhabash and McAlister 2015, 1318). Also, many memes use hashtags or keywords to direct their audience and classify themselves. Nevertheless, there is also another aspect to it: Memes are highly inter-textual (see Lankshear and Knobel 2007, 213–215; Wiggins 2019, 34 on.). To fully understand them, they require knowledge of the codes and references they are using. The creator of a meme has to imagine a target audience while creating the meme, who are able to read the subcultural codes and, depending on the audience, make their meme more or less accessible (see Grundlingh 2018, 150; Shifman 2014, 115).

The receptive dimension is a mirror of public opinion about a meme. When discussing what determines a successful meme, we talk about its virality (see Shifman 2014, 65). Of course, virality in itself is complex and there are many theories and approaches to the topic (see Arjona-Martín, Méndiz-Noguero and Victoria-Mas 2020, 3–5). One way to define virality is through interaction with a meme, which can be seen through three determinants: First, the “viral reach”, which is comparable to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and “refers to the volume of message sharing and forwarding by internet users” (Alhabash and McAlister 2015, 1319); second, the “affective evaluation” describes the affirmative or disapproving reaction to a piece of content, as expressed through likes or dislikes. Lastly, “message deliberation”, in which reactions are expressed through the comments section of the meme (Alhabash and McAlister 2015, 1318–1319). But these points mostly focus on the re-

ception of a single internet meme on one platform. It is also important to trace the spread of a meme over different platforms and especially to trace its transformations across them to, therefore, get a better grasp of a meme's history (see Pailler and Schafer 2023, 123–125). While longevity is also often perceived as a characteristic of a meme's success (see Lankshear and Knobel 2007, 202; Pailler and Schafer 2023, 121–123), I would argue that it is a determination of the long-term influence of a meme. Lankshear and Knobel (2007) describe its importance as follows: “[T]he longer a meme survives, the more it can be copied and passed on to fresh minds, thereby ensuring its ongoing transmission” (202).

It is important to note that history memes in general mostly have the same functionality as every other meme, but they do not entirely function the same way (see Makhortykh 2015, 88). So, while the first three dimensions are not exclusive to history memes, the fourth one is: Unlike every other kind of meme, history memes use their visual, auditive and content levels across a spectrum of “History” and “Contemporary.” (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Spectrum of history memes. Upper right: Accessed 30. August 2023. <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2648331-classical-art-memes>. Lower right: Accessed 25. April 2023. https://www.reddit.com/r/medievalMemes/comments/ddgy73/ily_st_hildegard/. Upper left: Accessed 25. April 2023. https://www.reddit.com/r/HistoryMemes/comments/ee3ka9/black_panther_flashbacks/. Lower left: Accessed 25. April 2023. <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1207951-fake-history>.

On one side, historical imagery is used as the visual base for the memes and which can be taken from historical photography or paintings. A category in that field is the so-called Classical Art Meme, which “draw [. . .] their images from what can be broadly conceived as ‘classical art’” (Piata 2019, 196). However, it is not necessary that a meme’s imagery is really historical – as long as it seems historical, it will be seen as historical. For example, new pseudo-historical material is created where historical sources are lacking or do not exist. This can be best seen through the “aural turn” of memes and the rise of “Bardcore” – a genre of music that reimagines popular modern songs in a medieval-sounding aesthetic. This blending of historical and modern elements can tie into the concept of image substitution, which Ekatherina Zhukova (2019) defines as “an image of one historical event of a particular time or place that is used to represent a historical occurrence of a different time or geographical location” (5). In the case of famous historical pictures used, it is notable that “the more an iconic photo is circulated, the more it is recognized as iconic, yet the more it may become devoid of the significance that made it iconic in the first place” (Boudana 2017, 1227). Thus, memes not only play with historical imagery but also contribute to the complex landscape of historical representation.

Content-wise, these memes put the historical pictures into a contemporary context or present a historical narrative associated with the era depicted in the images (see Göke 2020, 16–23). They connect this historical imagery with our modern times and forge connections that resonate with contemporary audiences (see Barclay and Downing 2023, 62). However, they can also play into the concept of visual fake history, which “implies a mixture of truth, misinformation, and disinformation created through aesthetic qualities of image substitutes and accompanying narratives” (Zhukova 2019, 5). This is even more evident when the creators use meme templates to illustrate historical narratives as the base of their memes. In this case, history memes display a great deal of ambiguity, with some presupposing a certain level of historical knowledge among their audience, while others opt for a more simplistic or even factually inaccurate approach (see Göke 2020, 16). Sometimes, these modern memes do not use historical narratives but play on historical connections to our modern times. What is interesting is how these modern memes often engage in playful exploration by drawing connections to historical events or figures in the context of contemporary culture. These memes effectively transpose elements of the present into the past, creating a bridge between eras and building a connection to the past. However, this can open the door to reflexive fascism, a concept that refers to the phenomenon that “contemporary neo-fascist actors remake, revise, and warp the very conceptions of post-war history and historical scholarship” (Strick 2022, 335).

2 Memes Make History

In the past decades, the relationship between memes and history has evolved into a new dimension and memes are now gradually becoming sources that provide unique glimpses into everyday culture due to their ability to adapt to various contexts. They represent inclusive and collaborative discourses and contribute to the narratives of shared history (see Nolasco-Silva, da Conceição Silva Soares and Lo Bianco 2019, 114, 127–128). For example, in the case of the “video essay” “BLACK MEME”, the artist Legacy Russell uses memes to explore a cultural history of Black visual culture (see Externalpages 2020; Heyward-Rotimi 2022). The artist asks the question “What is a black meme” (Externalpages 2020) and answers it in a “non-hierarchical approach to engaging with varied forms of Black cultural output” (Heyward-Rotimi 2022). According to her:

Memes are not neutral. The labor enacted through black meme culture raises questions about subjectivity, personhood, and the ever-complicated fault lines of race, class, and gender performed both on- and offline. I want to talk about the economy and engine of this and perhaps push further a discussion about how we can hold ourselves accountable to how this material is produced and circulated (Externalpages 2020).

This examination demonstrates the cultural capital of memes and recognises certain examples of them as part of Black cultural heritage, as Valérie Schafer and Fred Pailier (2024) show: “Situated at the intersection of communities of practice, cultural and digital history, vernacular and sometimes folkloric trends, memes stand out as very good contenders for heritagisation”. Furthermore, the explicit political connotation of “BLACK MEME” demonstrates that memes wield an undeniable discursive power. In this digital age, they are a dynamic force shaping contemporary discourse and how we connect, share and engage online. In particular, political memes not only mirror the technological prowess of the internet by spreading swiftly across borders, but also provide a platform for expressing a diverse array of political opinions. According to Wiggins (2019), a political meme is, in the broadest sense, a meme that “addresses some aspect of political philosophy and ideology” (65). These memes offer a channel for inclusive and empowered interaction and communication, particularly for marginalised groups. Therefore, they play a pivotal role in community building (58).

However, it would be false to paint political memes merely as quasi-egalitarian ways of expressing political opinions, as memes can also be used to manipulate the public. Since the mid-2010s, internet memes have been discussed as a means of warfare or at least political influence (see Zakem, McBride and Hammerberg 2018, 52–55). In a 2018 report for the Center for Naval Analyses, Vera Zakem, Megan K. McBride and Kate Hammerberg identified three different ways to influence campaigns with memes (Tab. 2):

Tab. 2: Use of Memes in campaigns [USG= US Government]. (See Zakem, McBride and Hammerberg 2018).

	Inoculate	Infect	Treat
Purpose	Prevent or minimize the effect of adversary messaging	Transmit messages in support of USG interests	Contain the effect of adversary messaging
Distribution	<i>Preventative</i> Anticipatory	<i>Offensive</i> Stand Alone Effort	<i>Defensive</i> Reactive
Message Disposition	Adversary	USG	Adversary

To use memes in a way to “inoculate” campaigns means “to use a meme in an effort to protect against a threat or anticipated attack. Using memes to preemptively address – with an emphasis on delegitimizing or undermining – a message or attack expected from another actor” (Zakem, McBride and Hammerberg 2018, 17). For example, when the IS demanded ransom for two Japanese hostages in a video from 20 January 2015, Japanese citizens mocked the IS through numerous memes “in part to inoculate the Japanese public against the expected horror of the hostages being executed” (Zakem, McBride and Hammerberg 2018, 18).

When talking about how memes can “infect” campaigns, Zakem et al. mean “to use a meme to spread a specific message. To use memes to articulate a message – either positive (e.g., defending a value) or negative (i.e., disparaging an institution) – that aligns with broader mission objectives” (2018, 24). In 2016, there were two instances in which Russian troll farms were accused of influencing foreign votes in the interests of the Russian government. Mostly via Twitter and Facebook, but also on other social media channels like Pokémon Go, they spread pro-Brexit and pro-Trump/anti-Clinton content (Zakem, McBride and Hammerberg 2018, 27–30). Jeff Giese (2016), who has a rather radical approach to memetic warfare, writes in his paper for NATO, that “[t]rolling [. . .] is the social media equivalent of guerrilla warfare, and memes are its currency of propaganda” (68). However, not all trolls are part of a bigger operation because “there is far too much variation within the behavioural category of trolling (even within the same raiding party) to affix any singular, unified purpose to constituent trolls’ actions” (Phillips 2016, 20). Generally, the aims of trolls “are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement” (Hardacker 2010, 237).

The last way to influence a campaign through memes can also be a reaction to the previous practices since it means “to use a meme to treat an already circulating message. To respond memetically – by mocking, disproving, or otherwise countering – to a message that has been spread by another actor” (Zakem, McBride and

Hammerberg 2018, 34). In 2016, Italian and Iranian citizens used memes to ridicule the decision of the Italian government to conceal certain nude statues during the visit of Hassan Rouhani, who was the president of Iran at that time (39–41). According to the report, these memetic interventions were successful on tactical and strategic levels. Although they are mostly short-lived and culturally specific, they resonate emotionally and transcend “individual cultures and languages” (43). Generally, they are far-reaching and “not limited to counter-radicalization efforts” (43), while, furthermore, a wide variety of actors are involved, ranging from normal citizens to NGOs, non-state actors, and governments.

An awareness of the manipulative use of memes is important since “[h]istories and historical events exist as memories, images, or imaginings to be remembered, revitalized, sparked” (Hristova 2013, 93). Images, and therefore memes, are essential in the public perception of history (see Hristova 2013), and they can even be used to construct history that never existed in the first place, like in the case of the Bowling Green Massacre. When Kellyanne Conway, a counsellor to President Trump, spread news in 2017 of a non-existent massacre in Bowling Green, the internet reacted immediately. Memes created in response to this news memorialised the event as if it had truly occurred, thus elevating it to the status of “one of the most significant events in recent years” in Bowling Green (Evans 2018, 469).

It must be noted that working with memes as primary sources presents its own set of challenges. First and foremost, the sheer volume of memes circulating online can be overwhelming, leading researchers to grapple with questions of how to manage and analyse this vast and ever-expanding dataset effectively. Much like the broader field of social media history, meme studies requires approaches that combine traditional close reading methods with distant reading techniques (see Clavert 2021, 179–186). Historians can draw inspiration from works researching political memes, such as those by David M. Beskow, Sumeet Kumar and Kathleen M. Carley (2020).

Preservation is another critical concern when working with memes. Given their digital nature and often fleeting existence, questions arise about ensuring the long-term accessibility and preservation of these artifacts. As memes evolve rapidly and platforms change, archiving and documenting them become crucial endeavours. Furthermore, questions regarding copyright (see Mead 2022) and how to adequately preserve the complex nature of memes complicate the attempts (see Schafer and Pailler 2024). Archival researchers increasingly explore strategies to capture and archive memes, acknowledging their significance as contemporary cultural and historical artifacts (see Mead 2022). Given the previously mentioned cultural significance of memes, more actors, ranging from museums and mainstream media to web archives, as well as both commercial (e.g., Know Your Meme) and non-profit (e.g., Wi-

ikipedia) websites, actively participate in the archival and or heritagisation efforts of memes (see Schafer and Pailler 2024).

In sum, memes have huge potential to become a new kind of historical source. However, the challenges of working with memes as primary sources necessitate interdisciplinary and innovative approaches that adapt to the ever-changing landscape of digital culture.

Conclusion

Defining history memes is complex, as they blur the line between past and present. They encompass a broader range, including historical events, figures and imagery. Furthermore, they reinterpret history from a modern perspective, reflecting and sometimes humorously manipulating established historical themes. It is important to understand they often do not claim historical accuracy but mirror contemporary cultural viewpoints and interpretations. Memes are often sorted by their eras, type, or content. However, they can be classified more effectively using four dimensions: Productional – Communicative – Receptive – Historical.

The productional dimension of memes considers how they are created and shared. The role of the meme creator is crucial and is akin to an author whose profile helps classify and group different works. However, memes do not have traditional authors, as they often exist in systems that prevent attribution and many creators remain anonymous. Nevertheless, the creator's role is significant in determining a meme's virality, with highly connected individuals playing key roles in seeding them. Memes are a diverse genre appearing across various media, not limited to digital formats. This genre's complexity and elaboration vary, with memes often consisting of multimodal elements that construct their meaning. Analysing these elements and their interactions is thus crucial for understanding a meme. Memes undergo transformations, which started as spreadable media before being altered and reused to become an internet meme. These alterations add layers to a meme, influencing and sometimes changing its meaning. Memes can also be created for different purposes, like social commentary, absurdist humour, for fans, or as hoaxes. However, some memes can serve multiple purposes and are sometimes used to convey their creator's ideology.

The communicative dimension of memes considers their accessibility and reach. Memes vary in terms of public access, from circulating in small private groups to appearing on widely used social media platforms like Reddit and X (formerly Twitter). The platform, the positioning of a meme's creator, and the hashtags they are using are crucial factors that influence outreach. Additionally, memes are

highly intertextual, requiring an understanding of the codes and references they employ, making them more or less accessible depending on the target audience.

The receptive dimension reflects public opinion about a meme's success and, in the broadest sense, its virality. This is determined by factors such as viral reach, affective evaluation (likes and dislikes), and message deliberation (comments). Longevity also plays a role in a meme's influence over time.

History memes share functionality with other memes but have unique characteristics in terms of their visual, auditory and content levels. They blend historical imagery with modern elements, often using historical visuals as a basis, whether from actual historical sources or pseudo-historical material. These memes contribute to the complex landscape of historical representations. Some history memes use modern meme templates to illustrate historical narratives, showing a range of ambiguity. While some presuppose historical knowledge, others take a more simplistic or factually inaccurate approach. These modern memes playfully explore historical connections in contemporary culture, bridging the gap between eras and connecting with the past. However, this can also open the door to manipulating historical narratives as well.

Moreover, memes can also be considered sources that offer unique insights into everyday culture. They are versatile and adaptive, contributing to inclusive and collaborative discourses and enhancing narratives of shared history. Furthermore, they wield significant discursive power, shaping contemporary discourse and providing a platform for diverse political opinions. They have been shown to play a crucial role in community building, particularly for marginalised groups. However, political memes are not just egalitarian expressions of political views. They can also be used for manipulation and influence by inoculate, infect, or treat campaigns, often achieved through the use of trolls. Therefore, memes are effective tools for propaganda and disruption, but they also have the power to shape public perceptions of history.

These digital artifacts have become essential in shaping public historical consciousness and are a rich source of study for historians. However, working with memes as primary sources presents challenges, including managing the vast volume of online memes, preserving them for future study and navigating copyright issues. Scholars must thus adopt interdisciplinary and innovative approaches to harness the potential of memes as new kinds of historical sources in our digital age.

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