**Definition: Internet Memes**

Memes are a worldwide social phenomenon. “A 'meme' is a virally-transmitted cultural symbol or social idea.“[[1]](#footnote-2) “These small movements tend to spread from person to person via social networks, blogs, direct email, or news sources.“[[2]](#footnote-3) “The majority of modern memes are captioned photos that are intended to be funny, often as a way to publicly ridicule human behavior. Other memes can be videos and verbal expressions. Some memes have heavier and more philosophical content.“[[3]](#footnote-4) Since 2016 memes have played an increasing role in political debates online.[[4]](#footnote-5)

‘Meme' comes from the Greek word ’mimema' (meaning ’something imitated’, American Heritage Dictionary). Richard Dawkins - an evolutionary biologist - described memes as being a form of cultural propagation, which is a way for people to transmit social memories and cultural ideas to each other. In reference to evolutionary principles, memes - like genes - replicate successfully, evolve through alteration or mutation and spread; unfit memes are forgotten. Due to the rapid transformation of internet memes, their analyses are complex.

Although seemingly simple, memes are complex signs, which need a deeper understanding of contextual cultural knowledge of the image and the references in the captions.



**TOP TEXT**

*image*

**BOTTOM TEXT**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| typical image macro of an internet meme | example of a political internet meme[[5]](#footnote-6) |

**How to: Analyze Internet Memes**



Screenshot of Facebook profile “The Republicans Obviously Lack Logic“: <https://www.facebook.com/TROLLGOP/photos/a.306620502769573.68342.306616749436615/394041124027510/?type=3&theater>, 6/6/2018

**Step 1: Introduction**

* Give **available information on the context** (name of person who published the meme, date and place of publication, number of likes or shares or any other kind of additional information).
* Identify the **main issue** the meme refers to.

**Step 2: Description**

* Describe the **image** (setting, objects, people), the **action** depicted and the **caption**.
* If possible, describe the **comments** in the comment section of the platform on which it was published.

**Step 3: Analysis**

Explain the **main message** of the meme and **how it is created**. To do this, analyze…

* the image. Use your background knowledge and, for example,
  + “The Rhetorics of Memes“, a project by the University of Michigan: <https://sites.google.com/a/umich.edu/the-rhetoric-of-memes/home> (short link: <http://t1p.de/51t2>)
  + <http://knowyourmeme.com>
* (if possible) additional allusions, e.g. symbols: “Scumbag hat“, background color, …
* the caption and the use of (non-standard) English,
* the connection between the image and the caption,
* the intended audience.

**Step 4: Evaluation**

Evaluate the effectiveness of the meme. Determine what makes the meme sharable: irony, exaggeration, new perspective, choice of words, analogies, …

**Go further:**

**Research**

* In order to combat “*fake news*“, determine the meme’s trustworthiness by comparing and contrasting the message of the meme with other sources.

**Create your own memes**

* Inform yourselves about the newest memes: <https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/>.
* Browse through memes and gifs: <https://giphy.com/search/memes/>.
* Generate memes with the most popular images; upload your own images and memes, e.g.: <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>, <https://memegenerator.net>.

1. Gil, Pauli. “What is a meme?“, <https://www.lifewire.com/what-is-a-meme-2483702>, 6/6/2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. wikipedia, “internet meme“, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_meme>, 6/6/2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Gil, ibd. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. cf. Osnos, Evan. “The Year of the Political Troll“, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-year-of-the-political-troll> and [Priceonomics Data Studio](https://priceonomics.com/the-priceonomics-data-studio/), “We Analyzed Every Meme on the Internet“, <https://priceonomics.com/we-analyzed-every-meme-on-the-internet/>, 6/6/2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. screenshot of Facebook profile “The Republicans Obviously Lack Logic“: <https://www.facebook.com/TROLLGOP/photos/a.306620502769573.68342.306616749436615/394041124027510/?type=3&theater>, 6/6/2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)