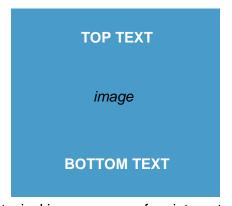# Definition: Internet Memes

Memes are a worldwide social phenomenon. "A 'meme' is a virally-transmitted cultural symbol or social idea."[1] "These small movements tend to spread from person to person via social networks, blogs, direct email, or news sources."[2] "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] Since 2016 memes have played an increasing role in political debates online.[4]

'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.

typical image macro of an internet meme

example of a political internet meme[5]

1 Gil, Pauli. "What is a meme?", https://www.lifewire.com/what-is-a-meme-2483702, 6/6/2018.
2 wikipedia, "internet meme", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_meme, 6/6/2018.
3 Gil, ibd.
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, "We Analyzed Every Meme on the Internet", https://priceonomics.com/we-analyzed-every-meme-on-the-internet/, 6/6/2018.
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.

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,
  - o "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)
  - o 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.