

# Mememes as Games: A Procedural Rhetoric Perspective on the Critical Potential of Internet Mememes

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## Introduction

Internet mememes are, according to Wikipedia<sup>1</sup>, “an activity, concept, catchphrase or piece of media which spreads, often as mimicry, from person to person via the Internet”. While originally internet mememes were playful phenomena with the seemingly sole purpose of mutual entertainment, more recently mememes have become an integral part of political online discourse, as well. During the Greek debt crisis in 2015, for example, the role of the controversial Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis quickly led to the emergence of hundreds of images and videos spreading online. Even more so in contexts of web censorship and propaganda, Mememes may be important and powerful ways to voice discontent (see Mina 2014, p. 362):

“Mememes, as micro-actions of media remixing and sharing, are particularly important in a censored, propagandized state, which seeks first to isolate individuals who express opinions contrary to state interests, and then to deaden the sort of public debate that fosters a diverse sphere of opinion.”

The present article develops the idea that Internet mememes may contribute to or even drive social change due to their playful nature as some form of communication game. More specifically, we want to investigate how internet mememes become relevant in public discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Internet\\_meme&oldid=671348194](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Internet_meme&oldid=671348194)

To do so, we develop a theoretical framework for analyzing memes as discursive games and look at the illustrative example of the “Obama Hope Meme”. In this case, an iconic Obama picture labeled with the word “hope” by US street artist and illustrator Shepard Fairey has inspired a still ongoing stream of derivative works, which transform and transfer Fairey’s work into new contexts with new - and often oppositional - meanings.

By analyzing the *Hope* meme, we are able to deduct a set of rules that govern the playful process of a *mem-discourse*. Thus the contribution of the paper will be to enhance the understanding of the role that memes play in the public discourse. We will show, that the meme game creates a secluded virtual space in which creative and critical potential can unfold outside of the public mainstream. The meme game thus constitutes a kind of laboratory for the formation of potential future discourse nuclei. The playful nature of the process and its inherent procedurality distinguish meme games from other forms of counter-publics and subcultures, that express itself rather in blogs, social networks or platforms.

## **Memes as Discursive Games**

### *Memes in Society*

Memes are fundamental features of modern media society. They are, not only in the rather narrow sense of internet memes, but also in a broad understanding of communication. The term was first introduced by Richard Dawkins (1976) in order to apply the principles of Darwinian evolutionary theory to the evolution of culture and society. Dawkins theorised, that the basic replicating units in biological organisms, genes, must have some equivalent in the process of cultural evolution and thus coined the term meme. In general, “a *meme* is an act or meaning structure that is capable of *replication*, which means imitation” (Spitzberg 2014, p. 312). Furthermore, “*imitation* is, in essence, a process of communication, in which one social organism, group, or system engages in activity that represents an informational duplicate or derivative version of another act or meaning” (ibid.). When looking at internet memes specifically, we can be more precise and understand memes as “digital objects that riff on a given visual, textual or auditory form and are then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from” (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer

2014, p.249). Having both in mind, the general idea and the internet-phenomenon, we can assert, that the core operation of these processes is the permanent copying and re-coding of a pre-existing theme – a constant alteration of something given into something similar but different. Thus, we can draw an analogy and assume that memes are at the centre of an evolutionary process in which meaning spreads throughout society, however not always quite in the way it was meant by the original sender. Communication is always an act of replication. When we write, we copy our thoughts onto paper, and thereby stipulate what we want to express in a fixed order of words. But, in the very moment of writing, we know that our expression could have more than just one meaning, could be interpreted in more than just one way, and hence, not everybody will understand our expression exactly the way as we meant it to be. Let alone ourselves, who can never be totally sure either, what we meant in the first place. This uncertainty inherent in communication is variation.

Then, if someone else reads what we write, is an entirely different matter, dependent on a great many factors. Our number of friends or colleagues, our wit, our access to social networks and their size, act as selectors that determine how far the words we write (or the pictures we take, etc.) spread (Spitzberg 2014). Memes are, compared to complex manifestations of communication such as books or films, very small units of information. “Memes diffuse at the micro level but shape the macro structure of society” (Shifman 2013, p. 372). The sheer endless resources of the meme producing communities lead to a fast-track selective process in which the appropriate memes for specific problems emerge. Like nature with its lavishness, the digital culture produces vast numbers of memes, of which only a negligible proportion crosses the barrier into the public consciousness. Even though only few memes enter the public discourse, all the non-selected memes were functional for the selective process.

### *Memes as Part of Public Discourse*

Apart from their common usage in the internet community, *memes* represent a far more broad concept in theories of evolutionary sociology. They make the building blocks of discursive frames, which order memes into a consistent and coherent set and thereby organize human cognition and interpretation. *Frames* thus struggle with other frames over dominance (Deutungshoheit) in the public discourse. To be more precise, since frames themselves are just schemes and patterns who cannot act, actors do so by creating or tapping into existing frames in the course of communicating.

Thus, as in nature, society is not a realm of permanent stalemate where organizations are locked in a status quo. From time to time “underdog” organisations or individuals, who are not part of a dominant mainstream discourse coalition (Hajer 1993), manage to tip the balance and topple dominating (or at least challenge it), by introducing new counter-frames in public discourse. With regard to this process of change, our hypothesis is that memes, understood as a game, represent one dynamic mechanism that enables less-powerful actors to challenge dominant frames, thereby potentially driving societal change. Memes undercut the logic of the public discourse and are therefore hard to target by traditionally powerful “opinion leaders”. This is why “so far, the most successful memes have been deployed by people without a megaphone against institutions that often dominate mainstream culture.” (Zittrain 2014, p. 389)

### *Mememes as Games*

Before we enter into memes as games, we have to enquire, why the *meme game* is played at all. Surely, playing is not always a sociologically or culturally meaningful act (Huizinga 1980, p. 1), since humans have played long before the dawn of civilization. Thus, not each meme we encounter when looking at public communication, is a meaningful act with regard to others. In fact, most of them might well be just pieces created for the sake of creation, or simply, for having fun and enjoyment. However, as Huizinga points out, “all play means something” (ibid.) and therefore every act of playing bears the potential of being meaningful. Even though the player might not intend his play to be more than just fun, it could very well happen to be. Because, every now and then, a meme connects with other acts or meanings that happen to be related to the same frame and cross the barrier into the attention of the public. In their broadest sense, frames can be understood as “patterns of interpretation through which people classify information in order to handle it efficiently” (Scheufele, 2004, p. 402; see also Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974), i.e. they organize cognition and interpretation. Memes are part of frames and thus part of “an environment in which rival frames seek survival” (Spitzberg 2014, p. 315).

Earlier, we argued that memes undercut the logic of public communication and are thus hard to target by strategic communication. But, how do memes achieve that avoidance? We argue that the reason for the virality of memes, which is a precondition for public discursive relevance, is that they are part of a decentralized game whose outcomes are usually

irrelevant to the public. Only now and then does the play-like process bring about memes upon which critical, different frames enter the public discourse. Memes therefore act as a kind of *discourse nucleus*. As Kumar and Combe note, those processes “create an alternative space for social and political critique, outside the institutions of traditional media due to the proliferation of networked devices.” (2015, p. 211) While organized communication is mainly concerned with traditional media relations and the main hot spots of social media, such as Facebook or Twitter, memes can dwell in the endless depths of the internet and thereby avoid the limiting conditions of the mainstream public arenas. Satire and parody have since long been agents of subversive speech, especially in authoritarian regimes (Mina 2014), where ambiguity was the only way to dodge censorship executed by the gatekeepers of the public. Today, memes are acts of subversive speech in a “risky game where parody accounts, mirror websites, fake usernames, and proxy servers allow participants to slip under the watchful radar of state agencies, that continue to finesse their skills at controlling and stifling online speech.” (Kumar & Comber 2015, p. 212) The game of memes is therefore played on two distinct levels. First, it is a competition of generating memes, which then are battling for the attention of users within and/or aside the mainstream. Second, wherever the right of free speech is limited or neglected, it is also a game of hide and seek – governmental organizations or other large organizations try to control what is being said and therefore try to oppress voices of different opinions.

## **Playing the Meme Game**

### *The Procedural Rhetoric of Meme Games*

Our core hypothesis is, that the playful nature of the process is crucial for the success of memes. Playing creates an environment that is governed by the rules of trial and error. Huizinga noted “that culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning.” (1949, p. 46) Unlike work, which affords an earnest attitude, playing involves “a note of light-heartedness and carefree joyfulness” (ibid., p. 30). As Rowe has pointed out, “games are ends in themselves” (1992, p. 468). Even though there might often be a defined point, upon reaching which the game ends, games are often played just for the sake of playing the game - it is not their outcome that defines them:

*“Thus, at bottom, there are two sorts of game: those that are constituted by sequences and those that are constituted by goals. Both kinds of game are abstract objects and they both have a common value: they guarantee purposelessness however seriously and relentlessly the activity they create is pursued, and this ensures that it is the activity itself, rather than any product of the activity, which has value. I should therefore define a game as ‘An abstract object (either a sequence or a goal) which is designed to have no instrument value; the realization or pursuit of which is intended to be of absorbing interest to participants or spectators.’” (Rowe 1992, p. 478)*

Hence, when looking at memes in digital culture, it is not only the object that should attract our attention, but also the underlying qualities of its medium. The analysis of cultural phenomenon often focusses on oral and visual representations. However, to grasp memes for what they are, “we must look beyond the formats imposed upon the computer by the older media” (Murray 1999, p. 64). First of all, we have to be aware “that the new digital medium is intrinsically procedural” (ibid., p. 71). To Bogost (2007), procedurality is what makes digital games unique compared to other media such as movies, literature or theatre, because procedurality produces representational expressions which can be explored and experienced by the player. Unlike oral or visual rhetoric, procedural rhetoric is then “the practice of authoring arguments through processes” (Bogost 2007, p. 28-29) in order to convey ideas (ibid.). Surely, a novel can be explored by the reader, too. But the text is not interacting with the reader in the way, a programme interacts with users. The programme offers many ways of experience, where novels and films are restricted to the narrative they have - they are linear after all. The novel can persuade its reader of an inherent idea. A programme can make the user experience one idea or many.

When we now turn to memes, we can see that experiencing the procedurality of the meme game means something entirely different than the sole act of receiving it. Receiving a meme tells us something about the content of what we see or hear and consequently, the issue connected to it. Creating a meme and feeding it into the digital community, makes the user part of a process that starts as playful pastime and might end up in the creation of an iconic meme that inspires people all around the world. However, the inspiring or iconic meme is not the intended outcome of the process. It is just a by-product that happens to evolve from time to time. The intention of the game is to have fun by creating replications of existing memes and enrich them with humorous, ironic, sarcastic and critical content. And with every playful

activity, the outcome usually yields no immediate consequences. After all, it is just a game – most of the time. Thus, the idea conveyed through the procedure in the meme game is the idea of playful criticism.

### *Features and Rules of the Meme Game*

Memes possess some features that make them the ideal carrier of meaning. The success of a single meme in the competition with other memes is dependent on three main characteristics, as Dawkins (1976) argues: longevity, fecundity and copying-fidelity. *Longevity* can be understood as the time span a replicating pattern survives (Heylighen & Chielens 2009). With regard to internet memes, it means that the meme must at least have a number of recipients and carriers who spread the meme and thereby make sure it does float on the top of perception. Some memes like the famous depiction of “Alfred E. Neumann” from Mad Magazine, “Kilroy was here” or Uncle Sam’s “I Want You” go back decades, even before the internet was born.

*Fidelity* is then the effort it takes in order to replicate a meme. The easier the replication-process is, the better are chances that it will spread. Highly complex memes are hard to copy and therefore not many users might find it attractive to develop their own altered version. In fact, most memes are a simple combination of a picture and two written phrases. Hence, the famous *One cannot simply walk into Mordor*-meme from the motion picture *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* is one of the most popular and widest spread meme in the internet. The phrase “one cannot simply” has a high recognition value and is easy to combine with any kind of issue.

*Fecundity*, finally, refers to the potential a meme has to attract a large number of recipients. Therefore, the topic incorporated in the meme is crucial. Partisan, highly controversial and current topics are more likely to gain attention than inside jokes which only a handful of people can understand. In fact, all the factors that make news more likely to be covered also increase the likeliness of memes to be recognized in the public and thus increases the chances of further replication. The iconic “Hope” poster depicting Barack Obama during the US Presidential Campaign in 2008 is an example we are going to elaborate later on.

Earlier on we suggested, that the meme game is played on two levels: A competitive level among individuals for creating memes that attract attentions and a competitive level between

individuals and organisations in order to criticise, or make fun of organisations, their representatives, their policies or issues they are related to. Due to the evolvement of the internet, memes have found the perfect realm to dwell, since costs for distribution throughout the internet are very low and the number of potential receivers very high. Longevity, fidelity and fecundity are just the prerequisites for memes to be replicated at all. The development of critical potential in memes, however, affords a few more factors to emerge during the process.

First of all, unlike plain text, memes are hard to track for what they are. Critical public coverage in news media is relatively simple to censor, since the content can easily be track online. Openly critical ideas stand for what they are straightforward and are therefore relatively easy to suppress by hindering the speaker to speak (or write) in public. For centuries, satire was (and still is) one of the few instruments available to express deviant ideas and establish counter-frames (Marzouki 2015) in order to point out the shortcomings of a present system and its representatives. It is the very nature of satire to challenge “not only the individuals in positions of power but also the very norms that govern the functioning of institutions, and the media in particular” (Young 2013, p. 375). Due to its implicit nature (ibid.), satire can transport critical ideas by using language or expressions that do not look critically on the first sight, maybe not even on the second. It would be highly exaggerated to claim that satire is critical per se (sometimes it is even instrumentalized by those in power), but it can be, as many examples in the history of totalitarian regimes prove (Ioffe & Oushakine 2013 and especially Qualin 2013 on the russian musician Vladimir Vysockij).

However, it is only a trait that memes share with the genre. Unlike most satirical works in arts and literature, memes are always the result of a *joint effort*. Even though the theme of a meme might be authored by few or even a single individual, replicating the meme and spreading it across the internet is always an effort of the many. And the existence of the meme is never dependent on one person alone. Unlike artists and comedians who work on a grand opus, the contribution to memes comes in small steps. And as Tooby et al. have pointed out: “Where interactions are small in scale, joint efforts are routine.” (2006, p. 104) This joint effort results in a wide spread variety of the meme. On the one hand, the criticism wrapped into the meme is not as visible as the work of a critical thinker, artist or comedian. However, it is easy to ban a person from public stage. And thus, on the other hand, the many separate small pieces of works that constitute the meme all together are not easily to disband. It is hard to censor hundreds and thousand small pieces of a replicated meme. If

some pieces are taken out of the web, they either get replaced immediately by other copies or the other pieces in the game still transport their message and thereby just occupy the places left open.

However, meme-games also unfold their critical potential due to the same features in societies that grant freedom of speech. Their decentralized organization, their high number of participants, and the small collaborative efforts create a kind of public sphere aside the agenda of mass mainstream media, in which not the speaker with his credibility is at the centre of attention, but a tiny piece of playful replication of an already existing mem.

Hence, not the act of public speaking is what makes a meme potentially subversive in nature. It is the playful co-creation of memes by dispersed actors, which adapt memes to ever-new discursive contexts. The only thing that defines the players in each game is, that they co-work on the same meme, hence their point of reference is the same and their replication is visible in the internet. Even though the participants in the process might not knowingly be part of the game, they automatically become, the very moment they tag their mem-fragment in order to make it traceable for others.

## **The Case of the “Hope” Meme**

The *Hope* meme has its roots in the iconic depiction of Barack Obama by Shepard Fairey during the presidential election campaign in 2008. The *Hope* meme is an ideal case, since it shows almost all traits of the meme game as we described it: the meme (1) inspired thousands of replications, thereby involving (2) a vast number of users participated in creating their own replications; the process was (3) decentralized with the Hope meme being the only common ground due to similar tags assigned to the memes (Hope, Meme, Obama) and similar arrangement of the replications in terms of colours, typography, layout, etc.; finally, (4) some (not all) mem-fragments critically engaged the politics of the Obama-administration.

We have searched for variations of the Hope meme with the help of Google image search with different combinations of search terms such as “Obama”, “hope” and “meme”. We then clustered the different meme fragments thematically (see Figure 1) and did additional research on memes in these thematic clusters using respective search terms (e.g. “hope” and “spy” or “joker”). This allowed us to reconstruct the development path of different meme

clusters, leading to very different outcomes. In effect, this resulted in some form of meme biography.

Initially, the hope posters had been part of the communication strategy of team Obama and the Democratic Party. However, thousands of users captured the image in the aftermath of the campaign and turned it into a fast spiraling meme, that provided almost endless links for further (critical) debates. As Figure 1 shows, the variety of evolved mem-fragments covers a vast range of issues. Republican supporters turned the image into displays of republican politicians, such as 2008 vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin or the republican patron saint Ronald Reagan.

The schematic style of the original has inspired countless replica with regard to popular culture: Luke Skywalker in Star Wars, Mr. Spock, Homer Simpson or the notorious villain from the Batman comics, the Joker. Especially the hybrid between the original Hope motif and the Joker shows, how the creative playful process evolves into a counter-discourse. With only a few alterations, the *Hope* meme changes into a *Fear* meme, which it was to political adversaries presumably from the beginning on. The hybrid between the Joker and Obama stands suddenly for anarchism, socialism, communism and even fascism. The meme becomes a projection screen for even irrational fears and attitudes connected to Obama. As far-fetched as it might seem, in this process the transformation from hope into fear, from Obama into Hitler (or Stalin, or Mao) is just a few steps of alterations. It is the discursive expression of individuals who really believe that the Affordable Care Act, commonly referred to as Obamacare, is evidence for fascism, with Obama being an American dictator.





Figure 2: The original version by Shepard Fairey (left) compared to the replication by René Walter (right).

In his blog entry from the 8th of June 2013, Walter says that he had read a lot about PRISM that day, emphasizing the 64th anniversary of the publication of Orwell's *1984*, and telling that he did it because he had a lot of time due to a server blackout that lasted the entire day. In other words, while there was nothing to work on, he enjoyed the playful activity of replicating a meme in order to criticise the policy of the Obama administration. Beside the rephrasing of the words compared to the original, the headphones that Walter put on Obama are the main attention. Whether deliberately or not, the headphoned Obama bears a striking resemblance to Stasi-Captain Gerd Wiesler, portrayed by Ulrich Mühe in the motion picture *The Life of Others*. Furthermore, Walter included the *Eye of Providence*, a symbol that represents an all-seeing god - a symbol known from the US-Dollar notes that implicates a controlling and all knowing instance above the ordinary people. Thus, we clearly see, that the replication is almost an exact copy of the original in terms of visual markers. But nevertheless it includes a lot of references that allow a critical interpretation of the original issue.

If we 'zoom out' and take a look at the Hope Meme at large, we can see that the opportunities of replication are virtually limitless (see Figure 1). And one realizes, that the possibilities of tying issues together in memes is therefore limitless as well.

The alteration ranges from other politicians and persons portrayed in the same style (Edward Snowden, Ronald Reagan, Che Guevara, Vladimir Putin), to fictitious characters from popular culture (The Joker, Alf, Mr. Spock, Homer Simpson, Luke Skywalker, Alfred E. Neumann, Transformers), or combinations with other memes (Guy Fawkes-mask, Big Brother, Uncle Sam). Unsurprisingly, memes thereby also serve as a platform for criticism of any kind. From humorous and ironic critical reflections on present politics and politicians, to aggressive (sometimes even racist) offenses and violations, memes include every shade of criticism. The polarising figure that Obama is (in an already polarised political culture in the US), serves as a projection screen for hopes and fears. Some results of that fear materialise in absurd memes, such as depicting Hitler with the Slogan ‘Yes We Can’ or labeling the Affordable Care Act (commonly referred to as Obamacare) as a fascist policy. On the other hands, the meme and its instrumentalisation during the election campaign let the benign observer sometimes wonder, if Obama maybe really could walk over water.

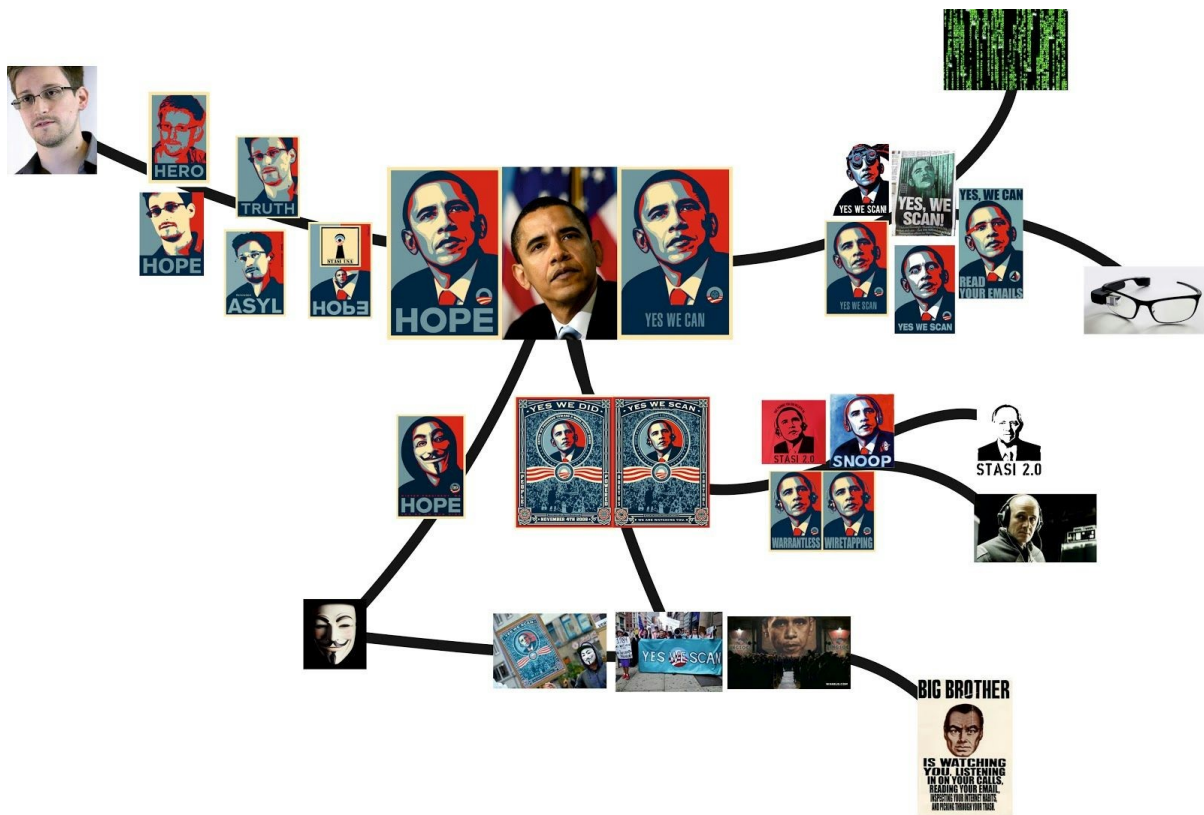


Figure 3: Zooming in on the Hope meme’s surveillance variation.

Only very few memes attract a larger number of people who themselves start to spread the meme further. And, supposedly, even less memes cross the threshold into the public consciousness and become a symbol being associated with an entire movement, like the

Guy Fawkes mask in the case of Occupy, or, as discussed, the *Hope meme*. However, most memes never reach any attention at all, let alone public attention. The same is true for already established memes, whose alterations and replications are too many to count. But it is the wastefulness of the play-like process that constitutes its critical potential. Memes like the *Hope meme* are easy to memorize. And for subsequent replications it is easy to tap into this reservoir to connect with existing themes and issues.

## Conclusion

Surely, memes do not represent complex arguments in public debates. The key arguments in public discourses are not made by creating memes and it would be a grave misunderstanding to see memes as a cornerstone of discussion and debate in public arenas. The function of memes is to provide discourse nuclei, often in a pre-public space. The markers included in the respective memes serve as an anchor for individuals in a dispersed crowd, thus they know where to look in order to find the right spot to engage in discourse.

Outside of the mainstream mass media and the grand platforms of social media, memes are a huge playground, that is governed by the rules of trial and error. While false steps may have grave consequences on the public stage, all kinds of criticisms are possible in the meme game. Thus, in the game, whatever can happen, will happen.

The procedurality of the process is key. Even though recipients judge memes according to their visual, textual or oral content, for the participants of the meme game, another effect is important. The playful replication of existing memes and their subsequent publication conveys the idea that criticism is possible - for the best and the worst -, beyond the boundaries that might restrict debates in the public arenas. Memes give attitudes an expression, that have no part in the mainstream discourse (yet). And they can only do so, because the meme game does not yield consequences in case of a misstep - after all, it is just a game. Thus, memes that emerge out of the game and that become the symbol for a bigger social movement that eventually enters societal discourses, are nothing more than by-products of a wasteful process. The vast majority of memes created in the process will never surface to more than a handful of internet users. However, some few will definitely cross the threshold into the public consciousness and will thus become a discourse nuclei for a theme or view that has yet not been part of the mainstream discourse.

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