

Groundhog Day: Memes Are New

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On September 11, 2023, the Influencer Ethnography Research Lab (IERLab) at Curtin University hosted “Groundhog Day”—a one-day online-only open-access collection of roundtables on the cyclical nature of academic spotlights and hot topics, and some of the frustrations related to the ahistoricity of the discussions and moral panics. Over four panels, the event addressed the cycles, patterns, templates, and related fatigue on digital media discourse. Find out more at ierlab.com/groundhogday.

This article is an edited and truncated version of the highlights for panel four: “Memes Are New.” The panel was hosted and moderated by Dr. Gabriele de Seta, and features Dr. Idil Galip, Dr. Lucie Chateau, and Günseli Yalcinkaya.

Introduction: Are Memes New?

Gabriele de Seta:

Memes are often discussed as if they are something new. But at the same time, they have arguably been around since, well, forever. So, memes are weirdly connected to both ideas of novelty or oldness, and the debate around these ideas is interesting. I would like to start our discussion with this quote by Lisa Gitelman (2006) from the book *Always Already New*, which I think is very applicable to memes and creativity on digital media at large. She writes:

The introduction of new media [. . .] is never entirely revolutionary: new media are less points of epistemic rupture than they are socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning as such. Comparing and contrasting new media thus stand to offer a view of negotiability in itself—a view, that is, of the contested relations of force that determine the pathways by which new media may eventually become old hat. (p. 6)

I really appreciate her discussion of different kinds of media that have, at some point in time, been thought of as new, since she recognizes that this novelty is never entirely revolutionary and what matters is how media are socially embedded and how novelty is negotiated by people through them. So, are memes new? What does this mean, and how? How are they new? What kind of novelty is this?

Idil Galip:

I have thought about whether memes are new or not. The first thing that comes to mind is that memes are new, or not new, depending on the definition that you adopt. If we take a broad view of memes as culture, then of course they are not new—it is just that culture is produced through memetic means. But if you think of what memes look like today, in 2023, then they *are* new because of the platforms through which they travel. After the colonization of most online content by a few tech companies, we have these platforms on which we are overloaded with different types of content, and there are algorithms that categorize the sort of content that we look at. But I think that memes also do some of that work of categorization, they have become a kind of *algorithmic runoff*, in that they make people aware of different cultural touch points—they put it all together in one image through which you can be in touch with different discourses, trends, and things that are in the public eye. Memes have this interesting function of organizing the wealth of content that we are provided with; they keep people in the loop. So, perhaps what they *do* is new. But what they *are* is not.

Lucie Chateau:

I am also really interested in meme aesthetics and the formats that memes take. I want to stress that the aesthetics we see in memes have inherited a really long legacy that might span decades or even centuries. Memes are indebted to different aesthetics throughout history—they go back to the carnivalesque, but also Dada, and the subversive aesthetics of new media art, glitch, collage, and so on. As a result of art movements and social movements, they are a manifestation of where we are today, but this does not mean that they are nothing new. They are a great engine for creativity and novelty, and the kind of work that we see done in memes and with memes is really interesting, especially in the age of artificial intelligence (AI). While AI-produced images are extremely middling, as they average out a data set or the most common image in it, memes do the opposite work—they create a kind of erratic, rhizomatic, esoteric aesthetics that are way more creative than anything that can be generated by AI. So, to me, the fact that memes have this kind of novelty is really important to keep in mind, even just for the artistic and creative health of our society.

Günseli Yalcinkaya:

I feel that memes themselves are not new, but the means that we use to develop memes are new. I think it is very interesting to see how memes are responding to technological advancements, whether it is AI or the kind of video game engines or mods that people use to create memes. One of the things that I have really seen change in the last year or so is due to changes to algorithms and social media platforms, paired with the fact that at the moment there is no political potential on the horizon, especially for young people. Perhaps memes carried more political thrust in the post-2016 era—now that has been replaced by theorygram and this strange kind of AI weirdness developed with memes which is again fueled by algorithmic content. The memes that we create are designed for virality; they are made with the algorithm

in mind. So it is interesting for me to observe how this process creates the kinds of content that we consume.

Global Meme Aesthetics

Gabriele de Seta:

When I started studying memes a decade ago, I mostly focused on memes that were shared on Chinese social media—I was just doing research there, the Internet was becoming increasingly relevant in people's lives, and then I started noticing things that looked like what I would call memes, but they were not called this in China. As a matter of fact, the whole lexicon of digital creativity and online virality was almost entirely different from what people use in English or in other languages. So, this was my entry into the subfield of Internet studies dealing with memes and other forms of vernacular creativity, but I also looked at some older literature—books like Richard Dawkins's (1976) *The Selfish Gene*, where the word "meme" was arguably used for the first time, or Susan Blackmore's (1999) *The Meme Machine* and other work in the area of memetics that sought to articulate an evolutionary approach to the psychology of ideas that spread and reproduce in people's brains. It is interesting that there is a sort of self-reflexive history of Internet users commenting on the fact that Richard Dawkins invented the term and what Internet memes turned out to be is not exactly what he meant. So, I am quite interested in your experiences—how you encountered memes, how long ago, in which kinds of linguistic, cultural, national, or regional contexts, and what situated differences might be there.

Idil Galip:

I think I went online when I was around 12, so when I was growing up I was already consuming what we call, well, *content*, in both English and in Turkish. And I was really into Turkish memes, which, of course, were not called "memes." I think that the term "meme" has become used more recently, mostly because of the abundance of English-language memes that younger people are into—people younger than me, Gen Z or Gen Alpha, who have taken on the term meme because of finstas or shit-posting accounts on Instagram. But when I was growing up, there were different names for memes, the most standard one was just "caps," because the text was all capitalized—it was basically just a picture that would have a red banner at the bottom with white text in it; it was a type of caps-lock meme. And then other things started happening with the development of vernacular creativity: people started acquiring digital skills that make you capable of making memes, such as being able to use simple photo-editing apps or knowing where to source images, and most importantly, I think, being terminally online; if you want to make good memes, you have to be constantly consuming memes.

Lucie Chateau:

I grew up during the Facebook era of memeing, which was just pages on Facebook posting a certain collection of memes that were all themed around something, and you would just follow as many meme pages as you could and then sometimes those of us who were really brave and ventured outside of Facebook would create their own albums of things that they had found on the Internet. This was how I first came into contact with memes, and obviously also with websites like iFunny and others. My "local" story is that I am French and I have mostly been participating in the Anglophone meme context for a very long time, but French meme pages are called *Neurchi* de something, because *Neurchi* is a French slang

term created by swapping the syllables of *Chineur*, which means “somebody that looks for treasure.” I thought it was interesting that those meme pages were labeling themselves as if they had gone off to find something like a treasure and curated it. This aspect of curation is almost completely lost today because most people just wait for the algorithm to bring them some memes, so we are living in this sort of 21st-century hunter-gatherer dependence that is algorithmically driven.

Günseli Yalcinkaya:

I feel like my experience was a bit different. I got into memes a lot later than I should have, given that memes are now one of my main research subjects, but I think I started logging on around the age of 8, mostly in Anglophone contexts—I am Turkish but I grew up in England. My main platform was Instagram, and I sort of moved backward from there, tracing back the origins of different memetic tribes and identities. From that point onward, it was really interesting to observe how—again, going back to 2016 and the Trump election—how these kind of memes became potential carriers for political resistance, and how this process spawned multiple, or potentially infinite, you could argue, kinds of memetic political tribes that were then adopted by Gen Z. First of all, I found it very interesting how around 2020, when their political potential was dwindling, memes became a mainstream carrier for pop culture, especially since obviously everyone was online during COVID-19. It really felt like that was the year when Internet culture . . . I would not say replaced pop culture, but yes, it became the main platform reflecting the collective happenings and social events of our era. Second, I also found it interesting to observe how a lot of the memes that we share today did have their origin in places like 4chan and other politically extremist contexts—a lot like incel culture, most of it also propagated by essentially radicalized teenagers. So, yes, I have taken a very temporally confusing route into the world of memes, I suppose.

The Social Life of Memes

Gabriele de Seta:

We all touched on emerging practices such as creating memes and sharing them, but there are also curatorial ones, like collecting and preserving memes. These seem to have changed because of new kinds of circulation that are enabled by machine learning and algorithmic systems—that could be one new thing about memes. And the other thing that I thought of is this connection to current events, politics, and activism. Memes are not just about the Internet. For sure there still are some funny things that you find online and share, but these can also be vectors for politics and engagement with popular culture or societal discourses more broadly. If we combine the two, what is new is that you need to engage in preservation and curation to hold onto what speaks to you or what you might need in the future. Perhaps it is this rhythm that is new, or maybe the acceleration of these cycles of novelty—part of it is that you need to make sense of things that are always new, and if you are not on top of things, or if you arrive late, you might not understand that something even *is* a meme. Has anyone encountered examples in your research that speak to this?

Lucie Chateau:

I do not have an example per se, but following up on what you were saying, I think that what is also interesting about memes is that because they change so fast, we might encounter memes that we were not aware of, but also because they rely on irony, the simple passing of time can create a new way of looking at memes. So, for example, people circulate boomer memes, or very early meme templates,

exactly how they were originally posted—nothing has necessarily changed about them, but looking at them ten years later and cringing on ourselves or about the fact that we found them funny in the past is enough to add a layer of irony. Nothing even needs to change about the memes themselves; the context added by time passing and irony is enough.

Idil Galip:

The idea of presence is really interesting to me when we talk about memes not as just objects but also as personal or social attachments, things that we share. So, as Lucie was saying, the act of cringing ourselves together or laughing at the generation before us—I think this is part of the folkloric function or nature of memes, in that you need to be present wherever memes are happening in order to develop attachments to them. When I was developing attachments to particular memes, jokes, or communities, it was because I was sharing that with other people. Hence the ideas of presence, communion, laughter, and also self-reflection—it is almost as if memes have both individual and personal but also communal and psychosocial properties. Today people are talking about how we live in an age when self-discovery is really, really important. I think that memes also provide a sort of mirror, a reflection of not only ourselves but also of the people we see ourselves in communion with.

Günseli Yalcinkaya:

I completely agree. I feel it is essential to take memes back to their original meaning: They are social signifiers, they signal a kind of social cachet, and they are a sort of digital folklore that echoes the collective fears and anxieties and desires of any given time. And obviously how this applies to different generations is informed by different things. With Gen Z, one of the biggest hallmarks is their nihilism, especially when it comes to politics. With Gen Alpha and memes like Skibidi Toilet and Subway Surfers, the hallmark is absurdity, I guess—but as a sidenote, it might just be because they are made and shared by ten-year-olds. But I think that one great case study is looking at how memes are actually being brought to the offline world as well. For example, last year it was the boom of post-Internet fashion, with brands like Praying or OGBFF being very predominant in the New York-adjacent Internet scenes, you would get a lot of T-shirts with meme slogans that seemed to have been directly uploaded onto the physical world, in a way. It is interesting to see how these ideas are translated into the analogue when they are also so time sensitive—for me, maybe that is why post-Internet fashion seems to have become passé so quickly. It is as if expiry dates get shorter and shorter the more information is readily available to us.

Conclusion**Gabriele de Seta:**

As we all mentioned, there are a lot of popular culture debates around memes, so I was curious about your point of view as meme researchers working in different contexts, how do you see the landscape around you? What have you noticed when you write about memes? What kind of reactions do you get? And how does your field make sense of the novelty?

Günseli Yalcinkaya:

To be honest, there are quite a lot of parallels between media and academia in that they are both institutions, and a lot of problems that might echo across academia are also applicable to us as we are also tied to certain postcapitalist financial pressures. The Internet moves so fast and responding to that with said pressures in mind, as well as time constraints, is difficult. I predominantly write for a youth culture magazine, and the way that my writing is received by readers is overall very positive. It makes me happy to see that people are also engaging with the analytical side of things.

Gabriele de Seta:

My feeling is that academia often lags after journalism and popular media writing by a couple of years—not in what we do research about but in terms of publications, as things are published much later and have much less dissemination. So it is interesting for me to read articles you might write today and know that in a couple of years there will be an academic article about the same topic.

Idil Galip:

For me what is really interesting is that I get to teach really young people. I met my students last week and when I tell them, “You know, you can study memes and write about them, we are going to read about them,” they seem quite shocked and interested and excited because it is still a new thing. Memes are so mundane, and they are everywhere, so they become almost invisible—from an analytical perspective, they are almost like the trash of the Internet, and if you are studying something like that, often people find it frivolous at first, and then they are surprised and interested. I tell people that I research this topic because imagine how many memes you see in one day, even if you are an older person . . . I mean, my parents, they are sending good-morning memes to each other on WhatsApp all day long! Memes are such an invisible but important part of our everyday life, and it is funny that they are still treated as a novel or weird research interest to have.

Biographies

Gabriele de Seta (he/him, they/them) is, technically, a sociologist. He is a researcher at the University of Bergen, where he leads the ALGOFOLK project (“Algorithmic Folklore: The Mutual Shaping of Vernacular Creativity and Automation”) funded by a Trond Mohn Foundation Starting Grant (2024–2028). Gabriele holds a PhD from Hong Kong Polytechnic University and was a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, and at the University of Bergen, where he was part of the ERC-funded project “Machine Vision in Everyday Life.” His research work, grounded on qualitative and ethnographic methods, focuses on digital media practices, sociotechnical infrastructures, and vernacular creativity in the Chinese-speaking world. He is also interested in experimental, creative, and collaborative approaches to knowledge production.

Idil Galip (she/her) is a researcher, teacher, and writer from Turkey. Her work investigates the conditions of cultural production on digital platforms through ethnographic and theoretical interventions. She is particularly interested in exploring how Internet memes are made, shared, and monetized and wrote her PhD thesis on this topic, titled “Creative Digital Labour of Meme-Making.” She is the founder of Meme Studies Research Network, and the coeditor of the third volume of the Critical Meme Reader. Her

writing has been published in a variety of academic journals, literary publications, and magazines, and has been translated into German and Italian. She is currently employed as a lecturer in New Media and Digital Culture at the University of Amsterdam and holds a PhD in sociology from the University of Edinburgh.

Lucie Chateau (she/her) is a digital culture researcher interested in meme aesthetics. She just finished her PhD, entitled "Anxious Aesthetics: Memes and Alienation in Digital Capitalism," which looks at the subversive potential of aesthetics online. Her work has therefore looked at a variety of meme genres such as depression memes, anticapitalist memes, and climate-change memes but also looks at how those have shaped an aesthetical vernacular that negotiates platform cultures and digital capitalism. Recently, her work has focused on the alienated aesthetics of image degradation, following Hito Steyerl's theorization of poor images and combining it with a Marxist approach to objectification.

Günseli Yalcinkaya (she/her) is a writer, researcher, and cultural critic based in London who studies online communities. She is the features editor at *Dazed* magazine and the host of *Logged On*, a monthly podcast series exploring all things Internet culture. As an artist her work explores the interconnection between ecology, magic, and nonhuman and machine intelligence.

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