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Memes as a phenomenon of mobile culture. The politicization of a new digital genre

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of memes on the Internet as units of imitation and replication in an attempt to understand their cultural, political and textual significance. Dawkins (1976) invented the neologism “meme” after the Ancient Greek word *μίμημα* (*mimēma*), meaning “something imitated”, to characterise how cultural information spreads both diachronically from generation to generation and synchronically through exchanges between peers and media. In keeping with previous research (Arizzi 2013; Shifman 2014; Wiggins and Bowers 2015), this paper views digital memes as hybrids which, once generated from an original matrix, will circulate on social media in ways that respond to Darwinian laws of natural selection. They typically incorporate features of traditional textual strategies such as satire and irony but adapt these to the needs of today’s digital context of culture.

The paper also suggests that the affordances of social media have changed traditional notions of authorship. Digital meme analysis is a tool well suited to the investigation of shared authorships in today’s digital texts in which terms such as ‘addressor’ and ‘addressee’, ‘readership’ and ‘writership’, and the roles attributed to them, require careful analysis. With its brief analysis of political memes relating to the 2016 American Presidential Election, the paper also focuses on the politicization of memes (Ross and Rivers 2017). This special focus provides both a suitable field in which to test out the validity of digital meme analysis and a chance to reflect on the relevance of memes in interpreting the ties between political participation and grass-root movements.

Keywords: *digital memes, collective identity, political discourse*