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Crisis memes: The importance of templatability to Internet culture and freedom of expression

ABSTRACT

Crisis memes are the ghoulish and satirical posts that spread through social media concurrently with serious journalistic reportage. They are folk productions that respond to challenging events based on thematic and structural templates of popular online image macros. This article explores how templatability is relevant to the underpinnings, development, structure and value of crisis memes. The combination of frivolity and ghoulishness that is typical of crisis memes may be criticized for not being reasoned discourse, reinforcing cultural divides and making use of copyrighted content without permission and in ways that the copyright holder may not wish. However, the value of crisis memes lies not in their content but rather their place as a public voice that sidesteps the constraints of traditional media and as an illustration of freedom of expression that may be threatened by increasingly restrictive copyright regimes.

INTRODUCTION

When natural disasters, political feuds, terrorist attacks and other crises arise, ghoulishly humorous posts created by users spread concurrently with serious professional reportage. By the day after the Mail Online (9 August 2011) published a mobile phone picture of a hooded man defiantly displaying a bag of looted basmati rice, the image spread from Facebook (EgonAllanon, 2011) to Reddit (okanagandude 2011) accompanied by the text 'I don't always loot/but when I do, its cuz I need some basmati rice' (Figure 1).

Similar posts can be found for several recent crises, ranging from natural disasters (the Queensland floods), policy crises (the US debt crisis), terrorism (Norwegian mass killings), through to celebrity deaths (Amy Winehouse). Even given the large number of potentially creative people in the world, just how is that such posts are so readily produced? The answer, of course, is that most are not created from whole cloth. Rather, they are image macros, which are one form of online memes: thematically and formally replicated trends in online behaviour. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear's detailed thematic analysis of nineteen classic online memes finds that one of the overarching purposes of online memes is social commentary (2007: 218) within which they find three subcategories: people concerned with displays of good citizenship; tongue-in-cheek, socially oriented, political critique; and social activism or advocacy. Posts such as Figure 1 combine elements of all three of these sub-categories. In this article I will refer to them collectively as crisis memes. Although crisis memes could take forms other than image macros (such as videos, animated gifs, twitter hashtags), judging by meme collection sites such as Know Your Meme, the image macro form is the most visible. As such, this article will focus exclusively on the underpinnings, development,

Figure 1: UK riots crisis meme.

notable examples and ramifications of image macro crisis memes (referring to them as 'crisis memes' for convenience).

I will underpin my discussion of crisis memes with some foundational ideas about meaning as a process of movement to set the stage for introducing memes as proposed by Richard Dawkins' (1989). Moving to analysis, rather than follow Knobel and Lankshear's (2007) thematic approach to meme analysis, I will take a more structural approach, emphasizing the templatable forms, situational deployment, purposes and values of crisis memes. After a short history of the relevance of templatability to online memes, the analysis will illustrate how crisis memes are based on thematic and structural templates of popular online memes fitted to current social crises. The combination of frivolity and ghoulishness that is typical of crisis memes may be criticized for not being reasoned discourse, difficult to control, reinforcing cultural divides and making use of copyrighted content without permission and in ways that the copyright holder may not wish. However, I will argue that the value of crisis memes lies not in their content but rather their place as a public voice that sidesteps the constraints of traditional media and as an illustration of freedom of expression that may be threatened by increasingly restrictive copyright regimes.

MEMES: MEANING IN MOVEMENT

It is axiomatic to cultural studies that meaning is a process of movement. At the heart of semiotics is Ferdinand de Saussure's (1983) proposal that the basic situation in which meaning occurs is the exchange of signs. Further, as Pierre Bourdieu (1984) recognized, the connection between signifier and signified is powered by the transfer of capital, be it economic or symbolic (educational, social, cultural). Just as ideas themselves are the products of transfer, so to are the ways in which ideas are manifested and used.

Humans are adept at transferring ideas from their point of origin to a new situation. A fundamental property of human language is indexicality (Peirce 1998). Since it is impossible to have unique terms for every possible situation, we have the ability to fit our limited set of terms to new contexts. The most obvious examples are pro-terms (e.g. 'she'), references (e.g. 'that') and names (e.g. 'Bill'), but virtually all words necessarily have variations in meaning across situation (e.g. 'hello' can be a greeting, an expression of surprise, a summons, etc.) and social actions can be expressed by different words (e.g. any number of words can be used for greetings). Transferring ideas is also fundamental to Julia Kristeva's (1980) concept of intertextuality, the way in which the meaning of a text is shaped by other texts (e.g. quoting lines from a sitcom to comment on a current situation).

Whereas intertextuality emphasizes the multiplicity of meanings, Richard Dawkins's (1976) concept of memes emphasizes the replication and evolution of meaning. Dawkins coined the term 'meme' to be the cultural analogue to the biological 'gene': a self-replicating unit of information. Trends, fads, fashions, 'catchy' things, patterns are all memetic. Although the metaphor has been criticized as reductionist (Kull 2000), this is ultimately less relevant to the metaphor's usefulness than the notion of transference via replication and evolution. Dawkins postulated that memes are subject to the evolutionary forces of variation, mutation, competition and inheritance. Just how this will occur depends on the behaviour of hosts, that is, people in cultures. Meme survival is not a matter of moral or cultural preference but on three factors of replication: Fidelity (how easily an idea can be copied), fecundity (how quickly

it can be copied) and longevity (how long the idea lasts). These factors are afforded or constrained by the infrastructure in which meaning is hosted. This brings us, of course, to the Internet: the ultimate meme hothouse.

ONLINE MEMES, TEMPLATABILITY AND THE PREHISTORY OF CRISIS MEMES

Just as for the twentieth-century electric light provided new flexibility for the meanings of home, work and civil life (McLuhan 2003), for the twenty-first century the Internet provides new flexibility for the creation and distribution of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984; Castells 2000). The rise of social media has dramatically lowered the bar for individuals to broadcast well beyond their physical social circles. In danah boyd's (2007: 126) terms, the networked public has four infrastructural features that are highly conducive to memeticism:

- Replicability: digital objects are infinitely and perfectly reproducible. Easily used and free social media provide multiple and exponential channels for distribution, breaking the economic, cultural and generation barriers to distribution of pre-Internet cultural industries. For most objects, no matter the creator or licensing regime, its form is replicable and thus exploitable.
- Searchability: objects of popular and folk culture are easily found via search engines, especially as metadata tags improves the indexing and curation of digital objects. As such both raw materials and templates for generating objects are easily found.
- Persistence: although digital objects may not last as long as analogue objects, they are infinitely transferable and storable, and they certainly persist far longer than the ephemeralities of co-present interaction.
- Invisible audiences: digital objects are double articulations, created (by either cultural industries or individuals) for a particular audience but with the knowledge that they can and will spread to an unknowable audience wherever the Internet is available.

As Knobel and Lankshear note, 'the concept of a "meme" itself has become something of a meme online' (2006: 202). Sites such as 4Chan and Reddit are commonly cited as places of both deliberate and accidental meme generation (Know Your Meme). The Cheezburger Network of sites encourages the categorization and collection of memes, while sites such as Meme Generator and Rage Comic Builder provide both the raw materials and editing capabilities to rapidly produce new instances of common memes. Further, in an interesting twist on the nature of scholarship, sites such as Know Your Meme actively track, research and report on the genealogy, forms and popularity of online memes. As such, the last few years have seen a huge growth in Internet users' memetic analysis and exploitation of meaning as templatable.

Templatabilty lies at the heart of online memes and especially crisis memes. The memetic process is a product of the human capability to separate ideas into two levels – content and structure – and then contextually manipulate that relationship. Templating is the practical, methodical and material process by which this contextual manipulation is expressed. The practices of templating have developed over time, and it is worth providing a brief history of three structural versions of online memes as a basis for understanding crisis memes.

All of the crisis memes covered in this article are based on image macros, one of the earliest forms of online meme. An image macro is a picture with

Figure 2: Classic image macros: O RLY? and Happy Cat.

superimposed text (Wikipedia 2011a), conforming to a template for their combination and types of meaning. The images are usually striking representations of an action or emotion, often taking the form of a human, anthropomorphized animal or object. The text of the caption is usually in large point size Impact typeface coloured white with a black outline. The words are often written using Internet orthographic alterations.

The first acknowledged image macro was the 2001 O RLY? snowy owl (Figure 2, left), used to indicate a dubious or incredulous response to a post on the Something Awful forums (Know Your Meme 2011i). The etymology of the name 'image macro' is important to the basic concept of templating and how online memes themselves came to be so successful. The Something Awful forum software allowed a user to enter text that would expand into a pre-defined image (Wikipedia 2011d). This expansion of code is known as a 'macro' in computer science. In other words, a commonly understood practice in computer science involves exploiting pre-fabricated structures. It is not surprising, then, that such understandings were imported into Internet culture. O RLY? turned out to be the tipping point for the use of image macros because its very simple pattern could be employed to great social effect.

4Chan users have probably generated the largest number and variety of online memes of any online service (Know Your Meme 2011a; Wikipedia 2011a). In particular, 4Chan spawned the LOLcat (Know Your Meme 2011g). Since Happy Cat (Figure 2, right) was posted in 2005 LOLcats have brought image macros more generally into the mainstream, a necessary precondition to the spread of crisis memes. Happy Cat widened the scope for memes in two ways. First, it was not a response to the content of a post but stand-alone content. Second, since it was provided as member of the category of humorous cat posts to 4Chan, it spurred the posting of images patterned after it rather than simple replication.

Figure 3: LOLcat snowclones.

Happy Cat also set a standard for an idiomatic pidgin that has come to be referred to as 'LOLspeak' with remarkably robust rules (Dash 2007). Historically, language play has been a staple of typographic Internet communication (Crystal 2001), and this heightened sensitivity to play with language patterns is particularly important to meme development. Apart from image macros, the other fundamental building block of online memes is the language template termed 'snowclones' (Know Your Meme 2011l). Unlike LOLspeak, which is based around particular grammatical patterns with some common content themes, snowclones are more direct verbal templates.

Glen Whitman coined the term snowclone to refer to sentences such as 'grey is the new black' in which the two nouns 'grey' and 'black' can be replaced by any two other nouns (Pullum 2004). Representing the nouns as 'X' and 'Y' shows the structure of the template: 'X is the new Y'. This template can then be deployed to comment on any situation in which one wishes to express the sentiment of changes in trends. So, for example, 'grey is the new black' refers to fashion trends. Figure 4 illustrates two LOLcat snowclones. Invisible Bike (Figure 3, left) relies on a specific form of humorous cat image (a cat caught mid-air looking like it may be engaging with an invisible object) and a labelling snowclone 'Invisible <noun>'. I'm in ur spaceship/Stealing ur gravity (Figure 3, right) treats the Invisible Bike image as a visual snowclone and then comments on the image using a different verbal snowclone: 'I'm in your <noun1>/<gerund verb> your <noun2>' (the In Ur Base Starcraft 2 snowclone, Know Your Meme 2011f).

In sum, then, the early 2000s saw the development of highly Internet-specific meme production techniques based on templatability, especially image macros combined with snowclones. Further, new instances often represent evolutions of prior combinations. These techniques underpin the development of crisis memes.

COMMENTING ON POWER: IMAGE MACRO SNOWCLONES AND ADVICE ANIMALS

The UK looter crisis meme used to begin this article (Figure 1) is clearly aimed at ridiculing the looter's defiant representation of power. The structure of the original meme provides a template that is suited specifically to commenting on extremes of power.

Figure 4: The Most Interesting Man in the World original and meme example.

The original version is an image macro snowclone based on the Dos Equis beer brand advertising campaign centering on 'The Most Interesting Man in the World' (Know Your Meme 2011f). The man (Figure 4, left) illustrated male power as cool, self-satisfied and defiant of societal norms. The man's exploits are so epic in scale that his choice of beer is epic by association (I don't always drink beer, but when I do it's *Dos Equis*). Although the campaign nominally rests on the audience recognizing the man's power, the audience is also supposed to take an ironic position towards the man: he is impossibly powerful and hence as much a figure of ridicule as respect. In the meme version (Figure 4, right), the notion of power is conveyed through the image of either the man himself or any figure that can be easily depicted through mid-shot image. This is combined with a snowclone version of the campaign's tag line: 'I don't always <verb phrase1>, but when I do, <verb phrase2>' with the phrases positioned as setup at the top and punch line at the bottom. However, the meme version usually emphasizes the original campaign's ironic position by using the punch line to show the figure as ridiculous.

The crisis meme versions of The Most Interesting Man in the World echo the original meme's method to critique a particular or category of person identified with the crisis as both hardcore and ridiculous. The UK riots version (Figure 5, left) uses the combination of the feeble image of the looter trying to look dangerous with the ludicrous nature of his haul to critique many of the UK looters as lacking both material and political ambition/motivation. When US troops killed Osama Bin Laden, several versions of The Most Interesting Man in the World appeared. Some used the original man to critique those in the United States who celebrated the death of Bin Laden (Figure 5, middle). One widely circulated version used an image of Barack Obama but retained the snowclone text (Figure 5, right). This

Figure 5: The Most Interesting Man in the World crisis memes.

version contains both right-wing and left-wing critiques. By playing up the issue of the US political right harping on the coincidental similarity of his name to that of Osama Bin Laden, the image paints his hardcore action as petty. But it also takes a left-wing perspective, painting action that might be desirable to the right as a potentially unconscionable over-reach of power.

The Most Interesting Man in the World meme is part of a wider category of memes called Advice Animals, which are image macros featuring animals or humans and superimposed text purporting to represent a character trait or archetype (Know Your Meme 2011b). The original meme, naming the category, was Advice Dog (Figure 6, left). However, while The Most Interesting Man in the World uses an unedited whole photograph, most Advice Animals follow the distinct visual formula of superimposing just the animal/person head on a colour-wheel background. The originator of any given Advice Animal sets the image and colour-wheel and the rest of the series only add new text based on the theme. Advice Animals are visually and thematically coherent within and across series. One of the reasons Advice Animals have become so prevalent is that sites such as Meme Generator (Figure 6, right) provide all the artwork and tools required to create new instances of existing memes and even help create new series, such as Advice Animal crisis memes. During the recent US debt crisis, Advice Animals based on Barack Obama
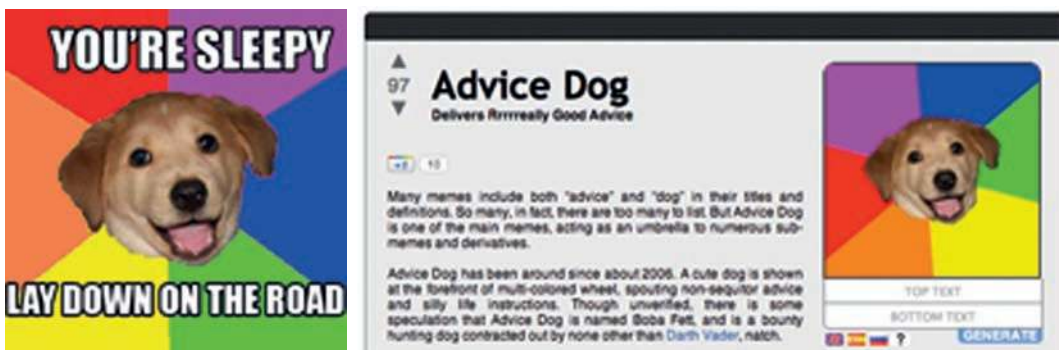

Figure 6: Original (Bad) Advice Dog and Meme Generator.

Figure 7: Advice Animals crisis memes.

(Figure 7, left), economist Paul Krugman (Figure 7, middle) and even Batman (right) were used to critique the left-wing position.

The thematic formula of Advice Animal crisis memes seem to give their creators license to express their political messages very directly compared to other image macro snowclones. For the purpose of political comment, then, Advice Animals allow for extremely rapid deployment of a political position as soon as a particular crisis unfolds and for easy reuse when the same political position needs to be espoused in a next crisis. Oddly enough, Advice Animals at present are used to express far more US right-wing political sentiment than left wing. Indeed, I was unable to find any US left-wing Advice Animals that related specifically to news crises. That being said, perhaps because of their very clear formula, in sites such as Meme Generator instances of Advice Animals can be found using many languages other than English. Indeed, a setting on the site requires users to identify the language used when generating a new version. It may be, then, that Advice Animal crisis memes are more widespread and politically varied than the English language versions.

COMMENTING ON DISASTER: EXPLOITABLES AND RAGE COMICS

Images without text are termed 'exploitable' because they can have new elements added. However, the term also refers to a class of memes that involve superimposing images of a human or anthropomorphic figure onto another image (Know Your Meme 2011e). Instead of critique, these crisis memes seem to be produced and circulated simply as ghoulish humour.

Strutting Leo/Leo Strut comes from an opportunistic photograph of Leonardo DiCaprio walking with exaggerated happiness (Figure 8, left) (Know Your Meme 2011m). The exploitable element is cut out of the original image (Figure 8, middle), and then superimposed onto other images. The crisis meme version uses Strutting Leo to provide a heightened contrast in which he does not care or is oblivious to current or impending disaster around him, often superimposed onto historical disasters like the JFK assassination (Figure 8, right). The celebrity status of DiCaprio may mean that Strutting Leo versions are distributed more widely and understood more readily than other crisis memes based on exploitables, but there are many crisis memes based on non-celebrities, such as Disaster Girl (Figure 9) (Know Your Meme 2011d) and Chubby Bubbles Girl (Figure 10) (Know Your Meme 2011c). Since their creator does not need to write amusing text to accompany the image, Disaster Girl and Chubby Bubbles Girl, they are one of the first memes to appear during

Figure 8: Strutting Leo original, exploitable and crisis meme example.

Figure 9: Disaster Girl original and crisis meme example.

Figure 10: Chubby Bubbles Girl original and crisis meme example.

any given recent crisis. During the UK riots Disaster Girl was appeared on the image of the burning shops in Croydon, South London (Figure 9, right).

Similarly, Chubby Bubbles Girl (Figure 10, left) was very recently deployed (with some alterations) as Chubby Gaddafi with an image of Libyan protestors (Figure 10, right). In this instance, Chubby Bubbles Girl has a minor element of critique in that the girl is not running from the protestors, rather she gives meaning to the background photograph as being about anti-Gaddafi protests. Disaster Girl and Chubby Bubbles Girl are understandable and amusing as stand-alone memes. However, for those who regularly browse or participate in sites that spawn memes these crisis memes are readable as part of a series or category. Each new iteration prompts association of the most recent use of the meme with the original and whatever other versions have been seen.

Y U No guy (Know Your Meme 2011o) is one of a number of illustrated figures called Rage Comics, each of which relates to a specific emotion (Know Your Meme 2011j). The original meme depicts a figure with a sweating comic face and arms held out imploringly, with a superimposed text-speak 'I TXT U/Y U No TXT BAK!?' (Figure 11, left). This meme is always used to indicate a perplexed and vexed questioner, and is in fact related to a series of other. Rage Comics, like Advice Animals, can now be generated via sophisticated generation sites such as Rage Comic Builder (Figure 11, right).

While Strutting Leo, Disaster Girl and Chubby Bubbles Girl are ghoulish jokes based on the fact of a disaster, the Y U No meme is used to express the anxiety of a disaster. Y U No was used in 2011 to express the perplexed rhetorical questioning of people experiencing floods and cyclones in Queensland (Figure 12, left) and similar questions about the UK riots (Figure 12, right). Y U No is particularly adaptable as a crisis meme because visually the face and arms of the figure provide the crucial emotion, while the rest of the image is more freely adaptable. Thus for the Queensland example, the round head of the figure is replaced by a map of the state. The name of the state is elided, so this crisis meme is designed to be recognizable by those who know the state's shape. The UK riot version places the Y U No figure into a stamp frame and adds a crown, taking the place of the Queen on the standard UK stamp. The added phrase following Y U No is itself taken from another meme originating from a rediscovered 1939 wartime propaganda poster reading 'Keep Calm and Carry On' (Wikipedia 2011b). The combination produces a confused
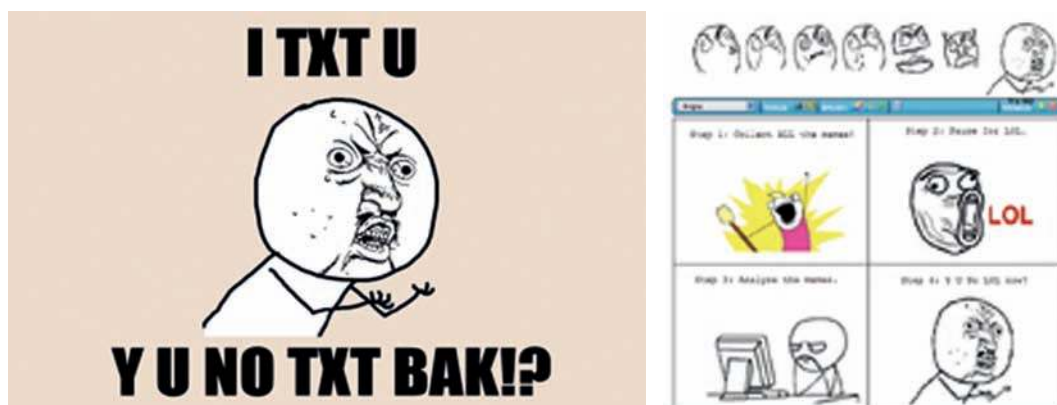

Figure 11: Y U No original and Rage Comic Builder showing use in a panel.

Figure 12: Y U No crisis meme examples.

imprecation for the rioting from the perspective of those (within or outside) who hold a particular stereotypical viewpoint of British society as typified by calm and the 'stiff upper lip' sentiment.

COMMENTING ON COMMENTING: MEME COMBINATIONS

As well as their own direct and fairly simple meaning, memes draw representational power from their association with one another. For example, when a new exploitable appears, it is common to find it combined with other exploitables with similar themes such as the combination of Disaster Girl and Chubby Bubbles Girl (figure 13, left). Similarly, a striking photograph can be used in conjunction with several verbal memes, as in the combination of LOLspeak with the 'You're doing it wrong' meme superimposed over the image of homophobic Westboro Baptist Church protestors (Figure 13, right).

Figure 13: Disaster Girl and Chubby Bubbles Girl; LOLspeak and You're Doing It Wrong.

As Alex Leavitt (2010) says of Figure 13 (right), the combination of textual memes works to reframe the reading of the image, "while the protesters believe that they are correct, the author illustrates a particular political statement against their beliefs. Now, while the subcultural joke is still present, the meme provides another way of approaching the picture's context."

The use of the infantalistic LOLspeak ridicules the apparently hypocritical position of the protestors, while 'You're doing it wrong' proposes that the creator and reader are superior to the protestors by virtue of being able to see the hypocrisy to which the protestors are blind. This position of having the right and ability to comment on news events suffuses online memes, especially crisis memes.

It is thus especially interesting to see that online memes are also combined to reflexively comment on online comment culture itself, especially in times of crisis. The Scumbag Steve meme (Know Your Meme 2011k) is a form of Advice Animal. It uses the image of a man with a particularly recognizable herring-bone-patterned cap worn at a rakish angle and accompanying text in which an act is described at the top of the image and the man's deplorable stance towards it is described at the bottom (Figure 14, left). Together, the image and text illustrate being a 'scumbag'. A typical crisis meme example is to attribute scumbag status to politicians based on hypocrisy, as in Figure 14 (middle), in reference to the infamous George W. Bush 'Mission Accomplished' speech.

Scumbag Brain (Figure 14, right) is an evolution, combination, and, in this case, reflexive commentary on crisis memes. Internet users have taken to pointing out their own anti-social actions by using the cap of Scumbag Steve as an exploitable superimposed over an image of a human brain. When the Norwegian terrorist killings occurred in close proximity to the death of singer Amy Winehouse, this Scumbag Brain example was posted on Reddit after it became clear that (1) significantly more commentary of all kinds was being devoted to Winehouse and (2) of this, significantly more sorrow was being expressed for the natural or suicidal death of a single person versus the 76 shot by Anders Breivik.

The moral dimension of this Scumbag Brain example also brings up the issue that different sites of meme production have very different standards as to what is considered acceptable. Know Your Meme pages on individual memes frequently mention 4Chan in early origin reports e.g. Chubby Bubbles Girl. 4Chan was designed to be an anonymous image-sharing forum in which users could post without restriction. Users in the/b/forum are notorious for their resistance to traditional morality (Knuttila 2011), this, combined with a

Figure 14: Scumbag Steve original meme example, crisis meme example and reflexive crisis meme example.

lack of a voting system, means that a very wide range of ideas are potentially available to be picked up as meme template elements. On the other hand, the aggregate up and down votes on Reddit or digg act as simplistic community standard governors of the spread of meme series and individual instances. As in any popularity contest, popular ideas tend to pull towards reproduction of at least the Reddit or digg communal morality. Reddit users are also particularly partial to creating and sharing Rage Comics and Advice Animals, memes forms that comment on social and moral standards. Special purpose meme creation sites, such as Meme Generator, allow for anonymous generation of both new and existing image macros. Such sites track popularity of the use of their generated memes to indicate their popularity. Meme Generator, for example, presents image macros in tiers from the most popular 'God Tier' through to the least popular 'Fail Tier', but such sites do not themselves have an ongoing community in and of themselves. Currently, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter act more as distribution infrastructure for image macros found in other meme collections or generated from meme creators, rather than as sites for the generation of the image macros themselves. However, the flows of meme generation and distribution are in constant flux, as they are for any social media use, so charting these flows will remain an ongoing empirical issue.

THE VALUE OF CRISIS MEMES

Image macro crisis memes are folk productions produced as responses to challenging events based on thematic and structural templates of popular image macros. The theme and structure of the original online memes lend themselves to finding new instances of related content. At the same time, the theme and structure are open to replacement of elements, evolution of elements and recombination of elements. For those in the know, a given instance takes some of its meaning as another – and possibly a next – in a series or category. Crisis memes thus draw their power, as do all memes, from a combination of timeliness, timelessness and seriality. These features are especially relevant to crisis memes, which are produced and consumed in the heat of an emergent social crisis, which is new but also another instance of a crisis that has been experienced before.

Crisis memes could be critiqued along the lines of much other popular culture: that as responses to crisis, crisis memes are frivolous and ghoulish attention seeking rather than reasoned discourse, and that they are inherently culturally divisive because they are linked to the infrastructure of affluent societies. Such critiques, though, are tired, misplaced and/or miss the point of what we can learn from crisis memes.

As with the products of popular literature, film, television and radio before them, crisis memes clearly do not represent forms of reasoned discourse that would conform more readily to, say, Jürgen Habermas's (1989) public sphere ideal of civil society. Reasoned discourse is a worthy ideal but to privilege it is to repress the many other methods, rationales, rituals and practices of communication that make up social life. While their actual civility might be questionable, crisis memes are nevertheless an important manifestation of civil society because they show people to be interested in taking an evaluative public position. To echo Axel Bruns's concept of 'produsage' (2008) and Lawrence Lessig's concept of 'Remix' culture (2008), they represent a reinvigorated, active and unconstrained public voice that sidesteps the constraints of traditional media opinion generation and distribution. Indeed, media based on the Internet

infrastructure afford far broader, more interactive and more intertextual exposure to the representations and expectations of civil society than could be dreamt of in Habermas's philosophy. The question for future research, then, is not whether crisis memes should be judged as responses against idealized reasoned discourse, but what their place is in twenty-first-century civil society. Future research should consider a number of issues along this line. Whether and how do members of various cultural groups treat templatable digital resources such as crisis memes as newsworthy, sharable, even resistible accounts for current social circumstances? What do individuals achieve – socially, personally and more widely – by creating, or perhaps simply passing along, particular memes in particular platforms? In what contexts are memes passed from platform to platform and how are they popularized and distributed within platforms?

Another critique that could be made of crisis memes is that they reinforce cultural imperialism and the digital divide. It is by now axiomatic that differences in affluence correlate directly with differences in infrastructural access to digital affordances (Compaine 2001) and that western culture dominates most Internet culture just as it dominates much of traditional media. This could be said of virtually any practice based on communication technology, so again it would seem that the critique is, at least, not well focused. In-groups have always demonstrated their cohesion through restricted code – group-specific words and ideas (Bernstein 1964) – and we should not be surprised to see this occur on the Internet. Clearly the in-jokes and associated templating knowledge needed to both understand and create crisis memes hold far more meaning for the Internet cognoscenti than the millions of Internet users who have no idea of meme history, and the billions more who have never seen them. Better questions for future research would revolve around the relationship between templatability and the relative visibility of cultural power. For example, G. Lakoff and M. Johnson's (1980) distinction between 'live' and 'dead' metaphors rests on the notion that at some point templatable objects (of which metaphors are one kind) reify their origins. Given the searchable nature of digital objects, crisis memes (and other templatable digital objects) could well provide units for investigating the point-to-point processes of reification. Alternatively, the promiscuity of crisis memes could provide important clues as to how aspect of Internet culture are crossing national, class and other traditional boundaries, and expanding previously bounded methods and contexts for expression about current social circumstances.

It was argued above that crisis memes represent a reinvigoration of an active and unconstrained public voice. The freedom of expression that is characterized by crisis memes, through, often depends on unlicensed use of copyrighted materials. While this should ostensibly be fair use, any use of copyrighted materials is facing challenges from increasingly strict copyright regimes such as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) (Electronic Frontier Foundation 2011). During early 2012, controversy erupted over the possible introduction of two overly restrictive US copyright bills, Stop Internet Privacy Act (SOPA)/Protect Internet Privacy Act (PIPA). SOPA/PIPA were especially problematic because their proposed response to allegations of copyright violation was to shut down the Domain Name Server (DNS) links to allegedly infringing websites, making them invisible to most users. Websites that served allegedly infringing material would thus be forced into the economically infeasible position of moderating every post for possibly infringing material. While such a draconian regime protects the interests of certain members of the content production industries and their lobby groups, it

clearly has massive impact on freedom of expression for individuals. Lawrence Lessig (2008) has long argued that overly restrictive copyright regimes wither creativity, taking us from a read/write culture to a read only culture. Similarly, in a TED talk discussing SOPA/PIPA, Clay Shirky (2012) argued that unless Internet users stand against future incarnations of restrictive copyright regimes, the Internet could end up promoting a consumption-only culture.

One such future incarnation is the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which effectively seeks to extend DMCA-like regimes to a range of international partners, including Australia (Electronic Frontier Foundation 2012). The Electronic Frontier Foundation's report on the leaked 10 February 2011 draft chapter on intellectual property indicates that the TPP treats ideas as property to be jealously guarded. The problem with such a regime is that it includes many property rights and infringement provisions for corporations and governments, but few to no positive rights for individuals or the free flow of ideas.

Even frivolous and ghoulish popular culture objects such as crisis memes are important manifestations of freedom of expression. As such, Internet users should be lobbying for more positive individual fair use and sharing rights to facilitate such expression. The 'Creative Commons' project is one part this process, but ultimately we need to go further. Going further will require that all stakeholders become better educated about the relationship between copyright, technology and Internet culture. Not only do Internet users themselves need to better understand the regulatory framework in which they operate, but legislators need to better understand how the demands of restrictive copyright might be at odds with the Internet's technical infrastructure and Internet cultural practices.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ALBERT MORAN is professor in humanities at Griffith University.

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