

29. The politics and practices of meme culture: ethnographic perspectives on post-digital modes of knowledge production (Roundtable)

Anja Dreschke, Universität zu Köln

Simone Pfeifer, Universität zu Köln

AG Media(anthropology)

Discussant: Anna Lisa Ramella, Universität zu Köln

The workshop explores ethnographic approaches to memes as a digital phenomenon characterized by practices of appropriating, commenting on, manipulating, editing, remixing, and disseminating found digital artefacts. By combining text and image or short audio-visual formats and their embeddedness in post-digital environments, contested forms of knowledge are produced and circulated. Practices surrounding memes often bring forth subcultural communities, and different meme cultures operate at the intersection of utopias of user empowerment and the media industry. Their potential for mass or even global circulation and “virality” is often counteracted by community-specific and localized addressing and legibility. Meme cultures are playful, often political, humorous or satirical thereby negotiating intersections of race, class, and gender. With their potential to subvert, memes intervene in political debates, and while they sometimes might seem trivial or nonsensical, they are easily politicized through their entanglements in political, economic, and social systems of domination.

In this workshop we particularly invite anthropological and media ethnographic perspectives that critically reflect on meme practices and their post-digital cultures from the different angles of production, consumption, and circulation in subversive, political, and popular culture. Case studies could range from political meme cultures, like the alt-right, interventions in election campaigns, or other social movements, to art, digital folklore and the use of memes in popular culture and everyday life.

During the workshop we want to explore the following questions: What is the state of memes in anthropology? How are memes situated as part of ethnographic research? What kind of knowledge is produced through the combination of text and image, or the short audio-visual formats? How are these modes of knowledge intervening in post-digital and decolonial practices or digital sovereignty?

Keynote by Idil Gallip, University of Amsterdam, founder of "Meme Studies Research Network"

Locating meme subcultures on digital platforms: An Ethnographic Inquiry into Instagram

Today, meme subcultures primarily emerge on social media platforms. As a result, their production, organisation and proliferation are bound by the politics of these platforms. Digital platforms are therefore significant actors within contemporary meme communities - meme creators and audiences approach them as locations, facilitators, and antagonists, forging complex relationships with and through them. In this presentation, I will discuss my process of designing an ethnographic study of a niche Anglophone meme community on Instagram. I will outline the various methods that I used to capture a sociological snapshot of the community in question and show how I mapped the central and peripheral platforms that appeared during the study.

Meme culture, journalistic practices and news-making in Ecuador

Karen Silva Torres, Universität Leipzig

Memes as digital cultural artefacts play a crucial role in contemporary public arenas. People circulate information and comment on almost every mayor political, economic and social event by sharing usually humorous or satirical memes. Journalists also consume and circulate these audio-visual objects every day, and despite their apparent frivolity, meme culture is becoming part of the very process of news production. This paper shows how journalists understand memes as signs of audiences' interests, social media engagement, and social protest while reading them also as manipulative political weapons or expressions of a moralising society dedicated to public shaming, misogyny, and hate speech.

Using ethnographic material from on- and offline settings, the paper focuses on memes about a particular viral political scandal in Ecuador. It describes the different and contested ways reporters and editors consume, signify and use memes to incorporate and translate them into mainstream news. The manifold and apparently contradictory journalists' understandings of memes illustrate the multiple dimensions (technological, political, institutional, and affective) of journalists' practices of knowledge production through which memes are enjoyed, validated, contested, and resisted. Moreover, the paper emphasises the increasing relevance of meme appropriations in the Ecuadorian digital and non-digital political culture.

Ethnographic Perspectives on Metapolitics – Memetic Communication and the Mainstreaming of Far-Right Discourse

Dr. Konstanze N'Guessan, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

With the notion metapolitics – dating back to Antonio Gramsci – the European New Right (De Benoist, Faye) attempts to influence collective imaginaries in order to gain cultural hegemony in diverse social fields. For example, by pushing notions such as “wave of refugees” or “replacement migration” and connect these with powerful affective images, migration appears as a threat to society, that has to be carefully monitored and restricted. Memes – or memetic communication in a broader sense – are part and parcel of metapolitical practice and of the mainstreaming of far-right discourse and imagery. With memetic communication I refer to both digital and post-digital practices of the New Right to promote far-right narratives without appearing to be extremist or risking de-platforming or even legal consequences. But what does it mean to study memes ethnographically? My paper will look at memetic communication from the perspective of those who produce, share and collaboratively work on and with memes. My analysis focuses on the use of affective practices such as polarization, retorsion, humor and enthymematic closure. Based on digital-related ethnography conducted from September 2021 to September 2022, my paper looks at practices of memeing and metapolitics among right-wing social media activists and the communities evolving around them.

'Only in Egypt': When real estate advertisements are memes: Perspectives on post-digital modes of spatio-visual knowledge co-construction

Dr. Ing. Mennatullah Hendaw, Technische Universität Berlin

Only in Egypt is a famous hashtag among local Egyptians in which they approach everyday politics using humor. In this article, I explore the real estate advertisements in Egypt and the memes produced on them by ordinary citizens. I argue that real estate ads reveal contested forms of knowledge(s) and the urban politics of everyday lives. Memes in this context reveal the urban dreams of the ignored majority of the population who would not afford to buy in the promoted ads. As such real estate ads (and real estate memes) negotiate intersections of class and gender in fundamentally patriarchal societies and bring forth subcultural communities of the vulnerable population.

This article builds on my PhD dissertation which focused on the intersection between the communication and visualization of urban visions and the spatialization of justice in the mediatized world. It brings media ethnographic

perspectives to real estate ads to tackle the following questions: What kind of knowledge is co-constructed through the visualizations of Cairo's urbanism in real estate ads/memes? How are these modes of knowledges intervening in post-digital and post-political urban practices?

Images of Protest: Afghan memes and the struggle to be seen

Sarah Bittel, Graduate Institute Geneva

With images being omnipresent in our contemporary world, the way migrants are visualized is inherently linked to the way they are socially and politically perceived, as images play a key role in regulating public and political debate and sustaining stereotypes. In a context where both images and humans are in what could be called an epoch-defining mobility, the image of the migrant thus became a key figure to contemporary politics. As part of my ongoing research project, "The migrant', key figure to contemporary politics" I in this paper focus on memes created and circulated within online networks of Afghan social activists. Doing so, I aim to gain perspectives on how migrants re-appropriate their own image and how memes are used as subversive tactics to challenge hegemonic power, with meme-making as form of everyday resistance and another strategy to cope with hardship. In the context of my research, memes commonly are circulated for their subversive potential, commenting for example dominant visual economies' lack of attention towards 'the Afghan case', as well as voicing criticism towards interventionist politics. In an ongoing struggle for recognition, memes here are a part of what could be called digital image protests.

Memes in Yucatec Maya: Indigenous language activism between virality and rootedness

Dr. Eriko Yamasaki, Philipps-Universität Marburg

The dialectic of universality and particularity is a typical feature of landscapes created through digital media and technologies (Miller and Horst 2012). Regarding the cultural and linguistic diversity, their homogenizing and heterogenizing impacts often coincide.

This dialectic is clearly manifest in ways in which digital media and technologies are used by Yucatec Maya speakers in Mexico. At first glance, increased accessibility of digital technologies seems to further promote the spread of "mega-languages" at the expense of the indigenous language. While the unequal distribution of languages and hence knowledge in the internet cannot be overlooked, there are also initiatives to challenge the "homogenocene" (Eriksen

2021). Digital activism is an emergent way in which Yucatec Maya speakers make a creative use of new media and technology to resist the homogenizing pressure on their language, knowledge and ways of life. By means of memes, knowledge in, of and for Yucatec Maya is produced, disseminated, and circulated to challenge the cultural and linguistic hegemony.

Drawing on interviews with digital activists and an analysis of their accounts in popular social media platforms, this paper discusses both potential and contradictions entailed in digital activism for minorized languages in the face of non-transparent and market-oriented algorithms.

The causal life of memes: a global perspective on political memes and their messy effects

John Postill, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne

In recent years anthropologists and other ethnographers have paid increasing attention to the actual and potential effects of memes in places as diverse as Ghana (Flamembaum 2022), Oman (Al Zidjaly 2017), Malaysia (Abidin 2020), Singapore (Abidin 2020), Indonesia (Postill 2018), and the UK (Brooke 2022). In this paper I marry this strand of research with recent sociological advances in the ethnographic study of causality (Glaeser 2005, Katz 2002, Lichterman and Reed 2015, Tavory and Timmermans 2013) to explore the social effects of political memes from a comparative perspective. To this end I draw from my own anthropological research in Indonesia and in the anglosphere as well as on the secondary literature. I argue that we need to overcome media anthropology's customary aversion to the notion of 'media effects' (Postill 2022) and take more seriously the messy, complex 'causal life' of memes as dynamic 'collections of texts' (Shifman 2014) to assess their political significance in different cultural contexts. This includes the need to differentiate between potential and actual effects, a distinction that is often conflated in the literature.