

Mememes of the virus: social criticism of the corona pandemic on the internet

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The author explains the term “internet memes” and uses examples to show how they comment on the coronavirus pandemic and reflect the discourse of crisis.

The corona pandemic has infected not only large parts of the world's population, but also the mass media and the internet. In the media, there is no escaping the virus. On the internet, the pandemic has gone viral. Internet memes, a popular form of communication among users, are frequently concerned with the coronavirus. How do such internet memes comment on the corona pandemic? This question will be answered by means of influential examples which reflect the discourse of crisis.

THE ORIGIN OF MEMES

Usually if we hear the term “meme” we think of amusing images and videos on the internet, not of evolutionary biology. But this is exactly where the term originated. The famous atheist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins introduced the term “meme” in his book *The Selfish Gene* in 1976, i.e. decades before the World Wide Web. What Dawkins means by a meme is a cultural unit that is transmitted from person to person via imitation. By analogy with genes, the evolutionary biologist uses “meme” to describe a new, cultural replicator which drives human evolution. Examples of such memes are ideas, ideologies, religions, sayings, melodies, styles of clothing etc., which evolve in the course of cultural history.

Dawkins (1993) conceives of memes as “viruses of the mind”, the title of one of his often-quoted essays. What he means by this is, on the one hand, that memes take on a life of their own, and on the other hand, that memes are as infectious as real viruses. Thus Dawkins (2006, p. 192) understands memes as “living structures, not just metaphorically but technically.” In his view, memes replicate spontaneously, in order to survive in the meme pool. Humans act solely as vehicles for transporting and spreading memes. In the logic of evolutionary theory, there is competition between different memes (e.g. between scientific theories, political ideologies or religious dogmas). The meme that will survive is the one that is best adapted to its environment, i.e. to human needs and societal conditions. The more infectious memes are and the better they can lodge in the human brain and be transmitted to other people, the higher their chances of survival are.

MEMES ON THE INTERNET

Are memes and internet memes the same thing? As far as Dawkins is concerned, the original concept of the meme offers a very good description of what can be found on the internet today. “The meaning is not that far away from the original. It's anything that goes viral.” (Dawkins, quoted in Solon, 2013) As he sees it, memes are viral content that spreads of its own accord on the internet.

This view is not unproblematic. According to Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green (2013, pp. 16-23), virality

gives a false impression of how content circulates on the internet. The idea that users are infected by viral content and then passively spread it is, they argue, a marketing myth. Instead they see users as actively involved in the process of deciding what content they will share with other users. The truth no doubt lies between these 2 arguments. Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, pp. 195-228) admit themselves that content is “designed” for better dissemination. It must be emphasised, nonetheless, that content such as internet memes does not spread on its own, but is reliant on the creativity and participation of users, which is incompatible with Dawkins's original idea of “self-copying memes” (2006, p. 194).

Another incompatibility with Dawkins's theory derives from the fact that the terms “meme” and “viral” do not mean the same thing on the internet. According to the communication studies scholar Limor Shifman (2014, p. 56), a viral is “a single cultural unit” (e.g. a music video, a political image or an advertising slogan), while memes are “always a collection of texts” (e.g. image macros with various captions). So a meme on the internet only becomes a meme when content is copied and changed. Virals, in contrast, only consist of a single version, though this can constitute the basis for internet memes.

CORONA MEMES AS SOCIAL COMMENTARY

Internet memes are not viruses, but they do make it possible to communicate about viruses, especially if the



Ill. 1: Corona-chan, also called Wuhan-chan, is an anthropomorphised representation of the coronavirus in anime style, here as a sexualised anime girl



Ill. 2: China is presented as having deliberately spread the coronavirus, so it can then play the part of the world power that saves the day

virus is – due to a global pandemic – an ubiquitous topic. On the internet, memes are often used to comment on current issues. As a means of communication, memes facilitate discursive exchanges about events within society, and criticism of these events. The latter involves the use of humour, allowing critical distance from the topic (Moebius, 2018, pp. 6f.). Humorous memes thus enable users to address sensitive topics and express criticism which would not be possible without an ironic undertone. The following discussion will show how internet memes comment critically on the coronavirus pandemic.

REPRESENTATION OF THE ROLE OF CHINA

The coronavirus, which is known to have originated in the Chinese province of Wuhan, has been anthropomorphised on the 4chan platform into a young anime-style woman (Ill. 1). She is wearing a traditional qipao, and holding a Chinese flag in one hand and a Corona beer in the other. Like the Ebola-chan meme (Marcus & Singer, 2017, pp. 350f.), the Corona-chan meme sexualises the virus to make it seem less dangerous. For users with the right affinities, fetishising it into an anime girl creates familiarity with an otherwise uncontrollable virus which is only known from media images. Corona-chan emerged in a pre-pandemic phase, at a time when the virus was still mainly raging in China, and the Western world was largely spared. When the pandemic finally erupted, China's role in the emergence and spread of the virus was scrutinised. For example, one webcomic implies that China deliberately released the coronavirus into the world so it could subsequently present itself as the world power that saves the day (Ill. 2). As the personification of the virus, then, Corona-chan also serves to question political narratives or to create new ones.

PROCESSING THE INTER-GENERATIONAL CONFLICT

The corona pandemic is triggering an intergenerational conflict, since the virus is mainly life-threatening for older, immunocompromised people. Protective measures such as social distancing, quarantine and masks are intended to protect these people. For young people this therefore means restrictions, which are not always readily accepted. The intergenerational conflict on the internet had already started before the pandemic, with the slogan "OK boomer." This is a dismissive response to outdated, conservative statements by baby boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964).¹ The meme culture can be associated mainly with millennials (born in 1981-1996) and zoomers (born in 1997-2012), i.e. with adolescents and more or less young adults.² One of the accusations of the younger generations is that the older generation is to blame for climate change. The allegation is that the baby boomers have recklessly exhausted the planet's resources with their lifestyle. A meme from the television series *The Office* with words inverted ("How the turntables..." instead of "How the tables have turned...") suggests that the planet is using the virus to get its revenge on the baby boomer generation (Ill. 3). In another meme the phrase "OK boomer" is anagrammed into "K.O. boomer" (Ill. 4) to emphasise the lethality of the virus for the older generation. In the coronavirus pandemic, the OK boomer meme takes a certain malicious pleasure in targeting the people who are most endangered by the virus, seeking to continue the intergenerational conflict even in the crisis.

CRITICISM OF PANIC BUYING

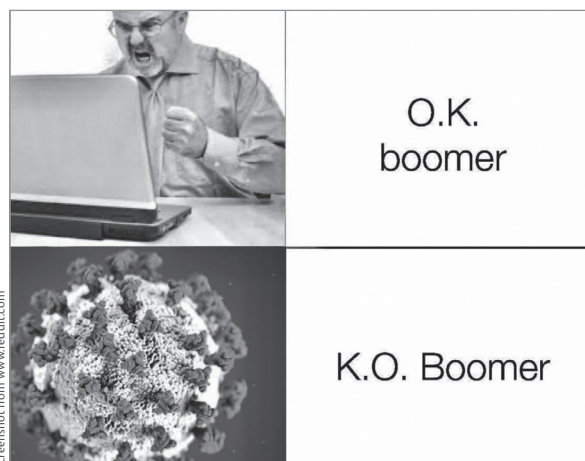
The pandemic has brought numerous restrictions in public life, with

When Boomers kill the Earth But Corona Virus kills Boomers



Screenshot from www.reddit.com

Ill. 3: A meme from the series *The Office* implying that the planet is using the virus to take revenge on the baby boomer generation



Screenshot from www.reddit.com

Ill. 4: Anagramming of "O.K. Boomer" into "K.O. Boomer"

curfews or lockdowns in many regions. The uncertainty about the restrictive measures, combined with media images from China, where people infected with the virus were actually locked up in their houses, has led to irrational panic buying. In many places, this has meant shortages in disinfectant, soap and toilet paper. Some memes reflect this experience of shortages, unusual for capitalist societies. The Elmo Nuclear Bomb meme exagger-

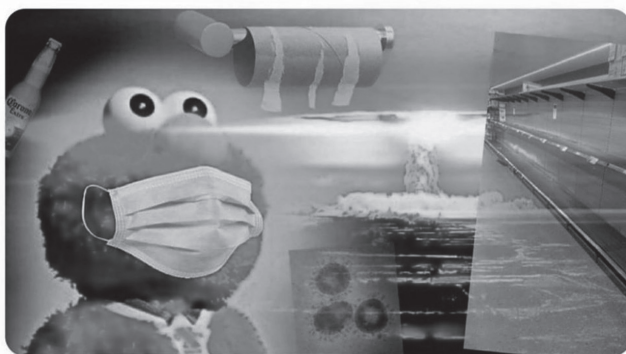
ates the situation, suggesting that the experience of empty shelves and a lack of toilet paper could in future cause post-traumatic stress disorders – and that it will only take a Corona beer to trigger such a reaction (Ill. 5). The Terminator meme goes a step further, implying a civil war over toilet paper (Ill. 6). The hoarding memes criticise the harmful purchasing behaviour of panic buyers in the crisis, which leads to unnecessary shortages of goods.

CRITICISM OF CAPITALISM

The capitalist system has been particularly severely affected by the pandemic, since many businesses have had to close because of protective measures. In many places the economy has been reduced to a bare minimum. Essential jobs, which are often carried out by people from lower social class, must ensure that society's needs are met. The Ralph In Danger meme from the

future grandson: "hey grandpa want a corona?"

me:



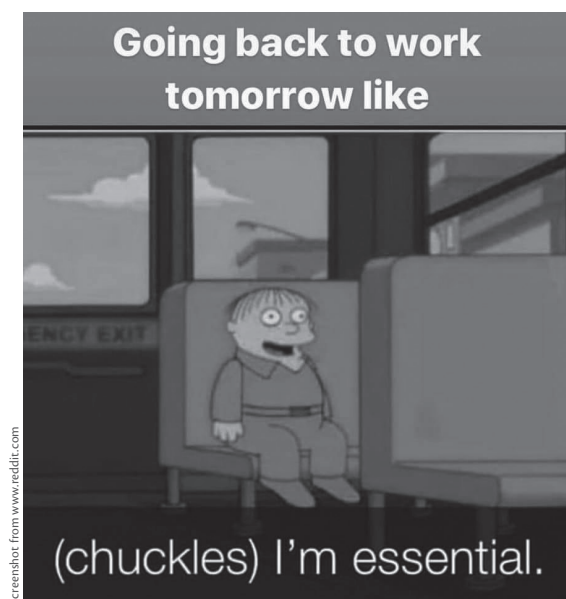
Screenshot from www.reddit.com

Ill. 5: Hoarding memes: the experience of irrational hoarding, processed in a meme

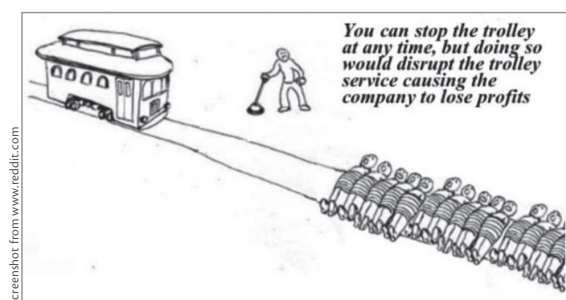


Screenshot from www.imgur.com

Ill. 6: Civil war over toilet paper – humorous criticism of panic buying in memes



III. 7: The luxury of working from home does not exist for essential workers



III. 8: Moral dilemma: the value of a human in capitalism

television series *The Simpsons* self-ironically reflects the fact that such essential workers, who do not enjoy the luxury of working from home, face heightened risks (III. 7). "I'm essential" has the same meaning as Ralph's original statement, "I'm in danger." The journey back to work is accompanied by gallows humour. Despite the health risks posed by the pandemic, it was not long before neoliberal voices were calling for the economy to be restarted. In the USA, a new discourse pitted human lives against the good of the economy. Old people were expected to sacrifice themselves for the economy, to prevent the system from crashing – that was the argument. This discourse has been evoked and exaggerated by the trolley meme (III. 8). The trolley problem is a

thought experiment, dealing with the moral dilemma of sacrificing one person to save many other people.³ In the internet meme, this moral dilemma is given an anti-capitalist twist. The tram, aka the economy, can be stopped at any time to save human lives, the only consequence being that corporations will lose money due to the stoppage. The internet meme simplifies the situation, however, the unemployment caused by the stoppage also endangers livelihoods. Nonetheless, the internet meme does identify a fundamental societal problem: the value of a human being in capitalism.

CONCLUSION

Internet memes are not virals or viruses which spread of their own accord, as envisaged by Dawkins. Instead they are specific pictorial practices that are reliant on human participation: without this they cannot form a group of texts. In other words, internet memes are only created in a collective exchange.

This collective exchange has been illustrated in the internet memes analysed here, which reflect different discourses of the corona pandemic. They comment on events in society from a humorous, not always politically correct perspective, thus mirroring social reality on the internet. The discourses are conducted internationally, as the corona memes show. Because of the pandemic, people all over the world are having similar experiences (e.g.

with quarantine measures, panic buying, short-time work etc.), which can be expressed and processed in the internet memes. In this way, intercultural communication on the internet can contribute to social crisis management.

NOTES

¹ One of the places where this response has been uttered is the New Zealand parliament: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3_tocfXUil&feature=emb_title [11.5.20]

² Also known as Generation Y and Generation Z.

³ A tram is travelling towards a group of people. To save the group, one can redirect the tram to another track. On this track, however, there is one other person who would then be hit by the tram.

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