ABSTRACTS & BIOS

PANEL 1: MEME MAGIC IS REAL! STUDYING THE POLITICS OF ONLINE SUBCULTURES THROUGH THEIR MEMETIC ACTIVITY

This panel presents work by researchers based out of the University of Amsterdam's New Media and Digital Culture program and affiliated with the Open Intelligence Lab (oilab.eu). The research looks at the role of memes and slang expressions in relation to anonymous imageboard culture, their collectivizing role within these subcultural spaces as well and the dynamics of their spread to other more mainstream platforms. Insofar as these meme subcultures have undergone a recent "reactionary turn" (Tuters & Hagen 2020), the panels furthermore obliquely addresses issues concerning the rise of the far-right online. The papers thus combines subcultural ethnography with computational methods in order to understand how these problematic objects are used in different milieus and how they may travel between region of the web, from the fringes into the mainstream.

Marc Tuters is an Assistant Professor in the University of Amsterdam's Media Studies faculty where he teaches graduate courses on new media theory and directs the OILab, which often works together with the Digital Methods Initiative to map the cultural techniques and infrastructures of radical subcultures online.

"IS HE /OURGUY/?": REPURPOSING THE META-LANGUAGE OF ANONYMOUS ONLINE COLLECTIVES

SAL HAGEN

Pseudonymous and anonymous online groups form complex objects of study. The affordances of spaces like forums and imageboards invite distinctly "masked" subcultures, drenched in ironic, intertextual vernacular while lacking demographic or postdemographic data to repurpose. Instead of considering this a limitation in the study of the actors "hidden behind" the data, this presentation argues it is exactly ingroup expressions and objects like memes that construct their collectivity and help in maintaining a shared sense of identity. This reliance on cultural objects materialises in particularly revealing and socially constitutive "meta-language". It draws from Tarde's microsociology and Latour's notion of “panoramas” to argue that one should also trace this meta-language to understand the collectivity of seemingly nebulous online collectives. Specifically, the presentation shows various connections of a meme known as "/ourguy/". By for instance asking "Is Trump still /ourguy/?", this word is used on imageboards to initiate discussion on whether a certain public figure represents their values. The case study will circulate around differently constructed perspectives on this meme, combining close reading with digital methods and Natural Language Processing. In doing so, it attempts to show how such meta-language can be repurposed to map the collectivity of online subcultures.

Sal Hagen is a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam, Department of Media Studies. He co-founded OILab during his MA in Media Studies and has studied Internet subcultures since. His work combines cultural research and media theory with digital and computational methods.

MEMES AS MARKERS: TRACING POLITICAL THOUGHT FROM 4CHAN TO BREITBART THROUGH MEMETIC CONTENT

STIJN PEETERS AND TOM WILLAERT

Fringe internet platforms such as 4chan and other image boards are often positioned as the ‘birthplace’ of memes (Ludemann 2018), which after incubation cross over to other platforms. Through their memetic production, such fringe platforms can then have a profound impact on popular culture and politics despite their relative obscurity. Some of these platforms have become associated with extreme political discourse. 4chan’s ‘politically incorrect’ forum /pol/, for example, is an antisemitic and white supremacist space. It is also strongly memetic, having popularised Pepe the Frog as an alt-right icon, as well as a plethora of other memetic content. Together, this memetic vernacular can be considered a ‘memeplex’ (Konior 2019), in which /pol/’s political positions are reflected.

In this paper we argue that such memeplexes can be leveraged as a proxy for political positions. The memetic content constituting such a memeplex may then be used as a marker that can be traced to identify shifting and spreading ideological allegiances, thereby repurposing memes as a tool for tracing the spread of (extreme) political thought. This is illustrated with a case study in which /pol/ is compared to the comment section of Breitbart, a right-wing American news site. By tracing the usage of salient memetic content across two years of comments, it becomes possible to see how memetic phrases ‘cross over’ from 4chan to Breitbart,
together with their political baggage. This allows us, then, to assess the impact of fringe platforms as well as more generally the spread of online extreme discourse.

Stijn Peeters is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Amsterdam, Department of Media Studies. In 2018, he completed his PhD research on the shared history of Twitter and IRC at King’s College London, as part of the ERC-funded Ego-Media project. His current research interests focus on platform histories and a media-archaeological analysis of fringe communities on social media platforms. Within the Digital Methods Initiative, he has developed and co-developed multiple research tools including the Search Engine Scraper, IssueCrawler and 4CAT Capture and Analysis Toolkit.

Tom Willaert is a postdoctoral researcher at the VUB Artificial Intelligence Lab and lecturer in digital humanities at KU Leuven. He holds a PhD in literature (media studies and digital humanities) from KU Leuven Faculty of Arts and a postgraduate degree in big data and analytics from KU Leuven Faculty of Economics and Business (2018). His research interests are situated at the intersections of new media, digital methods, (dis)information and democracy.

HOW KEKISTAN UNITED AND DIVIDED THE RIGHT FROM 4CHAN TO YOUTUBE: TRANSCODING A CONTESTED MEME ACROSS FRINGE AND MAINSTREAM PLATFORMS EMILLIE DE KEULENAAR

With Trump’s inauguration, posters to the subcultural Web forum 4chan imagined themselves as victors in “The Great Meme War”. In this period, the appearance of “fashy” (or fascist) memes within social media feeds was tied up in the rise of a new type of online ultra-nationalistic political movement referred to as the “alt-right”. This paper offers a historical investigation of one such “alt-right” meme: Kekistan. In 2017, a contingent of Trump supporters – drawn together by a dark sense of humour – imagined themselves as the citizens of the fictional nation state of Kekistan at war with the forces of liberal political correctness. While having initially developed on 4chan, on YouTube, dozens of Kekistan-theme channels emerged, as for example in the genre of “protest LARPing” videos, in which Trump supporters would antagonize their opponents by flying the flag of Kekistan whose design was clearly based on that of the Nazi’s Reichskriegsfalge. This paper will trace a narrative arc of how the use and meaning of this “meme” transformed over time and across platforms, as well as offering an historical perspective onto a cross section of user-generated “alt-right” Web culture – from a period of time when the movement appeared ascendant. Using “kekistan” as a query to compile a historical corpus of 4chan posts and YouTube videos from this period – many of which the platform has since censored – the paper will present a snapshot of a relatively brief moment in time when a “deep vernacular Web” subculture associated with 4chan exploded into public view.

Emillie de Keulenaar is a junior researcher at the universities of Utrecht and Amsterdam’s OILab collective. At OILab, her research focuses on the production of misinformation in contentious debates and the dissemination of far-right political thought across fringe and mainstream platforms. Prior to researching for the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, she obtained a research masters in New Media and Digital Culture from UvA and a MA in the History of Political Thought and Intellectual History at University College London.

MINING THE VISUAL: ENCYCLOPEDIA DRAMATICA EXPLORER DANIËL DE ZEEUW

The use of digital methods to study visual content is impaired by the textual-centrism of the technological infrastructures that host such content as well as the tools to collect and analyse them. Whereas text is discrete and easily searchable, images are not. This presents a problem for the study of meme culture, which is obviously profoundly visual (and when there is text, it is often encoded within the image). In our research on the subcultural heritage site Encyclopedia Dramatica – which hosts an index of 4chan’s meme culture, including thousands of images – we developed a methodology for studying these images by using Google’s vision API to extract semantic and contextual information from them. We then created a map of the images based on the extracted terms, e.g. “memes”, “pornography”, “anime”. In the presentation this method, as well as its results, are presented. Besides, the politics of image recognition algorithms will be discussed.

Daniël de Zeeuw is a lecturer at the department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam and a member of OILab (oilab.eu). His current research focuses on the politics and aesthetics of online subcultures.
PANEL 2: POLITICS OF MEMES

DANSE MEMETIQUE: MEMES IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC  AN XIAO MINA

Today, as everyone from Boris Johnson and Tom Hanks to homeless people, prisoners and refugees in camps contract COVID-19, we face a pandemic with such remarkable contagion that half of the world’s population is now locked down in an ostensible effort to stop its spread. At the same time, more than half the world now has some sort of access to the internet, through mobile phones, desktop and laptop computers, and shared services like internet cafes. As we isolate ourselves physically, we congregate digitally at a new scale, with Zoom gatherings, TikTok cascades and chat threads. In this political moment, it’s worth asking what role memes play in a digital danse macabre, a space for us to process the ongoing threat and its effects on seemingly everyone in the world, from the most powerful to the most humble.

An Xiao Mina is an affiliate researcher at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society and the author of Memes to Movements.

FAST-FOOD MEDIA, MINDBOMBS OR THE SWEET ESCAPE? THE ROLES OF MEMES IN A SOCIETY  ANASTASIA DENISOVA

Memes have grown from a niche Internet darling to a type of folklore, slang that people of all ages use to communicate on all topics. In this talk, Dr Anastasia Denisova looks at the four roles of memes — how they serve everyday chats, political campaigning and trolling, provide an extension to journalism, and even soothe users who are dealing with unpleasant emotions. The case studies involve Russian political communication on Twitter, US elections and a few points about memes that emerged as a reaction to the coronavirus.

Dr Anastasia Denisova is a Senior Lecturer in Journalism at CAMRI, University of Westminster. Her recent book Internet Memes and Society was published in 2019 by Routledge. Her other research publications include articles for Media, Culture and Society; Social Media + Society; Comparative Sociology; M/C Journal. Anastasia’s work explores digital satire, viral cultures, political rap and social media, fashion media and sustainability.

THE LEFT CAN’T MEME - WHAT DOES IT MEAN?  ALESSANDRO LOLLI

I’m going to examine the statement The Left can’t Meme from a philosophical perspective. The Alt-Right weaponized this statement to win the so-called Great Meme War making it more a slogan than a subject of debate. For this reason, its meaning has remained obscure or overlooked. This brief inquiry assumes the slogan has two meanings: one regarding the content of the memes and one regarding the form of the memes. I will argue the two sides are connected in a dialectical manner leading to the problem of irony and the linguistic ambiguity. I will use Roland Barthes myth theory to point out the semiotic nature of memes and the reason why such visual language can be problematic for the left.

Alessandro Lolli is an Italian philosopher and author. He has published "la Guerra dei meme", on the language of internet memes.

EMOJIS, MEMES AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION  PHILIP SEARGEANT

Despite their public image as a frivolous, even childlike, form of communication, emojis are increasingly used in a vast range of different, and often highly serious, social situations. They’re used by the alt-right, for example, as symbols of identity; and by terrorist groups as a form of code. They also overlap in function with memes, while at the same time being a distinct form of visual communication in their own right. In this talk I’ll look at the way emojis are used as memes as a form of political communication, and what this indicates about the nature of contemporary online political discourse.

Philip Seargeant is a Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at the Open University, where he teaches and researches language and communication, with a particular focus on politics and social media. His most recent books are The Art of Political Storytelling and The Emoji Revolution. He is a frequent contributor to publications such as The New European, Prospect, The Huffington Post, Wired and The Independent.