

THE MEME WAR – PROPAGANDA AND RESISTANCE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract: In the context of the war launched by Russia in Ukraine, social networks have become an echo chamber of the conflict on the ground, a huge theater of imagological battle, where different versions of reality are confronted in order to gain popularity. Digital memes are a highly visible phenomenon of contemporary digital culture and could not escape the mobilization process triggered by the war in Ukraine.

Keywords: *Internet memes, Russia–Ukraine war, cult of Putin;*

Introduction

Against the backdrop of the war launched by Russia in Ukraine, social networks have become a resonance chamber of the conflict on the ground, a huge theatre of imagological battle, where different versions of reality face each other in order to gain popularity among public opinion. Digital memes represent a highly visible phenomenon of contemporary digital culture and could not escape the mobilization process triggered by the war in Ukraine. Digital memes, by which we mean repeated or remixed messages, with a playful, critical, and satirical content, materialized in an image, video or text, or a combination of image and text, that propagate rapidly from one person to another, through the Internet, are artisanal weapons used intensively in this guerilla warfare waged from the trenches of social networks.

Since social media has become increasingly politicized in recent years, this development would explain why memes have morphed from humorous and harmless content into corrosive sociopolitical commentary that reflects the polarization and ideological commitment of the digital tribes involved in their viral reproduction.

We are of opinion that memes are forms of popular culture's resistance to dominant media, to political, economic, and social discourse, expressions of social diversity and plurivocality. Memes can be considered the weapon of the weak, by dint of which established hierarchies and positions of power are challenged. In the context of the war in Ukraine, resistance is directed against the Russian Federation's institutionalized propaganda apparatus and its official narratives that attempt to justify the invasion of Ukraine.

One of the directions of action of Ukrainian or pro-Ukrainian memes was to undermine the image of the leader of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin. The *memetic* universe exploited this attack line because the external and internal communication policy of the Russian Federation is highly personalized, cultivating insistently the image of the providential and powerful leader. The derision and mockery of the authoritarian figure of the Russian leader take the form of carnivalesque resistance and occur in keeping with the logic of the upside-down world, of the absolute opposite, and of overturned values.

Conceptual clarifications

The term “meme” originates from biologist Richard Dawkins’ book *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins, 1976). Adapting the evolutionary theory to cultural changes, the author considers the meme a cultural correspondent of the gene in the field of biology: “Dawkins defined memes as small cultural units of transmission, analogous to genes, which are spread from person to person. Like genes, memes are defined as replicators that undergo variation, competition, selection, and retention. At any given moment, many memes are competing for the attention of hosts; however, only memes suited to their sociocultural environment spread successfully, while others become extinct by copying or imitation” (Shifman, 2013: 363). “Memes are small bits of culture that act as if they were individual genes within the field of biology. Each artifact carries with it a piece of the culture in which it was created. To continue with the metaphor, these genes then combine to become parts of a larger genome (the larger social-consciousness)” (Nieuburt, 2021). The form, content, and meaning of memes alter by the addition or loss of details throughout the process of cultural circulation.

In spite of its originality, Dawkins’ theory has received countless critiques and even outright dismissals. He is criticized for the forced analogy between biology and culture, and the vagueness and lack of utility of the central concept.

Shifman (Shifman, 2013) notes that two biological analogies predominate in the discourse on memes: with viral pathogens and with genes. Taking epidemiology and evolutionary genetics as a model, the two metaphors are far-fetched and problematic because they trivialize complex socio-cultural phenomena and because they construe man as a passive creature, defenseless in the face of contamination with foreign ideas. According to other researchers (Brown, 2014), the concept of “meme” is useless for explaining cultural processes because it duplicates established notions such as cultural “pattern”, “structure” or “idea”, and because any act of transmission of cultural information implies a dose of remixing and variability of the original. Dawkins’ theory does not provide sufficient clarification either to

enable the precise delineation of the boundaries of cultural artifacts included in this category or to distinguish memes from viral content.

The usefulness for communication sciences and media studies will be reconsidered in the light of new developments in the online environment: the process of information distribution has become demassified and individualized. This mutation of the communication paradigm makes the concept practicable, while Internet memes illustrate the evolution of ideas as a result of organic socio-cultural exchange between users.

Media research has borrowed the concept of memes to study viral content that spreads on the Internet. Originally defined as minimal cultural units that spread from person to person, memes are turning into a genre of online communication. In this capacity, online memes are described “as a remixed, iterated message that is rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity” (Wiggins, 2016: 453).

Memes have been transformed by the Internet into a highly visible and widespread practice, the term becoming an integral part of the electronic vernacular. Internet users tend to assign the meme label to specific phenomena, such as certain static or animated images accompanied by text or videos, which are shared through social networks and generate many derivatives. As illustrations of the visual culture that dominates the Internet, memes consist of a still image, an image accompanied by a phrase, a GIF (Graphics Interchange Format, an animated image), or a video. The iconotextual character of these artifacts of online culture draws them closer to advertising posters composed of an impactful image and a laconic slogan (Denisova, 2019: 9). The most common form of a meme is a combination of image and text. The images represent the cultural reference, the archetype, which is the basis of the remixes made by the text. The text usually contains a joke that intertextually exploits quotations, aphorisms or slogans. Both images and text play a role in understanding the meme (Shifman, 2013).

Memes are multimodal artifacts of popular culture, being employed in order to make public comments about political and social reality: their function has shifted from entertainment to political and social deliberation. Internet users use memes to interpret reality or negotiate social norms and values (Milner, 2013).

As manifestations of a “participatory culture” (Jenkins 2009), “memes are a site of contestation of collective identities, the arena where the hegemonic meets the alternative, and the public chooses the winner by clicking ‘like’ or ‘dislike’, and, most importantly, ‘share’” (Denisova, 2019: 10). By participatory culture, we mean the ability of any user to become a

co-producer of cultural goods as a result of the interactivity-based features of new communication technologies. Internet users actively consume information and take part through various forms of collaboration and interaction in generating new content. The development of Web 2.0 changed the paradigm of media communication, previously based on an agenda setting model in which journalists, as “gatekeepers”, selected information and thus indirectly controlled the manner in which reality was interpreted.

In the unidirectional model of communication, the professional journalist functioned like a mediator of the selection and interpretation of newsworthy events, which gave an asymmetric character to his relationship with the readers. The journalist's monopoly over the generation and distribution of media content has been challenged by the advent of the Internet. “The multi-directional model represented by online media has made possible not only the active consumption of journalistic content but also its generation by users. A new character appears in the landscape of new media, a novel mix between user and producer: the *produser*. These active and interconnected actors select, rank, produce and distribute online content likely to capture interest” (Sălcudean, 2015: 25, *translation mine*). This de-monopolization of information as a consequence of cheap and non-discriminatory access to technology has altered the balance of forces on the stage of public communication, in the sense of its liberalization and democratization. Traditional media is losing ground, being successfully competed by cohorts of amateur producers. Through the possibility for the anonymous crowd to challenge the status quo of media communication by producing their own contents, on their own channels: blog, videoblog, microblog, social networks, Web 2.0 promises to be the freest and most dynamic space of expression. New media are considered essential in facilitating people's access to democratic debate within the public sphere, which is undergoing structural transformations, in the sense of its openness and multipolarity (Habermas, 2005).

However, this promise of emancipation should not be taken for granted, because the Internet comes with its own challenges and forms of entrapment. Its interactive and contentious communicative potential is limited by the nature of human relationships and social and political structures (Papacharissi, 2002). On the one hand, the desire for political and social activism, for participation in the public life of users is rather marginal, compared to the need for information, entertainment or socialization. On the other hand, online communication highlights the risk of ghettoization and fragmentation of the public space into hermetic tribal communities, unwilling to communicate and deliberate. Web 2.0 connects people with other people, giving them a sense of belonging to a community that hold dear the same values.

Informational echo chambers are closed structures that do not allow for the free circulation of information.

These forms of social aggregation in the online environment stem from the affiliation of individuals to groups that share similar ideas, values, and worldviews, which, in the absence of the possibility of serious challenge from the outside, creates the false perception that these ideas are universally accepted. In addition to this problem there is the digital competence gap between different segments of Internet users, which limits the access of some categories to the public sphere or affects their ability to correctly interpret information. Despite its unprecedented openness, digital communication is as vulnerable as traditional forms of communication to the interventions of elites and power structures, which, especially in authoritarian regimes, can take the shape of surveillance and monitoring of dissent, individual repression, censorship and blocking of access, or information intoxication and propaganda. All these aspects tend to overshadow the overly optimistic view of the liberating power of networks in political deliberation: “Technology alone cannot change the world – it requires human agency. From the optimistic perspective, digital platforms do provide opportunities for empowerment for those who seek to find unbiased information, share diverse and unorthodox opinions, express their nonconventional views, connect with the like-minded politicised individuals and mobilise for action (Denisova, 2016). Politically active people utilise the technology as one of the tools that helps them to reach their goals (van Niekerk et al., 2011), similar to how they employ posters, petitions, rallies and meetings” (Denisova: 15).

Despite the relativization of the ability of social networks to guarantee the emancipation of the powerless, a number of intrinsic and technological design features of the online ecosystem increase opportunities for civil participation in political deliberation. The Internet is the depository of an immense amount of information that is available to users and that cannot be completely censored by the interventions of the authorities. This information constitutes the basis of a latent civic consciousness, which can be activated in favourable circumstances. At the same time, online communication platforms supply fast and reliable connections to individuals and groups, providing them with a technological infrastructure that allows them to increase visibility, facilitate communication and awareness of belonging to a community with the same concerns. The Internet increases the visibility of challenging ideas and protects their authors by ensuring their anonymity. The Internet is a favorable environment for the development of various forms of political activism (attachment of symbols to the profile picture, crowdfunding campaigns) and for new genres of creative communication (hashtags, tweets, snaps, memes).

In this context, memes are unconventional tools that people can employ for political purposes. Based on suggestive images and symbols capable of stirring strong emotions, memes are valuable persuasive tools of communication campaigns. Creatively recycling elements of mass culture into discursive formulas that range from ironic subversion to partisan propaganda, memes jam the dominant discourse, challenging the established political and social order. Memes belong to the popular culture of the Internet and illustrate to the highest degree collective creativity, the act of production as well as the act of interpretation being decentralized and individual. These characteristics motivate the idea of the autonomy of the memetic phenomenon, of its non-alignment in relation to power.

Anastasia Denisova is one of the authors who point out the idea that politically engaged users use online memes as discursive weapons. The author identifies the generation and sharing of memes as a principle, practice and product of narrative intervention in the hegemonic agenda. Memes allow audiences to initiate a discursive assault on power. We share the opinion of the author quoted above, who considers memes a form of dissent, reading the phenomenon as a modern illustration of the medieval carnival. Denisova conceptualizes memes through the prism of the carnival theory, developed by Russian formalist semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin. In the medieval world dominated by dogmatism, the carnival represented one of the rare occasions of liberation, of opposition against the official tone of ecclesiastical culture. The carnival became noteworthy for its extensive use of various forms of subversion: from vulgarity, to satire and parody, to mockingly question and simulate the official discourse in the form of parodic travesty (Denisova, 2019: 35).

Called by Bakhtin a “utopian realm of community, freedom and egalitarianism” (Bakhtin, 1984), the carnival illustrated the logic of the world turned upside down (*mundus inversus*) and represented a real danger to established hierarchies. Faced with this threat, the medieval authorities confiscated the carnival, officializing it and organizing their own shows glorifying conservative values. Modern extensions of this corrupt form of the medieval carnival might be considered the state-sponsored media and other officially directed festive simulacra whose function is to reinforce the political, social, and moral status quo.

Paramount to medieval culture, the carnivalesque world is the archetypal formula for the online dissent of the digital carnival. The medieval carnival allowed the development in a festive setting of “alternative discourse, multiplicity of styles and heteroglossia”: “The circulation of memes in the digital space creates the carnivalesque vibe and lighthearted resistance: people exchange jokes and share a laugh, comment on society, culture and politics and make arguments on the heated issues. products of the mundane Internet’s folklore, they

nonetheless obtain political connotation and rhetoric strength when deployed against political targets” (Denisova: 36).

Similar to medieval carnival participants, who expressed various social or political grievances under the protection of travesty, social media users can publicly display their disagreement behind various forms of anonymity. Like the medieval mask, the digital persona guarantees users a low degree of exposure of their real identity in the case of online political activism, encouraging dissent. Creating, appreciating and sharing memes thus becomes an easy practice that can successfully bypass attempts at censorship. Contributing to this is the fact that the provenance of memes cannot be easily traced, as they are user-generated creations that belong to no one and to everyone at the same time. Censorship is also put to the test by the vague, indirect and allusive character of these cultural artifacts.

Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan, 1964) formulated the theory of technological determinism, talking about a decisive influence of communication technologies on human life at the individual and social level. Habermas (Habermas, 2005) linked the birth of the critical consciousness of the public sphere to the emergence of the independent press. This medium replaced the coffeehouses and drawing rooms where an early culture of rationality and debate had been consolidated, helping to coagulate the civic sense and to create and strengthen the political competence of ordinary people. Power thus became public and subject to contestation. We believe that the two theories can overlap, in that the evolution of communication technologies can be linked to the process of changing the configuration and relationships of political life.

The opening of the public sphere continues as we speak, with the refinement of communication networks and the emergence of interactive platforms that provide support for the expression of public opinion. The agora moves to the electronic environment, where forums, comment sections, discussion groups, and social networks take over the functions of control and supervision of political power. We can state, without exaggeration, that online discussion groups, comment sections of articles in the electronic press are the natural heirs of the cafes, clubs and literary salons of the past, specifying that absolutely anyone, regardless of material status or social class, is free to express their opinions. As a result of the current spectacular orientation of communication media towards interactivity, the current public sphere appears to us more decentralized and freer than ever.

It is doubtless that the information society, characterized by diversity and openness, subtly puts its imprint on people's mentality, as well as on the way they interact and look at the world. It is the first time in the history of humankind that we can no longer question the

existence of any technological barrier or any monopoly on the market of ideas and knowledge that prevents the expression of alternative visions, cultural and political elements, however local, peripheral and eccentric they may be. Millions of individuals whose access can no longer be restricted by censorship or administrative measures enjoy real-time access to information, becoming in turn relays of its propagation or even authors. The Internet is a catalyst for creativity and critical thinking, encouraging the dissolution of the boundary between the producer and consumer of information and cultural goods and allowing for the manifestation of antagonisms that would otherwise remain latent. This type of multipolar information society inevitably also changes the rules of the political game. The Internet has become a formidable political tool of the authorities and of the citizens as well. We are particularly interested in approaching this phenomenon under its latter aspect. We believe that the emergence of new technologies represents a factor of additional democratization of the public sphere, shifting the focus to intensive participation in debates that discuss topics of public interest.

Propaganda and resistance in social media, in the context of the war in Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, which meant a sharp escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that had begun in 2014. The invasion began in the early hours of the morning when Putin announced with a serious and threatening tone a “special military operation” for the “demilitarization and denazification” of Ukraine. From the first gunshots to the present, the warring parties have engaged in a war of attrition fought both on the battlefield and in the trenches of social media. The stake of this latter battle is to legitimize one’s own version of the truth. The online environment has become the space for discursive articulation of different projects and visions about social reality. Since the early stages of the conflict, internet memes have been used as discursive weapons, fueling through successive remixes the escalation of guerilla warfare waged on social networks. The Ukrainians and their sympathizers around the world have been very creative in their action to undermine the Russian hegemonic discourse.

The Russian assault on Ukraine was prepared by an intense barrage of Russian propaganda, through state-controlled audiovisual and online media. One of the rhetorical lines of this propaganda action, which we shall analyze next, links the nationalist idea of the moral, spiritual and military superiority of the Russian Federation to the cult of the providential leader who rules over the destiny of the nation with an iron fist. According to this narrative, the leader is an incarnation of the State. The cult of the strong leader derives from a long authoritarian tradition of Russia: during the Middle Ages, the absolute power of the tsar was justified by

divine right, the monarch not being subject to any human authority and later, in the Soviet era, the image of the leader stood at the center of a cult of personality, who portrayed him as the father of the nation.

Today, Vladimir Putin embodies the State, being the providential man meant to defend the nation from internal and external threats. The Russian president's press office has built him an energetic, resolute and virile public identity: "Putin has orchestrated multiple public appearances in various adventurous settings that allowed him to flash his skills at 'masculine' activities. He flew with cranes, rode a horse with a bare chest, found time-worn pottery shards on the seabed, fired a sleeping drug into a Siberian tiger and plunged to the bottom of the ocean in a submarine. The Daily Mail granted him a comparison with the Bond villain, ironically reflecting on Putin's allusion to being a president-action hero (...)" (Denisova, 2019: 66).

Unlike Stalin, who promoted himself as the father of the nation, Putin's public portrayal is heavily sexualized and brutal. Putin's machismo is linked to the need to justify the monopolization of power. Consequently, the memetic references of Putin's adulatory camp portray him as the alpha male, a virile and accomplished heterosexual, an action hero who authoritatively dominates his effeminate and promiscuous opponents on the local and international political scene. The qualities that recur in the construction of Vladimir Putin's public persona are health, strength and stability. All these data compose the force lines of the hegemonic discourse.

It is not desultory that one of the main directions of attack of memes criticizing Russia's action in Ukraine has Vladimir Putin in its crosshairs. Expressions of carnivalesque resistance, Ukrainian memes desecrate the image of the Russian leader, remixing in a parodic note the component elements of the hegemonic discourse that are processed according to a logic of overturned values. The cult of Putin is humorously undermined by dynamiting the very fundamental traits from which it was so painstakingly constructed: power, masculinity, moral purity, and love of animals.

A series of memes associate Putin with Adolf Hitler. In the gallery of monstrous figures of humanity, Hitler occupies a leading place and any association with Hitler is dishonorable. The combination of the two results in a new hybrid species of dictator, which goes by the name Putler and borrows the historical figure's iconic moustache. The analogy is motivated by the dictatorial reflexes of the Russian leader and his habit of annexing the territories of neighboring countries: "The comparison to Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler can be attention-grabbing and powerful. (...) On the other hand, drawing a comparison to Hitler and labelling one as a Nazi has become common place in political rhetoric" (Denisova, 2019: 134).

A line of memetic evolution ridicules the hyper-masculinized image of the Kremlin leader. The virile posture of the Russian president, riding a horse bare-chested, is subjected to parodic processing through the call to hyperbole or, on the contrary, to litotes: Putin is represented either riding a bear, one of the emblematic references of the Russian identity discourse, or riding on a bird. The derision of netizens knows no bounds: Putin's ridiculously long table, used as an element of protocol meant to symbolically mark the coldness of diplomatic relations with Western leaders, or as a not-so-subtle symbol of machismo, becomes the stage on which a surrealist spectacle unfolds, where the absurd meets the Christian miracle.

One by one, a pair of figure skaters perform on the protocol table, a tennis match is held, or the Last Supper is eaten. The digital carnival of demeaning the king continues with the placement of Putin in the role of anti-heroes from the cinematic universe: "I will not give my precious Russia to anyone," says Putin portrayed as Gollum, from "The Lord of the Rings", an emblematic character of popular culture, consumed by his passion for power. In another pose, Putin takes on the robe of the head of a mafia clan that applies criminal methods to global politics. The image of strength and prestige projected by the Russian leader is challenged by the "Sadimir Putin" meme series, in which the Russian leader is portrayed in a moment of human weakness, shedding tears. Developments of the same genetic lineage are the "Gladimir Putin" and "Madimir Putin" memes. The challenging potential of the apparently innocent attempts to humanize the tsar from the Kremlin was noticed by the Russian authorities in the field of communications and technologies, who instituted a ban on portraying people (politicians) in poses that are alien to their personality.

Conclusions

Interpreting the roles, the situation or the subject of communication may vary in accordance with the meaning system through which the individuals interpret their own social condition. Cultural studies (Hartley, 1982) propose three codes of interpretation, which purportedly correspond to the way in which a mass media message can be read depending on the ideological positioning of its receiver. We adapt these interpretation systems to social heteroglossia, talking about the existence of three codes that structure discursive relations:

- a dominant code, which bears the dominant values of society and structures the non-conflictual, conservative discursive exchanges, which do not question either the roles, the situation or the subject of the communication;

- a negotiated code, in which the dominant values and the structure of society are subject to re-evaluation and improvement, and which we believe would characterize the discursive interaction based on a conditional agreement;

- an oppositional code, in which the dominant version about social reality, about the roles of actors and the structure of relationships is contested, which we believe would be the basis of discursive interactions marked by strong disagreement and conflict.

As a point of intersection of these three codes, memes function as an instrument of political deliberation in the digital society, as an illustration of social heteroglossia. Popular culture is a place where the dominant ideology constantly crosses paths with resistances that it strives to eliminate. Using the material made available by the hegemonic discourse, memes expose the falsity of official conventions, deconstructing them from within.

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