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MEMES VERSUS VIRALS

The closest neighbor of the meme concept in both popular and academic discourse is “viral.” While many people use the terms interchangeably, I would like to highlight the difference between them. In a recent article, Jeff Hemsley and Robert Mason provide a comprehensive definition of “virality.” They describe it as “a word-of-mouth-like cascade diffusion process wherein a message is actively forwarded from one person to other, within and between multiple weakly linked personal networks, resulting in a rapid increase in the number of people who are exposed to the message.”¹ The three key attributes of virality, according to these authors, are (1) a person-to-person mode of diffusion; (2) great speed, which is enhanced by social media platforms; and (3) broad reach, which is achieved by bridging multiple networks. Hemsley and Mason, like other scholars researching virality, identify it as a certain diffusion process in which *a specific item* propagates in a

certain way. This item is often tagged as a “viral video,” “viral ad,” or “viral photo.”

The main difference between Internet memes and virals thus relates to variability: whereas the viral comprises *a single cultural unit* (such as a video, photo, or joke) that propagates in many copies, an Internet meme *is always a collection of texts*. You can identify a single video and say “This is a viral video” without referring to any other text, but this would not make much sense when describing an Internet meme. A single video is not an Internet meme but *part* of a meme— one manifestation of a group of texts that together can be described as the meme. Going back to “Leave Britney Alone,” I would argue that Chris Crocker’s video can be defined as a viral video that became a memetic video only with the emergence of its derivatives.² As elaborated in chapter 3, the “Leave Britney Alone” meme is composed of many videos. In a narrow, technical sense, both viral and memetic videos can be seen as adhering to Dawkins’s idea of memes in that they spread gradually from person to person. However, memetic content is closer to the original idea of the meme as a living and changing entity that *is incorporated in the body and mind of its hosts*.

But this straightforward differentiation fails to capture the complex relationship between memes and virals. In pursuit of a more nuanced distinction, I put forward two assertions. First, we should think of the viral and the

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memetic as two ends of a dynamic spectrum rather than as a binary dichotomy. In fact, purely viral content probably does not exist—once a photo, or a video, reaches a certain degree of popularity on the Web, you can bet that someone, somewhere, will alter it. Moreover, there is a strong temporal element lurking here: many memetic videos started off as viral ones. Thus, if we think of the viral and the memetic as two ends of a dynamic spectrum, a more accurate differentiation would be threefold: (1) a *viral*: a single cultural unit (formulated in words, image or video) that is spread by multiple agents and is viewed by many millions. A “viral” may or may not have derivatives (see, for example, the Kony 2012 campaign, <http://invisiblechildren.com/kony/>, or the Evian Roller Babies, <http://youtu.be/XQcVIIWpwGs>); (2) a *founder-based meme*: an Internet meme that is sparked by a specific (often viral) text, video, or photo (such as “The Situation Room” or the “Pepper-Spraying Cop”). The “founding” unit is followed by many versions, each viewed by fewer people; and (3) an *egalitarian meme*: comprising many versions that seem to have evolved simultaneously without a clear founding text. As I will elaborate in chapter 7, egalitarian memes are often based on a certain formula or genre. Such memes are characterized by a more even popularity distribution between the various versions. Rage comics, LOLCats, and “Hitler’s Downfall Parodies” would be examples of this category.

Table 1 Virals, founder-based, and egalitarian memes.

	Viral	Founder-based meme	Egalitarian meme
Number of versions	One*	Many	Many
Distribution of popularity	Millions of viewers of initial video	One (often viral) clip/photo that initiated the meme is by far the most popular	Popularity spreads quite evenly among numerous versions
Focus of derivatives		People relate to a specific photo or video	People relate to a certain formula
User involvement	Meta-comments	Modifying the text	Modifying the text
Examples	Evian Roller Babies	“Leave Britney Alone”	LOLCats

*When a viral generates many derivatives it can also be described as memetic.

My second assertion is that we should think of Internet memes and virals as different modes of engagement rather than as passive versus active formulations. Although it could be argued that viral diffusion is a more passive mode of communication than memetic imitation, I assert that both viral and memetic content involve engaged communication, albeit associated with different

engagement levels. In the case of the viral, the communication may involve personalized meta-comments (for example, “Don’t try this at home”), whereas memetic content invites modifications of the text itself.

While Internet memes and virals are similar in many respects, until now these concepts have been used in different ways in academic research. This split may stem from their association with two antithetic framings of communication—*communication as transmission* and *communication as ritual*. Articulated by James Carey in his book *Communication as Culture* (1989), this distinction provides fertile ground for mapping the new meme–viral scholarly landscape. The “transmission” standpoint likens the movement of goods or people in space to the spread of information through mass media. According to this view, communication is mainly a process of imparting information in the hope of augmenting the spread and effect of messages as they travel in space. To communicate effectively, on this view, is to “get your message through” to the masses quickly and without disturbances. By contrast, what Carey calls the “ritual” model defines communication not as the act of imparting information but as the construction and representation of shared beliefs. It highlights the sharedness of values, symbols, and cultural sensibilities that embody what people see as their communities. According to this view, the “message” in communication is not a unit whose reach and effect are easily

traceable, but an ongoing process in which identities and senses of belonging are continually constructed.

Studies of virality tend to embrace the “transmission” model of communication. Virality-focused research—conducted mostly in the fields of marketing and political communication—focus on questions that relate to the diffusion of particular “items.” They ask how and to what degree virals spread, investigate the factors that enhance their effectiveness, and chart the power structures underpinning this process. A prevalent question in politically oriented studies is what role do blogs and other social media play in the viral process—comparing it to the role played by established mass media outlets. For instance, in chapter 8 I will survey studies led by Kevin Wallsten and by Karine Nahon and her colleagues that focus on the diffusion of political clips in the 2008 US presidential campaign, and the role that official campaigners and bloggers had in augmenting the viral process.³ In contrast, marketing-oriented studies—such as Phelps’s and Berger and Milkman’s analysis, discussed in chapter 6—tend to focus not on the processes or power structures underpinning viral diffusion but on successful strategies for viral marketing.

The handful of studies focusing on Internet memes (rather than virals) seems to be linked more strongly to Carey’s second framing of communication as ritual. Such studies reflect the notion that memetic activities play an

important role in constructing shared values in contemporary digital cultures. Treating memes as cultural building blocks, they attempt to understand people's memetic choices, as well as the meanings they ascribe to memes. The scholarship produced by Jean Burgess, Michele Knobel, Colin Lankshear, Patrick Davidson, and Ryan Milner—cited in various chapters of this book—reflects this fledging research trajectory.

An interesting way to move forward would be to invert the ways in which we study memes and virals, looking at viral content in terms of ritual, and examining memetic content in terms of transmission. In practice, this would require the evaluation of viral videos not only in terms of success or effectiveness but also in terms of their cultural implications and role in the formation of social and political identities. By contrast, an inspection of Internet memes from a transmission standpoint would focus on success factors and diffusion patterns. Such a “transmission”-oriented approach toward Internet memes is currently apparent mostly in the fields of information and computer science. Research there tends to focus on verbal memes, such as quotes, hash tags, or catchphrases, looking into the changes they undergo and the underlying factors that influence this process—such as utterance length and the source of the quote.⁴

In sum: while the borderline between “memes” and “virals” may be fuzzy, and in fact many videos and images

are associated with both categories (by first spreading virally and then spawning numerous derivatives), it is still worth differentiating between them. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate that this distinction is especially useful when we think of the factors that motivate people to *share* content as opposed to those that augment users' tendency to *engage with it creatively*.

