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## **Internet memes – creation, distribution, social meaning**

### **KEY WORDS**

internet meme, internet, internet users, mass media, participatory culture

### **ABSTRACT**

The messages known as internet memes become an important phenomena in contemporary culture. These are various pictures, films or texts and their remixes. Internet users send these messages to each other regardless of institutional media broadcasters. They create and broadcast internet memes using the digital technologies and the Internet. The internet memes may be sometimes comments to public affairs or manifestations of engagement in some spheres of culture.

### **A short characteristic of the phenomenon**

The notion of “internet memes” is most commonly used to describe certain kinds of information disseminated among the Internet users by themselves. This information may include pictures, films (usually short), video clips, graphics, texts, quotes, animations, as well as their various combinations (e.g. captioned pictures). Internauts either send them directly to other people or post them at websites created for this purpose, internet forums, or community sites, where other users may access them. The term “internet memes” refers also to some customs among internauts, modes of expression, as well as recurring motives and conversation topics.

The term “meme” is much older than the Internet itself. It was introduced by Richard Dawkins in 1976, in the book titled *The selfish gene*, to describe a basic unit of cultural evolution, analogous to gene in the biological evolution<sup>1</sup>. Memetics, the theoretical discipline founded by Dawkins, claims that memes—similar to genes—spread, undergo mutations and replications, and their survival depends on natural selection. In the circles of social sciences memetics was received with significant distance, mostly due to its proposition negating the role of humans as conscious creators of culture, but also because of abortive attempts at applying biological theories to explain cultural phenomena. Jerzy Szacki points out that Dawkins, putting forward his “otherwise quite weird concepts”, actually admitted the

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<sup>1</sup> R. Dawkins, *The selfish gene*, Oxford–New York 1976. Polish edition: *Idem, Samolubny gen*, Warszawa 1996.

existence of cultural issues which cannot be explained by biology alone<sup>2</sup>. However, memetics tries to do it in a fairly risky way, transferring mechanical biological theories into the sphere of culture.

Nonetheless, the phenomenon of internet memes has little in common with the memes as Dawkins understood them. The most important difference is that in the former case the word “memes” defines a certain class of objects, and a certain theoretical construct in the latter. It is also difficult to recognize internet memes as an empirical illustration of Dawkins’ theory, as they result from the combination of various cultural components and are not distinctive cultural “atoms” (which is arguably what Dawkins considered as memes); moreover, they are products of human creativity. Each day a plethora of new memes is created, the vast majority of which is soon forgotten. Memes which function for several years are exceptions, and even they pass into oblivion after time. There is no indication, however, that the longevity of internet memes is subject to the laws of natural selection. It is difficult to point out the internet memes which would survive longer due to their excellent adaptation to the environment; moreover, it is unknown what environment is supposed to mean in this context. There is more to these two notions—internet memes and memes as understood by memetic theory—that divides than unites them.

Apparently the only thing they have in common is the idea of dissemination. Perhaps it is because of it that the term “meme” was adapted for the sphere of internet communication. It should be also stressed that it is the dissemination of information between people without any institutional intermediaries, established by authorities, who would produce and distribute internet memes (just like editors prepare messages distributed in the mass media). The messages which people disseminate this way among themselves must be attractive to them: funny, curious, and drawing their attention at least for some time. According to Dawkins, they are the carriers of memes, and themselves are in some respects similar to viruses: the interest of the recipient can be compared to her mind being infected, and her repeating the interesting information to other people is not unlike infecting them with a virus<sup>3</sup>. It is also worth mentioning that, shortly after the publication of the article by Dawkins on the “viruses of the mind”, a comparison between viruses and certain information—as varied as jokes, urban

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<sup>2</sup> J. Szacki, *Socjobiologia i psychologia ewolucyjna* [Evolutionary sociobiology and psychology], in: A. Jasińska-Kania, L.M. Nijakowski, J. Szacki, M. Ziółkowski (sci. eds), *Współczesne teorie socjologiczne* [Modern sociological theories], Warszawa 2006, p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> R. D Dawkins, *Viruses of the Mind*, in: B. Dahlbom (ed.), *Dennett and His Critics Demistifying Mind*, Cambridge 1991; as quoted in: P. Levinson, *Nowe nowe media* [New new media], Kraków 2010, p. 117.

legends, ideas, or religions—appeared in the science-fiction novel *Snow crash* by Neal Stephenson.

When speaking about the Internet in colloquial language, the word *viral* is virtually synonymous with an internet meme. What matters in both cases is information passed by people to one another via the Internet, without the participation of any specialized institution, sometimes on a significant scale. This information is intriguing, interesting, often fun in its own way. As Mirosław Pęczak wrote in his ironic commentary in “Polityka”, the most important trait of an internet meme is its infectiousness, which is probably why all messages from the “funny” category circulating in the internet are referred to as such—for laughing is often infectious<sup>4</sup>.

### **The predecessors of internet memes and the involvement of the media in their dissemination**

Internet memes are obviously neither the first nor the only kind of message disseminated directly among people. Since time immemorial people told each other various stories. This way myths, legends, and tales about real or fictitious characters circulated in a society. In a traditional society, reciprocal storytelling was the primary way of spreading information. This situation was radically changed only with the spread of the mass media.

The classical model of mass communicating, described by Harold Lasswell in 1948, assumes that a small number of specialized, official broadcasting institutions transmits professionally prepared, standard messages to a large, dispersed, and relatively passive mass of recipients. The trait of this model which comes to the fore is its unidirectionality<sup>5</sup>. The sender is the active party in the communicating process: she chooses information, creates messages, and explains the reality. The ability to speak in the mass media is seen as a privilege, attainable only to those who have formal competences (e.g. vocational education) or particular achievements, serve significant social roles, or at least have capital at their disposal.

The mass media became the most important channel of distributing information in large, modern societies of the industrial era, to which the term *Gesellschaft* can be applied, coined by Ferdinand Tönnies<sup>6</sup>. In his view, such a society is characterized by atomization of

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<sup>4</sup> M. Pęczak, *Mięsny jeż, mięsny jeż, też się ciesz* [Meat hedgehog, meat hedgehog, you'll enjoy it], “Polityka” 2012, No. 14, p. 106.

<sup>5</sup> H. Lasswell, *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society*, [in:] L. Bryson (ed.), *The Communication of Ideas*, New York 1948.

<sup>6</sup> F. Tönnies, *Wspólnota i stowarzyszenie: Rozprawa o komunizmie i socjalizmie jako empirycznych formach kultury* [Community and society: A treatise on communism and socialism as empirical forms of culture], Warszawa 1988.

individuals, scarcity of communal ties, as well as formal and material character of social relations. It was the mass media that enabled the emergence, and then integration and unification of such societies<sup>7</sup>. It may be said that thanks to their significant range the means of mass communication shape the common identity of a society. The media became professionally involved not only in the dissemination of information but also explanation of reality, commenting on current events, promoting norms and values important for the society, and providing fun and entertainment<sup>8</sup>.

The existence of messages specially prepared by sender institutions and served through media does not preclude, obviously, the existence of messages which people would pass between one another without involving the mass media, even on a large scale. These include, for instance, various rumours, hearsay, jests, jokes, or so-called urban legends<sup>9</sup>. The origin of all messages of this type is difficult to determine. It can also be assumed that they do not reflect the reality but rather contain some vague seed of truth and are the gauge of problems, tensions, and moods present in a given society<sup>10</sup>. They are more commentaries to the reality than accounts of it. They were all, initially, strictly verbal in character and, while one could think it should have radically limited their range, actually even before the internet age they used to spread throughout whole countries or cultural circles (like the Polish urban legend about the black Volga car allegedly used to kidnap children), and even worldwide (like many jokes and urban legends which have successfully crossed even the linguistic barrier).

The messages of this kind are spread primarily directly between people, in every-day conversations, and also through the Internet since it has become popular. Sometimes they appear in the official mass media as well, for which they are a convenient tool to facilitate fulfilling their function (e.g., they may support the media as the commentator of present events). According to Klaus Thiele–Dohrmann, it was the mass media that showed how strong the hunger for novelty is among people<sup>11</sup>. While the media may create them sometimes, they more frequently make use of ready information of vague origin and uncertain reliability circulating among people, like rumours and hearsay. It turns out that such practices

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<sup>7</sup> A. Kłoskowska, *Kultura masowa: Krytyka i obrona* [Mass culture: Criticism and defense], Warszawa 1980, p. 206–207.

<sup>8</sup> Cf.: T. Goban–Klas, *Media i komunikowania masowe. Teorie i analizy prasy, radia, telewizji i Internetu* [Media and mass communication: Theories and analyses of the press, radio, television, and Internet], Warszawa 2004; D. McQuail, *Teoria komunikowania masowego* [McQuail's mass communication theory], Warszawa 2007.

<sup>9</sup> This term was coined in 1968 by the American folklorist Richard Dorson to describe stories circulated among people, involving apparently plausible but fictitious events, usually dramatic, dangerous, strange, and disturbing. Cf.: e.g. D. Czubała, *Wokół legendy miejskiej* [About the urban legend], Bielsko-Biała 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Cf.: K. Thiele–Dohrmann, *Psychologia plotki* [Psychology of rumour], Warszawa 1980, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 64.

are not characteristic only to the tabloids and the media specialized in spreading rumours. They can also appear in the so-called opinion-making media, meant paradoxically to increase their veracity in the eyes of the recipients, since if a given medium uses rumours, it is seen as one close to people, trustworthy, and avoiding the “high-up coteries”<sup>12</sup>.

Many messages of this type—not unlike internet memes—have a clearly visible ludic aspect. They are meant to amuse the recipients, or at least interest and intrigue them. Even more so, one of the tasks of the mass media is to provide recipients with entertainment and fun. Therefore, many media messages are composed with this very function in mind. These may include images containing ironic comments on the reality, entertainment programs, or reports from satirists’ performances. The senders may invent the jokes appearing in the media by themselves but they can also take advantage of ready messages “circulating among people”. It happens sometimes, then, that popular jokes, for example, are being printed in the entertainment columns in the press or told by professional cabaret performers, whose appearances are transmitted by the media.

If such messages are presented, commented on, or even ridiculed in the media, they become all the more popular. Thus, the media can undoubtedly facilitate the dissemination of messages which people pass between one another without them. Therefore, the multilateral interpersonal communication can be turned by the media into the unilateral transfer, characteristic of mass communication, but the opposite situation is also possible. Messages, professionally created by media senders may enter the social circulation and be repeated long after their first appearance in the mass media (like, for example, quotes from some commercials or dialogues from the comedy films and series by Stanisław Bareja).

### **The specificity of creating internet memes**

There are multiple similarities between internet memes and such forms of messages as rumour, joke, or urban legend. The first is the difficulty in ascertaining their origin. The authors of internet memes usually remain unknown. One can only guess who they are and why they create memes.

Internet memes are probably one of the most popular forms of the internauts’ own creativity. Their abundance and popularity may lead to a conviction that almost all users are involved in creating these messages. This impression is strengthened by the comments about

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<sup>12</sup> A. Wagner, *Plotka jako narzędzie kształtowania rzeczywistości społecznej. Afera Rywina w dyskursie prasowym* [Rumour as the tool for shaping the social reality: The Rywin scandal in press discourse], “*Studia Socjologiczne*” 2006, No. 4.

the memes appearing in the media, like “the Internet commented”, “internauts said”, or “the internet community expressed its opinion”. It should be stressed, however, that the users who use the Internet in an active and creative way are a tiny minority of all internauts. Trying to estimate their possible number, Jakob Nielsen, PhD in information science and a specialist in the usability and functionality of websites, formulated the principle of participation inequality. It states that 90% of all users are passive recipients of information available in the Internet and do not add anything of their own; 9% sporadically produce their own messages and post them in the web; and only 1% of the most active users create original content in a constant and purposeful manner<sup>13</sup>. Nielsen created his rule, among others, thanks to comparing the statistics of internet access and the number of created blogs, as well as the number of unique users of Wikipedia and the official number of the contributors shown by the encyclopaedia itself. Moreover, the researcher referred to a survey of Usenet discussion groups, which revealed that 25% of all messages in this old network were created by 3% of its user population. This percentage ratio should be treated conventionally, especially that it is likely to change in time. It seems, however, that Nielsen grasped a very important phenomenon: the significant majority of internauts remain recipients, in the traditional meaning of the word, who look for ready products, services, and information in the Internet. The active authors are relatively few, even though it is they who lead the discourse and cultural changes related to the Internet.

Similar conclusions flow from the “Diagnosis of the Internet” research (Pol. *Diagnoza Internetu*), carried out in Poland in 2008 and 2009<sup>14</sup>. It turns out that only a part of internet users make active use of the web (the authors of the study called them the Creators). The major part of the users (called in turn Observers and Consumers) use the Internet as a source of information and a means of maintaining contact with other people. The Creators are active participants in the life of internet forums, write blogs, comment on current events, as well as publish the products of their work there (including, one may suspect, also internet memes). It should be stressed as well that all creative activities in the web are dominated by young people (which was confirmed e.g. by the Polish “World Internet Project” research in 2012)<sup>15</sup>.

Creators are people gifted with creative energy, so one may suppose they would realize their passions even without the internet or—speaking more broadly—digital technologies, even though they make it much simpler. Such an observation points out the

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<sup>13</sup> J. Nielsen, *Participation Inequality: Encouraging More Users to Contribute*, 9.10.2006, [http://www.useit.com/alertbox/participation\\_inequality.html](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/participation_inequality.html) [accessed: 27 Oct 2011].

<sup>14</sup> K. Krejtz (sci. ed.), *Diagnoza Internetu* [Diagnosis of the Internet], Warszawa 2009.

<sup>15</sup> *World Internet Project: Poland*, Agora SA and Orange Polska, Warszawa 2012.

great significance of “because motives” (to use the typology suggested by Alfred Schütz<sup>16</sup>) among the motivations which may drive the internet authors, including the creators of internet memes as well. On the other hand, the intention to amuse the recipients or to comment current events may be an important goal of creating internet memes (a “in-order-to motive”). The desire of recognition and publicity, in turn, most likely plays a lesser role, since the authors of internet memes usually remain anonymous. It may be an important motivation to spread memes, however, as a positive reaction of other users to an amusing picture or film may result in a positive attitude to the person sending such materials.

The creation of such messages as internet memes was made possible by digital technologies. They allow all information (graphics, photographs, video, sound, text, etc.) to be translated into the language of numeric data, understandable for computers. They can be recorded as modules, which can be put together at random, divided, and combine into larger wholes<sup>17</sup>. It should be stressed here that the evolution of computer technologies made such operations relatively simple even for computer laypeople. The content created in this way can then be freely disseminated among people thanks to the peculiar communication properties of the Internet<sup>18</sup>. The researchers of these phenomena, like Lev Manovich and Manuel Castells, believe that the ability to recombine data composing the transferred content, the ease of combining and transforming them, and the flexibility of dissemination are the essence of a new communication reality. It is in this reality that the internet memes could emerge.

It is worth to note that in the situation described by these researchers a message is never a complete whole but undergoes endless transformations. Similarly to direct communication, in internet communication everybody can change something in a given message, remove something from it, or add to it something from herself. This includes internet memes as well. They are messages open to change, like e.g. urban legends. During the transfer of a meme, its initial information may undergo modifications introduced by subsequent users. Sometimes the original meme is created as a certain scheme of a work or action, which is then filled by users with the content they have created. This is the case of the famous LOLcats meme, or the idea to create images of cats with captions written in poor English. A great number of individual “works” was created based on this scheme.

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<sup>16</sup> A. Schütz, *Potoczna i naukowa interpretacja ludzkiego działania* [Common-sense and scientific interpretation in human action], in: E. Mokrzycki (ed.), *Kryzys i schizma: Anty-scjentystyczne tendencje w socjologii współczesnej* [Crisis and schism: Anti-scientific tendencies in modern sociology], Warszawa 1984, p. 158

<sup>17</sup> L. Manovich, *Język nowych mediów* [The language of new media], Warszawa 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Cf.: M. Castells, *Spoleczeństwo sieci* [The Rise of Network Society], Warszawa 2007, p. 78–84

It should be added as well that many internet memes come to be not as a result of conscious and planned creative activity but randomly, in course of internet conversations, or due to someone's spontaneous idea. This is why so many memes appeared for the first time on internet forums. One of the most important ones in this regard is the 4Chan.org forum. It was established in 2003 as a forum for the fans of manga and anime, yet with time it was transformed into a peculiar Hyde Park of the Internet, where content related to various subject may be published, often vulgar and iconoclastic but sometimes also ironic and funny. It was at the 4Chan.org forum that such memes as the abovementioned LOLcats and Rickrolling were born. (The latter is a practical joke in which a participant of an internet discussion is being referred to a website supposedly containing interesting information, while all that actually is there is a video clip with the song *Never gonna give you up* by Rick Astley.)

### **The methods of dissemination of internet memes**

Another similarity between internet memes and such messages as jokes and rumours is the method of their dissemination, involving mainly their being repeated by people to one another. With the emergence of the internet, however, this method gained a new dimension. The Internet combines some of the characteristics of individualized and mass communication. It is so because it is not indeed a single medium but rather a set of various methods of communicating: from fully personalized (one-to-one) communication to the classic mass communication model (one-to-many). Between these extremes lie various forms of collective communicating (many-to-many)<sup>19</sup>. Many forms of internet communication also allow each user to easily take on the role of the sender whose message will be received by thousands or even millions of recipients. Users are thus offered many opportunities to send information containing memes to other users: they can send them individually to other people (e.g. using email); they can pass them to others during discussions in smaller or larger groups; they can send them on a virtually mass scale as well.

Direct interpersonal communication taking place without the participation of mass media (in which people transfer rumours, hearsay, jokes, and other information as well) means that each person may communicate in a given time only with a limited number of other people. Thanks to the Internet these contacts are not subject to such limitations anymore, and every user can freely and almost immediately establish contact with any number of other users. The sphere of Internet-mediated communication should thus resemble a flat network,

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<sup>19</sup> M. Morris, Ch. Ogan, *The Internet as a Mass Medium*, "Journal of Communication" 1996, No. 46 (1).



which does not contain any communication intermediaries<sup>20</sup>. What distinguishes it from direct communication should be only the scale and speed of communication. In practice, however, it turns out that a large part of users' activity is focused in just a few most significant points, which are the most popular internet sites<sup>21</sup>. It is they that act as intermediaries in internet communication, enabling those who do not have the competences necessary to create a sender organ of their own, like a personal website, to take on the role of senders. They are also useful to online recipients, who want to find the interesting content gathered in one place. It can be said, therefore, that the services which gather information from users, store it, and provide access to it to all the interested parties play the role of peculiar communication and information centres online<sup>22</sup>. The examples of such centres in the present-day Internet may include Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia, and popular websites such as Yahoo! (and, for example, Onet or Wirtualna Polska in Poland).

These centres play an important role in the dissemination of internet memes. Many of them subscribe to the important trend in the present-day Internet, known as Web 2.0, in which it is the role of average users to create, organize, and spread the content available through the network. Prominent websites such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube are filled with content by the users themselves; therefore, they gather and distribute significant amounts of internet memes as well. It is Facebook, above all, which deserves a particular attention here. It is often called the Internet in a nutshell, as it contains within all the important communication traits of the Internet, including the capability of sending messages in various ways and on a varying scale. Accordingly, memes are being posted there in the individual profiles of the users or institutions, where they can be seen by the rest of internauts. The users of the service may also approve of such messages by applying an "I like it!" tag to them, as well as by posting a commentary or spreading the information about that page. Gathering many "likes" makes the promotion of a page easier (which is most important in the case of commercial companies). Particularly amusing or intriguing internet memes are being placed there on purpose, therefore, in order to persuade users to like a given page, which is appropriately called

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<sup>20</sup> Cf.: T. L. Friedman, *Świat jest płaski: Krótka historia XXI wieku* [The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century], Poznań 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Such conclusion was drawn by Albert-László Barabási and his team. He showed that a small number of websites has an enormous number of connections to others (whereas the overwhelming majority of the sites has few such connections). These are the most popular sites and most important to users. Cf.: A.-L. Barabási, E. Bonabeau, *Sieci bezskalowe* [Scale-free networks], „Świat nauki” 2003, No. 06.

<sup>22</sup> We could refer here to the concept of Harold Innis, who believes that every society has a certain system of communication based on the currently predominant medium. There are node points in this system, where the currently available knowledge is being gathered and from which it is passed on. Such points were the mass media for the mass society. Perhaps, the particularly prominent websites may serve as such node points in the present-day society. Cf.: H. Innis, *The bias of communication*, Toronto 1991.

“begging for likes”. It should be noted here as well that Facebook—and other community websites as well—interfaces other internet sites where memes are being published. In this way they can be spread even faster and more easily, it is also possible to express one’s positive feelings about them.

Referring to the terminology suggested by Chris Anderson<sup>23</sup>, we can say that in the Internet we may observe a “head”, composed of several most prominent centres, and a “long tail”, gathering extremely numerous and yet unusual, often niche communication offers, each of which can gain the interest of only a narrow group of recipients. The structure of the “long tail” is not homogenous, however. Here as well, there are “small centres” composed of sites on similar subjects (or otherwise connected), important and influential centres on a smaller scale, or significant to certain communities or interest groups. It is perfectly illustrated by the “Internet map”, a project created by Ruslan Enikeev, which visualizes the importance of various websites and their position in relation to one another. Each site is represented by a circle—smaller or larger—based on the traffic taking place there. Whereas the distance between individual sites is the function of how often and how many users pass from one to the other<sup>24</sup>. It is clearly visible that besides the “great centre of the Internet”, with Google, Facebook, Yahoo! and YouTube, there are many small centres gathering internet sites dedicated to specific subjects.

This is also the case of internet memes. There are many websites specialized in gathering them. Every user can freely post them there, watch them, express her opinion about them, as well as copy them and pass them along. As can be seen from the “Internet map”, websites enjoying the greatest popularity in Poland include demotywatory.pl, kwejk.pl, and joemonster.com; as well as mistrzowie.org and bash.org.pl, which gather funny quotes from internet discussions. It is not mass popularity, however, as the circles representing these sites are significantly smaller than the circles showing such important websites in Poland as Onet, Wirtualna Polska, and Allegro. On the “Internet map” the websites gathering internet memes and various jokes are close to one another, which means that many users often pass from one of them to another. It can be expected, therefore, that these sites have a (large but not astonishingly huge) public of their own, interested in messages of this kind. Put together, they form a small communication and information centre dedicated to entertainment created by the users themselves.

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<sup>23</sup> Ch. Anderson, *Długi ogon. Ekonomia przyszłości – każdy konsument ma głos* [The long tail: Why the future of business is selling less of more], Warszawa 2008.

<sup>24</sup> See: <http://internet-map.net/> [accessed: 12 Jan 2013].

Finally it should be noted that internet memes sometimes go beyond the Internet itself, entering the direct communication between people, as well as the mass media. Some of them are discussed in the press (for example, the “Polityka” weekly has a special column dedicated to it, called the “Network life”, Pol. *Z życia sieci*), radio, and television. In this case internet portals may also be considered mass media, as in spite of some interactive elements they subscribe to the classic model of mass communication: institutional sender—standard message—mass receiver audience<sup>25</sup>. They often publish selected internet memes. Each important event discussed within this medium is usually illustrated with these peculiar “voices of the internet community”. The portals thus constitute an important link in the process of spreading of internet memes. The memes which have been published there become known also to those who do not visit the abovementioned information and communication centres, specially dedicated to this kind of transfer. This way, the messages which were meant to be spread directly between normal internet users become materials discussed in the mass media as well.

### **Internet memes as an expression of the participatory culture**

The Internet together with digital technologies and the media based on them disturbed the asymmetrical relation, solidified across many years, between the authors and senders of messages, and the receivers of the latter, comprised in the classic model of mass communication. In the mass media it is the sender who is the active party, creates and disseminates messages. There are large institutions specialized in it: publishing houses, film producers, editors, and television stations (according to the Frankfurt school, centres specialized in producing the texts of culture can be referred to as culture industry)<sup>26</sup>. This privileged position of institutional creators and senders is very much the result of the use of carriers of limited capacity by the traditional media. The new media technologies remove this barrier: they make it possible for everyone go become an author and a sender, regardless of formal competences or one’s officially confirmed social role. “A users of electronic applications does not have to call herself an artist to become a creative entity,” remarked Antoni Porczak<sup>27</sup>. Obviously, it does not mean (as has been noted above) that all their users

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<sup>25</sup> Cf.: M. Juza, *Internet jako medium masowe: szanse, zagrożenia, perspektywy* [The Internet as a mass medium: Opportunities, threats, perspectives], “*Studia Medioznawcze*” [Media Studies] 2007, No. 2.

<sup>26</sup> M. Horkheimer, T. Adorno, *Dialektyka oświecenia: Fragmenty filozoficzne* [Dialectic of the Enlightenment: Philosophical excerpts], Warszawa 1994, pp. 136–188.

<sup>27</sup> A. Porczak, *Remiksacja jako metoda odtwarzania kultury* [Remixing as a method to recreate culture], in: P. Celiński (ed.), *Kulturowe kody technologii cyfrowych* [Cultural codes of digital technologies], Lublin 2011, p. 126.

do so. Nevertheless, it constitutes a significant social change involving the democratization of creating and transferring information. People who had so far to content themselves with being passive recipients may now transform existing messages or create their own works based on them. By doing so they become co-creators of the culture transferred by the media. Henry Jenkins described this phenomenon as participatory culture<sup>28</sup>.

The creation and dissemination of internet memes is an important expression of this phenomenon. For their authors, culture (mainly, but not limited to, popular culture) is not a collection of separate, uniform, and complete works but rather—using Lev Manovich’s definition—a database to construct new works by new authors; a collection of content which can be randomly used, put together, remixed, change their content and place them in a different context<sup>29</sup>. Culture understood this way is treated as the common property of all people who come across it, and not just its creators. In the participatory culture, the borders between the creation and sending of content on one hand and its reception on the other become blurred. The reception of a work may mean the readiness to use it, transform it, or co-create it. In this sense, internet memes may be referred to as recipient products, since they are composed solely from quotations, from existing fragments of culture (e.g. films or shows) which the authors of the memes have come across as recipients. Nevertheless, internet memes are new works, and original in their own way.

They often take the form of collage or combination of image and text. Interestingly, however, some memes simply show a work or its fragment without any modifications or comments. This was the case of the Czech song *Jožin z Bažin* and the fragment of the “Holiday diaries” TV show (Pol. *Pamiętniki z wakacji*), which came to be known as “Meat hedgehog” (Pol. *Mięsny jeż*). A question arises in such cases, who is actually the author of such a meme: the author of the original work, the unknown internaut who started to spread it in the web, or the recipient who reads the message in a context different from that planned by the original author. It seems that this kind of message becomes a meme in the process of reception, when the receiver confronts its content with the current context and interprets the intentions of not the original author of said content but rather of someone who posted it in the Internet. Anyway, this kind of doubts regarding the author’s identity are characteristic of the communication in the age of the Internet and digital technologies. In these circumstances, the message is not a complete work of its author but the result of whimsical interpretation by a

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<sup>28</sup> H. Jenkins, *Kultura konwergencji. Zderzenie starych i nowych mediów* [Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide], Warszawa 2007, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> A. Porczak, op. cit., s. 124.

recipient, who is given a collection of contexts, from which she has to create the message by herself<sup>30</sup>.

Moreover, internet memes constitute a peculiar expression of the involvement of their authors in the public issues. Not unlike rumours, jokes, or urban legends, internet memes often comment on the current reality. Every phenomenon broadly discussed in the media—like, for example, a speech of a politician, meteorite impact in Russia, or the abdication of the Pope—cause an immediate flood of internet memes about this subject. Information related to public issues appearing in the mass media become another source of material to the authors of memes. They often combine pop-cultural motifs with the components of the current public and political life, thus opening a new chapter in the history of political satire (collages linking politicians with the fallen Jedi knights or “The Muppet Show” episodes with the voices of politicians have already become classics). Memes may also refer to relatively constant trends and tendencies in the society, such as the consumerist way of life or activities of treat corporations. This way internet memes, just like rumours and jokes, can reflect various moods present in the society and comment on the issues which are important to this society. By doing so, the authors of internet memes take on the role of the creators and commentators of the public discourse, which role was reserved in the mass media for symbolic elites—to use the term proposed by Teun van Dijk<sup>31</sup>—which include journalists, artists, scientists, intellectuals, politicians, and experts, among others. In the age of the Internet, everybody is allowed to take part in the public discourse, regardless of her social roles and formal competences.

What should be stressed, however, is the uneven quality of memes, which are otherwise the expression of the creative capabilities of internauts and their active involvement in culture and public issues. The ability to freely create and disseminate messages by everyone with access to the Internet and digital applications is seen by some scholars with much enthusiasm. They perceive it as the awakening of the creative potential lying dormant in the network and the rebirth of the folk culture created by its participants<sup>32</sup>. On the other hand, however, there is no lack of voices lamenting the fall of the culture which is being co-created by people who do not have appropriate and institutionally confirmed competences<sup>33</sup>. Similar opinions can also be applied to the sphere of internet memes, which may contain apt and valuable commentaries on the current events, but may also be crude and embarrassing. One

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<sup>30</sup> Cf.: T. Miczka, *O zmianę zachowań komunikacyjnych: Konsumenci w nowych sytuacjach audiowizualnych* [On the change of communication behaviour: Consumers in new audiovisual situations], Katowice 2002.

<sup>31</sup> T. van Dijk, *Elite discourse and racism*, Newbury Park 1993.

<sup>32</sup> H. Jenkins, *op. cit.*; Also compare: C. Sharky, *Cognitive surplus. How technology makes consumers into collaborators*, New York 2010

<sup>33</sup> Cf.: A. Keen, *The cult of the amateur: How today's Internet is killing our culture*, New York 2007.

may also fear that the lowest-rate memes will gain widespread acclaim, just like on the press market and in television, where tabloids and simple entertainment shows enjoy the greatest popularity. It is not without reason that the issue of lowering the content level was indicated as the problem of the mass media and the mass culture they convey. Which leads to the question, whether the same problem will also be shared by the Internet.

It seems, however, that the situation of internet memes is different. Unlike the products of mass culture, they are not produced in order to bring profit, therefore they do not have to cater to the tastes of the greatest number of possible recipients, which would affect their quality. Internet users do not have to fight for recipients, as many of the mass media do, often being commercial institutions dependent on the interest of receivers and advertisers. The community of internauts is also different from the homogenous mass that the audience of mass media is usually thought to be. They should be perceived rather as a collection of very different individuals, interested in various content and activities, involved in separate cultural fields, and sometimes also seeking contact with people similar to them and organising themselves into groups of interests. Memes are usually created with just such small groups in mind, composed of recipients sharing peculiar and often niche interests. As a result, many memes are understandable only among certain groups of internauts. Also, many of them (like some rumours and jokes) can be understood only in a specific environment or cultural circle. To take care of the rest, the knowyourmeme.com website was established in 2007. Its authors describe the sources and meanings of many popular memes. In this situation, the heterogeneity of both the community of internauts and the messages available in the Internet seems to be enough to protect from such negative implications of mass scale as lowering the quality of published content and elimination of valuable messages.

### **Summary and conclusions**

Internet memes are yet another kind of messages, whose authors remain vaguely known and which are repeated by people to one another, modifying their content on the way. It is the same way in which myths and legends used to function, later joined by rumours, hearsay, jokes, and urban legends. The mass media could facilitate spreading such messages, yet only to a small extent. Still, an important change was brought about by the internet, which significantly increased the range of communication between ordinary people (without the participation of the mass media) and provided many aids in disseminating this type of messages. Internet memes came to be in this very environment, being the illustration of the communication capabilities of the Internet, as well as the opportunities offered by computer

technologies. Memes are also an excellent illustration of the modern transformations involving media, culture, and society. Beside the traditional mass media, with their strict division between the authors and senders, and recipients of information, there is a growing sphere of internet communication, in which this distinction is blurred. The recipients of the mass media become creators and senders of such messages as internet memes. In doing so, they make use of various content professionally produced by journalists and the “culture industry”. They are the material from which the internet creators produce new content, often commenting on the messages already present in social circulation. This way the recipients of the mass media become co-creators of culture. By transforming the existing and creating new content, reading the intentions of senders, and interpreting their messages they more or less actively participate in the culture which surrounds them. In these circumstances both parties of the social communication processes should rather be referred to as the users of the media and the participants of the culture the media convey.