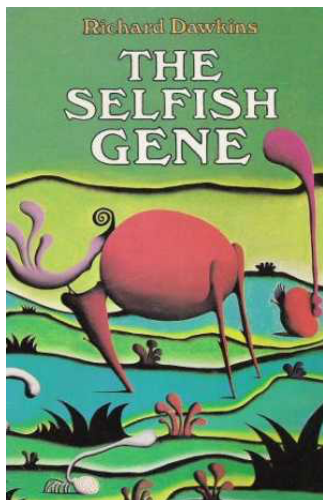


**MEMES AS PLATFORM  
CONTENT**

The history of the meme as object of study is one of its gradual denaturalization

**Dominant forms of platform content**

Virals on YouTube, rants on blogs, tweet storms on Twitter, listicles and scrollytellings on the web (particularly on news sites), long-form on Medium and fake news on Facebook, online content has forms that may be considered platform-specific.<sup>1</sup> Or, in the least, there are emergent genres associated with particular platforms. When considering Twitter one would not think of a listicle, for example.



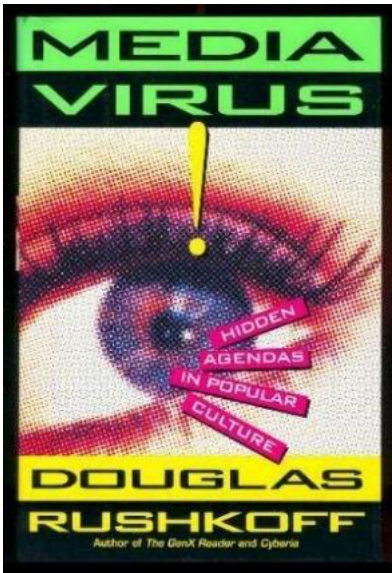
Whilst one could make an argument for each of those forms as of the medium and thus specifically digital culture, the meme stands out. As Limor Shifman argues, it is often considered to be “fundamental to digital culture,” associated with especially the architecture of the Internet and the web, particularly its wetware, to use a throwback term (2014). There is arguably an evolution to the study of the meme over the past forty years from the biological to the cultural, to put it broadly. Since its coining in 1976 by Richard Dawkins, it is an object of study in digital culture that scholars have struggled with, largely because it first appeared as natural or naturalising. It could be argued that meme studies over the past decades could be read as efforts to denaturalise the meme, to rid it of its naturalness, or to shed it of its cultural equivalence to the gene.

**Figure one:** Book cover of Richard Dawkins’s *The Selfish Gene* (1976), where in the final chapter he introduces the meme as cultural equivalent to the gene.

The meme, whether in the scholarly or popular realm, continues to maintain a relationship with the biological, and in particular with the viral. It may be argued that the meme’s relationship with the viral lends it its mystifying quality, through its potential to infect and even zombify consumers, thereby bringing it in line with other manipulative techniques, often from the history of marketing such as subliminal advertising. That is, these days one can study the meme itself as an intriguing object of online culture relevant to many disciplines, but for the media field it also should be placed in the history of media

<sup>1</sup> Meme studies worksheet written by Richard Rogers, 6 January 2017, based on Memes + Virals lecture in *Analyzing Digital Culture*, 28 November 2016.

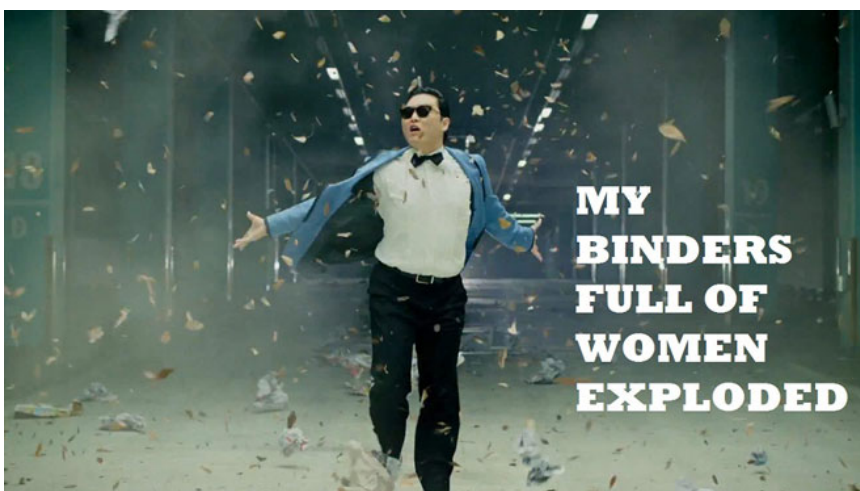
manipulation, media manufacture, and opinion manufacture. The idea that the meme quietly or without our knowing is infecting us on the one hand or manipulating us with agendas on the other may owe to Douglas Rushkoff's work on media as virus, among others (1994). As I come to, the meme as such certainly has become an object of intense scrutiny since the recent U.S. presidential elections of 2016 which also have been described as a meme war, where the question may be posed, did the U.S. just elect a meme (together with a president)?



**Figure two:** Douglas Rushkoff's *Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture*, coverwork, 1994.

Limor Shifman, in her conceptually defining book, called the meme a fundamental aspect of digital culture. Shifman, a contemporary scholar of meme studies, defines a meme as user-created derivatives (plural) of an original piece of content. The meme is thus a collection of content, though with a series of different types, including the subcultural which is particularly germane here. First, 'Charlie bit my finger' (the YouTube video) is of the user-generated, to use a term that now feels dated. It is supposedly funny, but is actually rather pernicious, given the look on Charlie's face after the bite, which perhaps explains its appeal, also in a trolling sense, which I come to. Another type, Gangnam Style, the most popular YouTube video of all times at the moment, is commercial content (a professional music video) that has

come to symbolize a particular contemporary globalising digital culture related to aspirational luxury that effortlessly mixes the western in the Korean (or Asian) and vice versa. But it is able to bring into its global memetic fold pop cultural, political debate moments such as the one between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama in 2012, where Romney remarks that he "went to a number of women's groups to help us find [qualified candidates] and they brought me binders full of women," a short quotation that appears in a Gangnam Style photoshopped image, which Shifman opens her book with (see figure 3).



**Figure three.** Globalising meme culture as exemplified by mixing of Gangnam and Romney's binders full of women. Example by Shifman, 2014.

Memes thus accumulate content around them, and additive content creation is often triggered by one-liners. Memes as media formats are actually two-liners, if viewed as an increasingly standardised

object made by online generators. They are images with two pieces of text, an opening and closing remark, above and below the image, occasionally with a hashtag, or an otherwise brief aphorism that summarises a pithiness one can hold on to. There is a Tumblr page with 'binders full of women' containing a series of serious homemade images protesting against

# DMIR Unit #7 Meme studies

women as filling binders. This again is the idea of memefication, a collection that not only cumulates, but that also can be curated (on a Tumblr or Facebook page).

## **Meme war**

The meme war during the US presidential elections, as curated on such pages as Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash, was actually initially between Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump rather than between Hillary Clinton and Trump, where Sanders was made to fit well into digital culture as dank meme ready and as such was the candidate who could beat Trump, at least in the meme war, given that Trump, through his effective tweeting, became viewed as a natural in the new media, over and above Hillary as manufactured. As a case in point, Hillary Clinton's tweets would end in -h, like an email sign off, albeit lower-cased, so one would know when she has actually tweeted, whereas those without were penned by her campaign team. There were moments in the campaign when one could tell which tweets came from Donald Trump himself only (forensically) because they originated from an Android phone, rather than his campaign staff's from an iPhone. The distinction is significant, for when Trump tweets (however prolifically), it has been considered news.

The third meme type beyond user-generated and globalizing commercial is subcultural, and relates both to the meme war as well as to the specific meme culture surrounding the Trump campaign. Pepe the frog became front and center of the Trump meme, now as a additive collection that includes drain the swamp and make America great again (including hashtagged or coded versions ) as well as variations on Hillary Clinton's one-liner, basket of deplorables (which is similar in form to Romney's binders full of women). Her remarks, like Romney's before hers, triggered memetic cultural production. During the campaign she gradually scaled her attack on Trump, ultimately including naming half of Trump supporters mimetically (emphasis added):

Grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the *basket of deplorables* — right? the racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, islamophobic, you name it.

The basket was laid out. Among the deplorables one notes among them, in a contribution to the Romneysque meme but with new context and urgency, is a cartoon figure, Pepe the frog, brought into the Trump team on the one hand coupled with the alt right on the other (in the least through the use of the berets).

In another analogous Hillary Clinton speech, where the basket of deplorables theme continues, publicized on an MSNBC news program, the reporter provides the coming out of Pepe the Frog. As reported at length by Rachel Maddow, a heckler in the crowd responds to Hillary's basket of deplorable comment with the cry, "Pepe" (Maddow, 2016). She argues that to the Alt Right it was a moment of triumph, and hilarious, and subsequently shows undercover footage of a speech by Richard Spencer, a significant figure in the Alt Right, who argues that the movement uses memes like the smug Pepe the frog to compete against a rising liberal culture.

For the journalist the discovery and explanation of Pepe the frog as meme is undercover or investigative reporting. It gestures to memes as having a hidden agenda and inhabiting an underground scene. Pepe the frog may seem innocuous but in fact represents and also rallies the alt right. As such it is a flare or beacon, and one means by which to know that

you are among the subculture. One yells out in the crowd “Pepe,” wears a hashtag t-shirt or otherwise shows codified knowledge of the movement. The Southern Law Poverty Center even has made a collection of ‘rare Pepes’, thereby curating meme pieces as a valuable collection of memorabilia.



**Figure four.** The Deplorables meme content, made after Hillary Clinton remark, adds Pepe the Frog and other Alt-Right figures to the poster of the movie ‘The Expendables 2’. Retweet by Donald Trump Jr.

Pepe continues a tradition of memes associated with trolling culture. The most famous trolling meme, ‘This is why we cannot have nice things,’ has its provenance in TV and film culture of decades ago, meaning in a denigrating, class-oriented sense that we cannot have valuable or

expensive things in the house because they will break. The meme also hints at Godwin’s law, where all seemingly rational conversations online shall come to end, because someone will reference Hitler. The conversation always will be ruined. Political trolling has developed alongside various exploits (DDoS-ing, DOXing, etc.), some for the nihilistic impulse. Anonymous researcher Biela Coleman notes how the (in)famous collective has fractured between those who were more interested in writing memes for memes’ sake and those interested in their weaponisation (Coleman, 2011). In recent years such weaponised trolling has become especially prevalent in gamer culture, becoming well known across Internet-related research during gamergate, a wide-ranging conversation about misogyny, trolling, and gamers, sparked when a female game developer, striving to published her game, Depression Quest, was repeatedly harassed (Foxman and Noeborg, 2016).

Trolling is the culture of grieving, of Shadenfreude, where one takes pleasure in giving someone else grief. The humorousness lies in the reaction of others. Scholars have talked about it in other fields than media studies, which have led to empathy-related and other theory. In the behavioral sciences, trolling is a product (and also a policy critique) of a digital culture that enables anonymity and that may lead to blamelessness or inculpability. If the online is seen as an equalising, status-reducing space, it could lead to disinhibition, which connects to an historical idea that if you feel that the online is a distinctive experience or space to be separated from the other space, formerly known as RL or real life, one may take advantage of that. With deindividuation, one become less of an individual in the sense of less able to relate and compare yourself to others, for there is less empathy. Trolling is also a subfield of study within media literacy, thought to be an important part of the curriculum in secondary school and beyond. How to decode, decipher and interpret what is happening in media, and how to act? How to identify a troll in a decoding sense? Wikipedia has experience with trolling, and defines it as continually engaged in flame wars, revert wars, POV warring, vandalism and other acts that may be deciphered. The one-liner, ‘don’t feed the troll’ because he or she feeds off any display of outrage or grief, is filled in because one knows in which editing contexts they are to be spotted.

# DMIR Unit #7 Meme studies



**Figure five.** Seminal trolling meme.

## **Meme history**

Richard Dawkins coined the meme in 1976 (as mentioned), Douglas Rushkoff in 1994 associated the viral (and meme) with the Internet, and in 2002 Daniel Dennett discussed the danger of the meme as viral. In this arc of history, memes are first biological and akin in their workings to genes, and subsequently carried by media and dangerous like viruses. To Dawkins, memes as genes spread by copying and there is a natural selection, where the more catchy ones

survive. At an Oxford Union gathering in 2014 Dawkins himself explained that he put forward the meme quite innocently in service of his notion of the selfish gene, not as a significant conceptual development with a research agenda but rather to say that it is conceivable that a gene-like replication mechanism could take place in 'stuff' other than DNA. "[There] may be another kind of replicator on this planet that could be doing the same job as DNA. [There could be] a unit of cultural inheritance that behaves like a gene in human culture" (Dawkins, 2014). Hence the meme. The idea of genetic reproduction would be like memetic copying, and Dawkins uses examples like whistling a tune that someone hears and subsequently catches. He or she starts whistling the same tune, spreading it throughout the town. Dawkins mentions that the meme effect could take sway for a style of dress, an accent, a favourite word, a style of pottery, or for woodcarving (where he mentions how generations of work flow from master to apprentice, and on and on). There's a distinct possibility for natural selection in the sense that some tunes and carving styles catch on, whilst others do not. Later on in the discussion Dawkins avers, however, that in culture the "mutation rate is too high." In the event, if one queries Pepe the frog in Google images one notes an exceedingly high mutation rate, so to speak, that is rather different from how genes replicate.

The media theorist, Douglas Rushkoff, some years later, introduces the relationship between the viral and culture as one that is principally about media. For Dawkins it's culture that bears the meme, whereas for Rushkoff it's media that is the carrier or medium of the memetic. 'What works' in media is the viral (1994). More to the point, those media forms that resemble media the most (the self-similar) are able to replicate and circulate; media that look like media work best. He thus speaks of the viral in terms of successful media formats. The subtitle of his book, hidden agendas in popular culture, links the viral specifically to marketing, brands as well as politics, not to mention the long line of persuasive messaging. The messages or agendas can be hidden in memes, or in the viral, as long as they are formatted in ways that allow them to look and act most like media. He links viral and memes, or memes as virals. Daniel Dennett took it up further in his TED talk in 2002 when TED as a format was in its infancy (Dennett was seated). Because they are viral and able to carry these powerful hidden messages, memes can be dangerous. Freedom, communism, Islam and others are ideas people feel worth dying for. Memes remain cultural units, but here they are less innocuous than woodcarving and catchy tunes.

The history of the meme as an object of study is one where the meme was first brought into being as a natural phenomenon and subsequently and gradually became denaturalized, in two steps. The first is to make the distinction between the meme and the viral, which is precisely how Shifman commences when arguing that a meme is a group of items with commonalities in content, form and/or stance. They are created with awareness of one another, where there is an intentionality on the part of the user (or producer, to use another new media term). One creates a derivative with purpose and with knowledge of the other content for the purposes of joining the community (so to speak) and sharing. With the viral, contrariwise, the user is a mere host. But as a meme-maker the user has agency and the capacity to act. Her distinction is not between the biological and the cultural; rather the meme is to be distinguished from the viral because the former is a group effort and the latter is one specific item that circulates. It's similar to the distinction between cross-media (same story) and transmedia (collection of items that together make up a story across media).

The idea of virality in social media is quite specific at least in the online marketing discourse. The viral is strategic content planting. The viral is also worthy of measure and metric-making. To Upworthy, to be viral is to have many shares per view and many clicks per share. The meme, rather, is a content network with contributors. The larger point is that Shifman makes a distinction that separates the meme from the biological, and is no longer viral.

### **The end of the viral**

The author who has taken the separation the farthest is Henry Jenkins, with his notion of spreadable media, in a second step that denaturalizes and (perhaps overly) normalises the meme as cultural content production. He argues against the notion of the meme and the viral as the most important ideas behind shared content and content sharing, and instead prefers the spreadable:

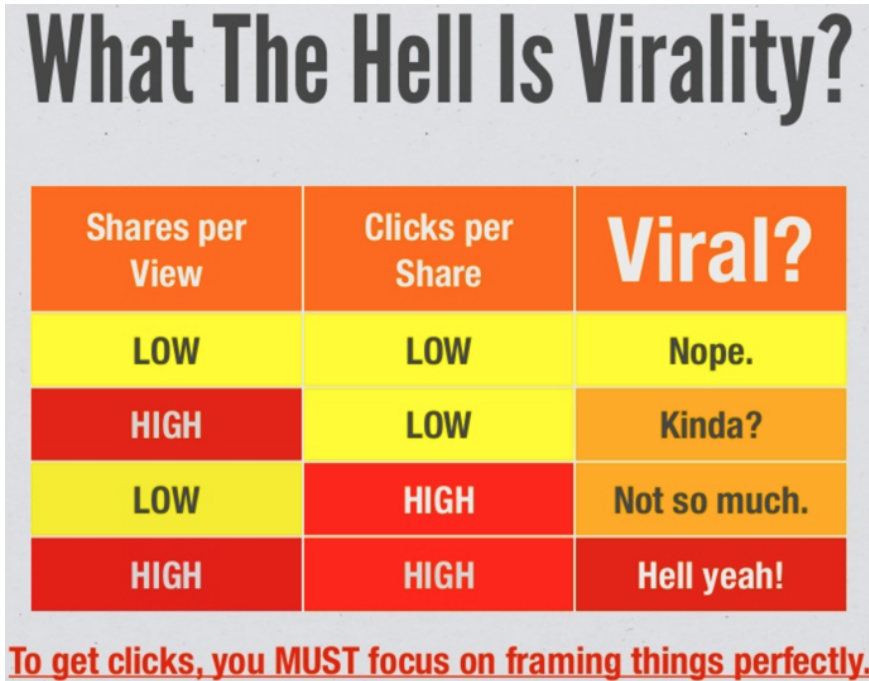
60% of American youth has created media and an increasing number circulates it. The story of King Arthur is one of passing through a folk process and arriving at a great literary work. Fan fiction, remixed into video, sampled into sound files, made into a meme that speaks to a political scene.... If it doesn't spread it's dead (2014).

Like Lawrence Lessig, Jenkins, describing participatory culture, argues that creativity itself comes from content sharing, derivative-making and content-additions (Jenkins et al., 2013). The users are contributing to the story, and also lending (qualitative) value to the content. It is an argument that speaks to copyleft, and to creative commons, whereby one should not lock down culture, but rather allow it to circulate in writable form. Here the meme is but one content type in a much larger arena of creative content making. Rather than opening a discussion of cultural biology, and how we become infested by media content, pass it on and infect others, the point is that users make on top of other content, in a sense normalizing meme production and its content community.

Memes may be fundamental to digital culture, as Shifman has argued. Like Jenkins she puts forth that the meme is distinctive from the viral, is a group of items that collectively and creatively are made with knowledge of one another, and share the same theme, stance or even story. Some can be political, humorous and/or part of a globalizing media culture. Other fundamental aspects of digital culture these days could include trolling (griefing from gamer culture), referring to disturbing and despoiling an online space. Here is the reminder that the online is often more of a social, phatic space than a debate or deliberative one, as

# DMIR Unit #7 Meme studies

previously envisaged. Thus the dominant ideas of digital culture have changed dramatically over time, often flipping over. Indeed to peruse editions of new media introductory textbooks, one finds such fundamentals of new media described as manipulable, networkable, dense, compressible, and earlier, digital, interactive, demassification and virtual (Flew, 2005; 2009).



**Figure six.** Virality definition by Upworthy.

If one were to ontologise memes for the study of new media these days, one may begin by noting that they are a particular type of means of expression — pithy and not so much unlike other shorter forms of expression that pack a punch such as slogans and aphorisms. The meme is also a format, where one can communicate in them, back and forth, a format ready to be filled in, that constrains the message. Thirdly, it also mobilizes publics or individuals. There are memes and counter-memes (black lives matter vs. all lives matter vs.

green lives matter — the Pepe the frog version). I'm with her, and I'm with you, are aphorisms formatted to mobilize publics and counter-publics in the US presidential election campaigns. Finally, memes are new media formats that have machines. Tumblr is a platform that made memes into a part of the digital cultural machinery, or platform-specific content, where they became well known. It made more widespread placard culture, holding up signs, often with hashtags, #bringbackourgirls. Increasingly Facebook, and Twitter (in a different way), are considered meme machines, the one collecting them (on pages like a Tumblr) and spreading them (in newsfeeds), the other spreading only. Memes thus become a format distinctive from rants, tweet storms, scrollytellings and listicles. On a webpage you may see a meme (with or without a hidden agenda to it) but you also will see "nineteen things you should never do in Japan." Side by side in the same space, one could study these genres in parallel, and ask whether they are memetic, viral, purposive, and whether they add value as part of creative human culture.

The meme over the past forty years in media studies has been denaturalized, and stripped gradually of its biological vitality. It still has a special status, for they may be culturally infectious, catchy, and have pass-along value. Indeed media scholars have argued that users have agency, and are not merely a host. Finally, memes are still studied as hidden messaging, as manipulative and as swaying the formation of public opinion, however much they may address a particular subculture, shaping public opinion en masse, like propaganda, less so.

## Assignment (option 1). Trump Tweets: Content analysis of Donald Trump's tweets, with a possible comparison with Geert Wilders'

### Overall goal: Characterise Trump by characterising his tweets

To what extent is Trump Alt Right? Is Trump treating the Alt Right as fan base?

In the well known media analysis of Donald Trump's tweets, data journalists publishing in the *New York Times* concentrated on Trump's personal insults (see figure 7). This personalised approach may be contrasted with a substantive one concerning issues, particularly related to the repeated claim that Trump is a supporter or adherent of the 'Alt Right'. Is Trump not only insulting people, but also tweeting for the Alt Right? Is he treating the Alt Right as fan base (however much it may be in code or through so-called dog whistling)?

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#### DEMOCRATIC POLITICIANS

Joseph R. Biden Jr.

VICE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

"not very bright"

Cory Booker

UNITED STATES SENATOR

"If Cory Booker is the future of the Democratic Party, they have no future!",  
"I know more about Cory than he knows about himself."

Ben Cardin

UNITED STATES SENATOR

"It's politicians like Cardin that have destroyed Baltimore."

Bill Clinton

FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

"DEMONSTRATED A PENCHANT FOR SEXISM", "so inappropriate", "terrible, failed badly", "was called a racist", "hypocrite", "the WORST abuser of woman in U.S. political history", "What

@CNN

Mort Zuckerman

OWNER, THE NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

"Dopey", "has a major inferiority complex", "dopey", "dopey clown"

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#### OTHER PEOPLE

Huma Abedin

AIDE TO HILLARY CLINTON

"was a major security risk"

John R. Allen

RETIRED UNITED STATES MARINE GENERAL

"failed badly in his fight against ISIS",  
"his record = BAD"

Ruth Bader Ginsburg

SUPREME COURT JUSTICE

"has embarrassed all by making very dumb political statements about me",  
"Her mind is shot", "resign!", "an incompetent judge!"

Elizabeth Beck

**Figure seven.** Excerpt of interactive accompanying the analysis of Trump tweets as personal insults, *New York Times*, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/01/28/upshot/donald-trump-twitter-insults.html>. Also see their visual analysis on <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/06/upshot/how-to-know-what-donald-trump-really-cares-about-look-at-who-hes-insulting.html>.



# DMIR Unit #7 Meme studies

In Europe the 'new right' (coined after the 'Tea Party' but prior to the 'Alt Right') is said to have interests distinctive from the old (brown) right of neo-nazi and neo-fascist bent identifiable by references to blood and soil. As Jamie Bartlett of Demos has written, the new right, contrariwise, are:

defined by their opposition to immigration and concern for protecting national and European culture, sometimes using the language of human rights and freedom. On economic policy, they are often critical of globalisation and the effects of international capitalism on workers' rights. It is combined with 'anti-establishment' rhetoric and language (Bartlett et al., 2011)

The new right thus is said to be difficult to fit into traditional party lines, and as such could be considered something of a political movement or at least a (mediated) group formation. An analysis of Trump's tweets so as to inquire into whether he should be called Alt Right. Or, if Trump should be considered the leading spokesperson or personification of the Alt Right, an analysis of his tweets to define its interests.

## Research strategy:

- 1) Curate a collection of Trump tweets, categorise the tweets and rank category types, so as to derive priorities.
- 2) Devise a categorisation scheme that enfolds Alt Right ideology.
  - Consider an A/B scheme for sorting tweets: Alt Right versus non-Alt Right tweets.
  - Consider following Bartlett's and appending new categories.
  - Consider sourcing descriptions of Alt Right (with characteristics such as anti-establishment) from scholarly and other sources.
- 3) Answering the question concerning the extent to which Trump is Alt Right could be approached from a comparative perspective. Compare the substance of Trump's tweets to other figures of the alt or new right such as Geert Wilders and/or others.

## Assignment (option 2). Facebook (and Twitter) as meme machines that produce dominant voices

### Overall goal: Determine whether memes dominated the campaign

Memes that animate the network

Pepe the frog, #maga, #makeamericagreatagain, #basketofdeplorables, and #draintheswamp (#dts) are just some of the signs and hashtags of a particular online network (with such actors as Breitbart News and Infowars) that created and circulated memes. The question concerns the extent to which these meme-makers became the dominant voices in the Trump campaign space online and animated it in comparison with other organised efforts (such as those by the Republican National Committee).

One research strategy to explore such a claim would entail the following.

1) On Facebook, compare RNC page (facebook.com/GOP) with Donald Trump page (facebook.com/DonaldTrump) for most engaged with content. Array side-by-side and determine the extent to which Trump content, over time, began to overwrite or dominate RNC content. Also determine the extent to which the Trump content is meme-like as well as oriented to the Alt Right.

2) On Twitter, derive the leading hashtags in the Trump space through co-hashtag analysis. How far from the top are the RNC hashtags? That is, did the Trump hashtags overtake those of the RNC in the Trump campaign space, and are these meme-like as well as oriented to the Alt Right.

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