

The Creation and Meaning of Internet Memes in 4chan: Popular Internet Culture in the Age of Online Digital Reproduction

Carl Chen *From lolcats to memes, Internet gimmicks have become more and more prominent in popular culture, giving rise to interactive communities such as “Yale Memes.” As a result, these viral images have become institutionalized as a genre with its own established culture and norms. **Carl Chen (MC ‘13, Sociology)** traces this Internet phenomenon back to its roots in the site 4chan and examines the forum using Habermas’s idea of public spheres and Macdonald’s theory of mass culture while also providing insight on the political culture promoted by these Internet communities. Ultimately, Chen’s analysis allows us a new perspective of contemporary Internet culture and the social implications for their worldwide audience participants. Written in SOCY 313: Sociology of Arts & Popular Culture.*

The rise of digital technology and the Internet has unexpectedly fostered a new form of cultural media: the Internet meme. The latter part of this term—meme—was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 to describe the natural human spreading, replication, and modification of ideas and culture within his Darwinian hypothesis for cultural evolution (192-195). According to this definition, a meme can technically be any transferable form of information, but due to the mechanisms of digital and Internet technology, it is now commonly conceived of as an extremely contagious and often very humorous part of Internet culture that can sometimes generate enough hype to break into mainstream popular culture. These Internet memes—funny quotes, silly captioned pictures (or an image macro), riffs on popular culture, and viral videos—are created, found, and shared by Internet users who usually belong to online communities, the most infamous being the “random /b/” sub-forum of 4chan.org. These forums all differ in culture and membership, and 4chan is particularly interesting because it is kind of like the Id of the Internet, where people are completely free to be creative and open-minded, but also depraved and offensive. To survive, some online communities, such as the above, require significant financial support through direct donations from their members, but other companies have since been able to generate high revenue from selling advertisements on their websites as well as meme-related merchandise to millions of users.

One particular image macro meme that was created from 4chan in 2005 and has since become a mainstay of both Internet and popular culture is a “lolcat” (the combination of LOL, an Internet acronym for “laughing out loud,” and cat). In *Figure 1*, the meme is a funny picture of a cat, which is either cute and/or in a silly situation, combined with superimposed text in the form of “lolspeak,” or broken English interspersed with Internet terminology (Kim). Millions of people browsing on the web or reading printed magazines have since enjoyed user-created lolcats, which have also inspired many other image macros. By breaking into popular culture, this Internet meme has created its own economic value, as shown by the sale of the meme aggregator website ICanHasCheezburger.com for \$2 million (Grossman). Although the specific example of a lolcat for study might seem slightly outlandish, the Internet meme as an online community’s cultural artifact actually helps to illuminate how they express values and share interests, which then leads to the fostering of critical judgment in the membership and even creation of political action.



Figure 1. “I Can Has Cheezburger?” is one of the original lolcat memes and is the namesake of the popular “I Can Has Cheezburger” meme-aggregator website. (icanhascheezburger.com)

Using 4chan and its characteristics as the prime example, I will study the cultural and social aspects of the Internet meme to determine the importance and value of popular Internet culture in the age of online digital reproduction. First, by focusing on the liberating social structures of this forum, I will demonstrate how it shares traits with the ideal public spheres in the social theories of Jürgen Habermas. After explaining the mechanisms of 4chan, it will also be evident how it is comparable to the Folk Art and Avant-Garde communities of Dwight Macdonald’s theory of mass culture. Consequently, the Internet memes created from 4chan should belong somewhere near these free realms, since the community owns the means of production and is able to exercise autonomous critical judgment on their culture. However, culture industry theorist Theodor Adorno would likely conclude that they are not producers of free forms of culture, but are rather just a chaotic group of users still shackled by the false consciousness imposed by a capitalist economy. On the other hand, Bernard Gendron would strongly argue that Adorno’s theory has failed to consider the new role of technology, which transformed the means of production, ownership, and type of Internet culture.

As for their true cultural and artistic creative value, Internet memes—because of the demographic of the users—seem to straddle very fine lines between questionable innovation and ironic kitsch as well as biting wit and profuse vulgarity. But regardless if users are actually producing good culture created for culture’s sake, these Internet memes also have the power to significantly influence a community’s social values. In the case of 4chan, the sharing of information promoted independence and

autonomous creativity, which transferred over into their collective political conscience, leading to the formation of the loose hacker-activist network known as “Anonymous.” Hopefully, by understanding the processes of these structures, people will then be encouraged to participate in this cultural process and push for more freedom on the Internet, so that not only will Internet culture improve by lowering the barrier to entry for creative production, but political activism may also increase from the values developed from producing free culture.

4CHAN AS HABERMAS’S PUBLIC SPHERE

To understand the characteristics, meaning, and purpose of this Internet culture, it may be helpful to analyze 4chan through the lens of the theoretical public sphere offered by social theorist Jürgen Habermas. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Habermas theorizes how the public sphere developed from private individuals come together for political and communicative purposes in order to foster a public opinion and challenge the previous public authorities (27-30). In studying recent history, he found that during the 18th and 19th centuries, literacy, access to literature, and more liberal critiques greatly increased, which heightened the need for a public sphere for educated individuals to congregate and debate. In Britain, the coffee shop became the public sphere, and in France, it was the salon. Although the more specific spatial or political characteristics of a public sphere—size, location, composition, or political orientation—were insignificant to the institution of a public sphere, they did share a few absolutely essential pre-conditions. According to Habermas, a public sphere must “disregard status altogether,” share a “domain of ‘common concern’ which was the object of public critical attention,” and be inclusive—“everyone had to be able to participate.” (36-37) With these characteristics, public spheres temporarily liberated the individual from the dominating influence of a capitalist economy and the ruling powers of the church and the state. The public sphere was an ideal evolutionary goal for both culture and politics because it historically utilized discussion and critical opinion to increase the autonomy of the individual, democratize societies, and improve the quality of intellectual thought. Moreover, for the purposes of this analysis, it promoted the autonomous creation of culture for its own sake.

Now with the development of digital technology and the Internet, the creation of forums, such as 4chan, has led to a newer and potentially more permanent public sphere, uninhibited by the material conditions that dogged Habermas. 4chan, one of the most popular manifestations of an Internet public sphere, is an

image-board forum founded by Christopher Poole, also known as his username, 'moot', from his bedroom when he was 15 years old in 2003. The highly user-friendly forum originally centered on the discussion of anime, or Japanese cartoons and has since grown to 7 million unique monthly visitors with 700,000 posts on increasingly diverse and radical topics (Poole). Its simple layout along with real-world factors encouraged the development of a free and liberated community that fulfilled the three requirements for Habermas's public sphere of disregarding status, sharing common interests, and fostering inclusivity. However, 4chan does not seem to have necessarily accomplished these goals with Habermas's ideals in mind, resulting in some interesting complications.

The forum has no barrier to membership such as registration or a fee, other than a computer and an Internet connection, which means as technology becomes cheaper, more and more people attain accessibility. Certainly though, the first component of disregarding status was consciously realized by Poole through eliminating registration on the website. Most forums on the Internet always require a registered username of some kind, which creates a degree of connection or identity between one's Internet persona and one in the real world. However, 4chan has no registration, and therefore no usernames. People then post anonymously, and anyone can assume any username for any post, even one used previously by someone else. Consequently, from post to post, no one can absolutely determine who anyone is—the default name is "Anonymous"—which means no credit or status gained from any post can be attributed to a specific user, nor can any user conclusively claim that a post belongs to him or her. Even in a chain of posts, one cannot be sure that the same person is posting in all of them. This lack of identity has created an extremely free, almost anarchic community, in which no one is afraid to say anything because everything is attributed to Anonymous, the term for the collective hive mind of the users. With complete anonymity, 4chan creates a unique sense of equality by destroying any sense of hierarchy and forbidding any material thing from the outside world except one's knowledge and opinion. Thus, Habermas's public sphere—"made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society within the state"—was formulated by teenagers who enjoyed Japanese animation (176). However, the community did not form to discuss political needs, but to be able to freely address their cultural needs, which was their "domain of 'common concern.'"

But unlike Habermas's public spheres that were historically formed by the bourgeoisie, 4chan is composed of young males obsessed with the Internet like Poole, which significantly changes the quality of participation and how a public opinion is formed. Because the forum has no memory or archive, anything submitted is either

buried under a barrage of new posts or erased within a few days, which means it must be vehemently reposted by a majority of the users in order to stay in the hive mind's consciousness. The value or importance of a subject is determined not necessarily by successful logical argumentation, but by the ability of the majority to relate to it and if they are willing to repost. Once a subject becomes recurring, more users will weigh in to approve, disapprove, or contribute. In this manner, an Internet meme can be created, as one person posted a picture of a lolcat and others quickly jumped on board by reposting it and creating their own. The simple image macro can be created by anyone with a computer and Internet, and the rest of the requirements are just wanting to contribute and having similar taste. Thus, the culture they produce then accurately represents themselves and their interests because it is for their own enjoyment.

Unfortunately, young males are often perceived as rude or immature and probably partake in what is considered already somewhat trashy mass culture, but once their community goes online and becomes unregulated from the state and economic interests, it becomes much more extreme. Since its inception, the website has become increasingly sexualized and filled with hatred for all groups—absolutely no one is spared. As the less open-minded users become bewildered or disgusted and either protest the content or leave for other forums, the community becomes increasingly insular and cultish. The users vehemently defend this perverse sense of culture through promoting Internet freedom and anonymity since they are very aware that their existence is predicated by the free sharing of information. This even led to the creation of its own governing rules, which is shown as “The Rules of the Internet” in Appendix A, in rebellion against the forum's moderators and Poole's orders. These rules, which are sometimes taken seriously and sometimes considered a joke, suggest the desire for power and self-governance and foreshadow the politicization of the members to act out beyond the Internet. These characteristics, along with the imposed extreme freedom and anonymity, will be very influential in 4chan's development and thus are particularly interesting for studying.

CLASSIFYING 4CHAN'S CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS

Now that the forum's structure, mechanisms, and constituency have been extensively explained, it is interesting to consider how mass culture theorist Dwight Macdonald would classify the culture produced from forums like 4chan. In “A Theory of Mass Culture,” Macdonald was principally worried about Mass Culture, which was “imposed from above” and “manufactured for mass consumption by technicians employed by the ruling class and is not an expression of either the individual artist or the

common people themselves,” effectively exploiting rather than satisfying “the cultural needs of the masses” (59-73). He believed that this takeover of the means of production in Mass Culture also threatened the traditional High Culture by breaking down the boundaries between the classes and creating a homogenized culture that was too efficient and geared entirely towards generating profits. This culture then lacked any value or meaning since he held “as axiomatic that culture can only be produced by and for human beings” (39). The only exceptions were the Folk Art community, which was more composed of people as individuals and not part of a mass, and the Avant-Garde community, which compartmentalized itself on the basis of an intellectual elite. From the previous documentation, 4chan is definitely some form of public sphere, but where does it fit into these categories in the larger context of the cultural world and not just the Internet?

4chan definitely is not traditional High Culture, but it certainly did cut out its own protective public sphere. Moreover, its users are anonymous individuals who use their public opinions to contribute to the greater cultural zeitgeist of Anonymous. Thus, it might be more akin to the Folk Art community or perhaps act as a strange Internet Avant-Garde community in which they co-opt roles as cultural elites. Internet memes should then have a positive effect on Mass Culture, since they were not designed to be sold, but looking at that picture of a lolcat does not feel like it provides much value. Indeed, after less than an hour looking at them online, one might easily become bored. Perhaps the Internet meme never had much value and was only kitsch, which according to Clement Greenberg, is qualified by how it “predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a shortcut to the pleasures of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art.” Most memes are incredibly simple, which is part of their charm, but perhaps it really does destroy any effort needed from the consumer. Macdonald would then apply Gresham’s Law to this cultural artifact and say how the “bad stuff drives out the good, since it is more easily understood and enjoyed” (31-32). Consuming the Internet meme has no challenge compared to higher culture, which could be intellectually stimulating and have other rewards. Subsequently, the ease of consumption is potentially dangerous because people are choosing it over High Culture, which may lead to its demise.

Yet the structures of 4chan appeared to have fulfilled the preliminary qualifications of a Folk Art community, so why is their culture then not also valuable beyond their own community? In response, Macdonald suggests that “the only time Mass Culture is good is at the very beginning before the ‘formula’ has hardened” and “whatever virtues the Folk Artist has... staying power is not one of them” (41-42). Perhaps the lolcat is now an outdated example that was previously fresh for a short time. It has

since been sold on merchandise and featured in magazines, so maybe by breaking into the mainstream, it has become overly standardized even though the instructions seem rather standard and simple already. Moreover, maybe 4chan does not have great staying power in terms of evolving their memes, which results in Mass Culture exploiting their “folk culture.”

ADORNO ON 4CHAN’S STANDARDIZATION

In his essays on the culture industry, Theodor Adorno would agree with most of these criticisms regarding standardization and would further add that every new type of Internet meme is substitutable with each other because of their common elements. This replication in the cultural artifact not only threatens High Culture, but also has negative social repercussions as mass culture. As a result of his fright from fascist Nazi Germany, Adorno is terrified of what standardization could do to society and believes that “the repetitiveness, the selfsameness, and the ubiquity of modern mass culture tend to make for automatized reactions and to weaken the forces of individual resistance” (216). The cultural role of 4chan could then be disputed because its memes are replicated internally and have also been appropriated by the Internet’s meme factories (meme-aggregator websites, such as memegenerator.net), which then reproduce the same cultural product over and over again. The problem for Internet memes might be in their inherent design, which was simple so that people could reproduce them, but this also results in standardization.

Similar to Macdonald, Adorno believed this standardization to be developed from the production side in the culture industry model, in which “every detail is substitutable; it serves its function only as a cog in a machine” (440). Adorno’s critique centers on analyzing the part against the whole, so if the jokes in memes can easily be switched out with others or if any funny picture is a funny picture, then they are virtually all the same as can be seen in *Figure 2*. Furthermore, the details of memes are unable to contain the whole and thus seem similar to popular music in which Adorno believes that “the detail has no bearing on a whole, which appears as an extraneous framework” (442). Users on 4chan then are not creating anything new, even when they fashion a new Internet meme instead of just modifying an old one. They are still They are still subjugated by the chains of popular culture from the real world and the material conditions owned by the capitalist elites who determine their passive false consciousness and influence their amateur attempts at creation. They have not constructed an autonomous new world, but have only temporarily escaped before inevitably being tied down by the cultural industrial process. However, perhaps Adorno was



Figure 2. The Business Cat Meme is an easily replicated and modifiable work-related joke with a pun referring to the cat as the boss (knowyourmeme.com).

overly pessimistic and his theories were written in regard to the threat of fascism and industrial expansion—would his theories still apply in considering the revolutionary role of technology in the online digital reproduction age?

IN DEFENSE OF 4CHAN

In “Theodor Adorno Meets the Cadillacs,” cultural theorist Bernard Gendron offers an explanation for where Adorno went wrong in analyzing the production of culture as well as the role of technology on culture as tangible artifacts. Using the production of music as an example, Gendron believes that Adorno was mistaken in developing the culture industry theory based off the capitalist manufacturing industry. In considering cultural production within the modern period, Gendron argues that “technology does not put the same constraints on the production of recorded musical sounds. If anything, it greatly expands the possibilities for variation” (26). Unlike for manufacturing in which new technology promoted standardization because it was more efficient and profitable, music became more diverse with the help of technology. For instance, musicians could now add an electric guitar with different sound effect pedals, or producers now had less technical constraints in the recording process. Similarly for Internet culture, technology and the Internet opened up a huge range of material for use, increased the speed of modification and replication and also conquered the difficulties of distributing the meme once it was completed. Meme factory websites are then positively contributing to culture because they offer user-friendly templates

(known as “exploitables” or blank pictures that just need superimposed witty text) and editing programs for people to produce or modify memes.

Additionally, Gendron uses technology to separate cultural forms into texts and functional artifacts, in which “a text is a universal, whereas a functional artifact is a particular” (27). In music, a song would be the text, whereas the functional material artifact might be a vinyl record, a cassette, or a CD, which a person can buy and own. But on the Internet, the functional artifact is just the image, text, or video itself, which can be cheaply replicated since it is only composed of digital data and requires no physical medium. True ownership does not need to exist because the replication or production of the text in a meme only needs to pay for the costs of Internet bandwidth. Because of this low cost, every meme once made is instantly a particular that can be replicated and distributed. The low costs, ease of making one, and the possibility of becoming very popular all greatly encourage people to try and make their own, thus increasing the diversity and improving the content of original Internet memes.

On the other hand, a Marxist rebuttal could suggest that these websites are in fact exploiting the users by stealing and hosting their memes in order to generate traffic and sell advertisements for revenue. They are crowd-sourcing their production of content to the users, who do it for free because they think they are producing culture for themselves, but in actuality, they are creating profits for the owners of these aggregation and distribution websites.

But more modern Internet culture theorists, such as Clay Shirky, would argue that all this concern over who profits and the quality of cultural products is ultimately irrelevant. Instead, Shirky claims that technology and these online public spheres have led humanity to a new golden era. People are now capable of shifting from passive culture consumption to active democratic culture production, which allows them to realize their greatest potential through the act of creation (18-20). Quality or standardization does not matter because it is not the mass culture industry creating it, but the individual users with their computers. Lolcats may be a stupid mediocre joke at best, but it was still creative, required thinking by the individual, and was only made possible by the freely experimenting public spheres. Shirky further optimistically claims that this new period of human creativity and generosity will continue to improve upon its content as more and more people realize they are no longer subjugated as consumers by the culture industry, but can now congregate online to use these new media tools to create their own culture (Shirky, TED). Although the online public spheres certainly unleashed commentary, organized users, and aggregated content, perhaps their most important part was motivating and giving the means for people to break out from passive consumption into active free production.

This free culture production model then offers many values, such as increasing diversity in taste, creating a unified identity, and expressing political agendas. While memes do not belong to High Culture, they are definitely pushing the boundaries of Mass Culture by adding and sharing the new amusing form of memes. Since these straightforward bite-sized pieces of content are made by the common people, they may be able to reveal new traits of consumption within the larger society, such as it becoming increasingly focused on instant gratification. Furthermore, many memes appropriate popular culture and use culture jamming, or twisting the original meaning of the work, to critique how the culture industry is producing worthless content with a lack of social value. This culture has also led to a more unified identity on these forums, especially on 4chan in which everyone belongs to the hive mind known as Anonymous. When the membership of an online forum take on this sort of group identity, they also become cognizant of their abilities and values and may even set up their own sort of structure (again, see Appendix for their “Rules”). In the case of 4chan, they are fiercely protective of their rights to free speech and strongly promote the free sharing of information. Shirky then concludes that though they first assembled to celebrate their Internet culture, they then became more civically active because of their ability to create (Shirky, TED). In 2008, users manifested 4chan’s political aspirations into the democratic hacker-activist network, “Anonymous,” which takes its name from the forum’s membership because it only wields its collective power when there is majority consensus, similar to how a meme only gains strength through numbers and connection. Although it has no sole leader and instead functions like the hive mind in 4chan, it has protested against the Church of Scientology, supported Wikileaks and its founder Julian Assange, and harshly criticized illegal online corporate actions.

In conclusion, most of the value of 4chan no longer resides in its cultural exports, but in its political ethos. However, users first participated in this public sphere because of their common cultural interests and only began to take action to protect its values once they realized their culture could be threatened by government censorship, corporate control, or by the forum’s leadership. These Internet forums will continue to evolve and produce culture Internet memes for their own culture’s sake like in Folk Art communities, which may even break into the mainstream again. But even though digital technology has created a public sphere and allowed them to own some of the means of production, they may still be exploited or influenced by the culture industry. However, this is not currently a major concern since the most important achievement of these public forums is the widespread increase in creativity that was only brought about by destroying status, fostering anonymity, and allowing autonomy.

Although critics may forever claim that these Internet memes are standard, vulgar, or prejudiced, 4chan's creator, Poole, has insisted that "as awful as /b/ [4chan] can be, its lawless-seeming atmosphere has fostered creativity. Sometimes it's when people are hidden away, unconcerned about their reputation or social identity, that they say and do very interesting things" (Walker).

APPENDIX

A. The Rules of the Internet as written in 2006 by the “random /b/” sub-forum of 4chan.org.

Source: http://ohinternet.com/Rules_of_the_Internet

Rules of the internet.

1. Do not talk about /b/
2. Do NOT talk about /b/
3. We are Anonymous
4. Anonymous is legion
5. Anonymous never forgives
6. Anonymous can be a horrible, senseless, uncaring monster
7. Anonymous is still able to deliver
8. There are no real rules about posting
9. There are no real rules about moderation either - enjoy your ban
10. If you enjoy any rival sites - DON'T
11. All your carefully picked arguments can easily be ignored
12. Anything you say can and will be used against you
13. Anything you say can be turned into something else - fixed
14. Do not argue with trolls - it means that they win
15. The harder you try the harder you will fail
16. If you fail in epic proportions, it may just become a winning failure
17. Every win fails eventually
18. Everything that can be labeled can be hated
19. The more you hate it the stronger it gets
20. Nothing is to be taken seriously
21. Original content is original only for a few seconds before getting old
22. Copyypasta is made to ruin every last bit of originality
23. Copyypasta is made to ruin every last bit of originality
24. Every repost is always a repost of a repost
25. Relation to the original topic decreases with every single post
26. Any topic can be easily turned into something totally unrelated
27. Always question a person's sexual preferences without any real reason
28. Always question a person's gender - just in case it's really a man
29. In the internet all girls are men and all kids are undercover FBI agents
30. There are no girls on the internet
31. TITS or GTFO - the choice is yours
32. You must have pictures to prove your statements
33. Lurk more - it's never enough
34. There is porn of it, no exceptions
35. If no porn is found at the moment, it will be made
36. There will always be even more fucked up shit than what you just saw
37. You can not divide by zero (just because the calculator says so)
38. No real limits of any kind apply here - not even the sky
39. CAPSLOCK IS CRUISE CONTROL FOR COOL
40. EVEN WITH CRUISE CONTROL YOU STILL HAVE TO STEER
41. Desu isn't funny. Seriously guys. It's worse than Chuck Norris jokes.
42. Nothing is Sacred
43. The more beautiful and pure a thing is - the more satisfying it is to corrupt it
44. Even one positive comment about Japanese things can make you a weeaboo
45. When one sees a lion, one must get into the car.
46. There is always furry porn of it.
47. The pool is always closed.

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