

Welcome to the Post-Text Future

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The Mainstreaming of Political Memes Online

By Nellie Bowles

Political memes have gone mainstream as the distance between the White House and subcultures like 4Chan has closed.

President Trump has frequently retweeted his fans' meme work, #MeToo jumped from social media to every workplace, and political campaigns started to invest in the form more seriously. The political meme — text over an image, sometimes short videos or digital clip art meant to spread and be imitated — is often a guttural, simple message couched in humor, like the doctored video from September of Hillary Clinton being hit with his golf ball.

Groups like the conservative Look Ahead America and the liberal Center for Story-Based Strategy emerged to nurture memers, and big political donors like George Soros and the Mercer family funded meme efforts.

"It's almost like a new means of communication — the image and emotion and creation," said Matt Braynard, 39, the former director of data for Mr. Trump's campaign, who is now the executive director of Look Ahead America. "I don't want to call it literature, but it has an art."

Mr. Braynard said the trend of political meme-ing began "with a bunch of folks who maybe were not initially political but have tech-related savviness and had their hide-outs online in forums like 4Chan." Memes were a natural way for those voters to enter politics because it's how they'd been communicating already, and mainstream donors saw their potential last year, he said.

Still, the shift toward a meme-based political discourse is in its early days, said Mr. Braynard. Already, he said, there was demand for meme content in international elections, like those in France and Austria, where "anti-postmodernist political movements" are growing.

Organizers on both the left and right said the left has so far been slower to adapt to meme politics. To catch up, Sean Eldridge, husband of the Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes, is working on creating shareable content with Stand Up America, a progressive nonprofit that opposes President Trump. And the activist John Sellers's The Other 98% has received funding from Open Society Foundations, a group backed by Mr. Soros.

"You don't want to be grandpa in the nightclub like, 'Hey, content creators, today we're going to meme about how to revitalize coal communities,'" said Rob Flaherty, 26, a former digital communications manager for Mrs. Clinton's campaign and now creative director of Priorities USA Action, a Democratic Super PAC. "It has to happen organically. So the next thing now is to more effectively organize the memers."

President Trump has been crucial in the spreading of political memes, often through retweets of his fans. For his supporters, a retweet shows he's listening — and that they need to keep meme-ing.

Take Jerry Travone, 34, a resident of Freehold, N.J., who found a meme last year gurgling around on Facebook: Mr. Trump's smiling face moving across a somber portrait of Barack Obama. Mr. Travone fiddled with the tint a bit and posted it to his 15,300 followers. Then Mr. Trump retweeted it to his more than 40 million followers in August.

"When it comes to memes I think he's the type of normal guy that sees a funny meme and laughs out loud and retweets it," Mr. Travone said about Mr. Trump. "A picture can contain a thousand words."

Andrew Boyd, who designs campaigns for social change, was one of the first to document political memes, writing a seminal essay, "Truth is a Virus," in 2002. He argued that the most important recent political meme has not come from either party's campaign or donors but from the #MeToo movement around sexual harassment.

"It has a crystal quality to it, a simplicity, and elegance, something that feels right and organized," said Mr. Boyd, 55. "Me too. Me too. That happened to me too. The best memes are very populist, and yet they have a precision."

Doyle Canning, who wrote a book on using memes for political movements and co-founded the Center for Story-Based Strategy, said people have now realized memes are replacing nuanced political debate.

"People in 2016 declined to take seriously the impact of the memes and clung to this narrative that rational policy discourse would triumph," said Ms. Canning, 37. "And it didn't."

Now politics, she said, is just "a battle of the memes."

The Rise of a Visual Internet

By Farhad Manjoo

I'll make this short: The thing you're doing now, reading prose on a screen, is going out of fashion.

We're taking stock of the internet right now, with writers who cover the digital world cataloging some of the most consequential currents shaping it. If you probe those currents and look ahead to the coming year online, one truth becomes clear. The defining narrative of our online moment concerns the decline of text, and the exploding reach and power of audio and video.

This multimedia internet has been gaining on the text-based internet for years. But last year, the story accelerated sharply, and now audio and video are unstoppable. The most influential communicators online once worked on web pages and blogs. They're now making podcasts, Netflix shows, propaganda memes, Instagram and YouTube channels, and apps like HQ Trivia.

Consider the most compelling digital innovations now emerging: the talking assistants that were the hit of the holidays, Apple's face-reading phone, artificial intelligence to search photos or translate

spoken language, and augmented reality — which inserts any digital image into a live view of your surroundings.

These advances are all about cameras, microphones, your voice, your ears and your eyes.

Together, they're all sending us the same message: Welcome to the post-text future.

It's not that text is going away altogether. Nothing online ever really dies, and text still has its hits — from Susan Fowler's whistle-blowing blog post last year about harassment at Uber to #MeToo, text was at the center of the most significant recent American social movement.

Still, we have only just begun to glimpse the deeper, more kinetic possibilities of an online culture in which text recedes to the background, and sounds and images become the universal language.

The internet was born in text because text was once the only format computers understood. Then we started giving machines eyes and ears — that is, smartphones were invented — and now we've provided them brains to decipher and manipulate multimedia.

Suddenly the script flipped: Now it's often easier to communicate with machines through images and sounds than through text.

It's more than just talking to digital assistants. Artificial intelligence might soon let us search and index much of the world's repository of audio and video, giving sounds and pictures a power that has kept text dominant online for so long. On HBO's "Silicon Valley" last season, there was a joke about an app that helped you identify any cuisine, SeeFood. Weeks later, Pinterest introduced just such an app; along with Google, the social network is developing software to identify any visual object.

Tech didn't just make multimedia easier to produce. It also democratized non-text formats, which for so long had been accessible only to studios. Podcasting became something like the new blogging, a way for committed amateurs and obsessives to plumb the underexplored eddies and mysteries of life. There's a podcast by a guy who spends more than a dozen episodes explicating the genius of Kanye West's fifth studio album. He does so using a trove of documentary material he found — where else? — on YouTube.

Meanwhile, social media showered every multimedia creator with a potential audience, and it allowed the audience to connect and discuss the work, deepening fans' relationship to levels of obsession.

It's a kind of passion that ultimately makes for a fundamentally new, deeper kind of art. Look at all the room the internet opened up for crazy mash-ups of ideas. Netflix's best recent show, "American Vandal," is a parody of "Serial," the true-crime podcast, and "Making a Murderer," another Netflix show.

The transition to multimedia won't be smooth. Business models are hardly proven. For several news sites, the pivot to video ended in a bust that will now give Facebook and Google even greater market power. Many podcast advertisers — I'm looking at you, Blue Apron — are themselves not

on the most solid financial ground; they could blow up tomorrow, taking the whole boom with them.

Yet the financial questions may be the least of our worries. An online culture ruled by pictures and sounds rather than text is going to alter much about how we understand the world around us.

The haze of misinformation hanging over online life will only darken under multimedia — think of your phone as a Hollywood-grade visual-effects studio that could be used to make anyone appear to say or do anything. The ability to search audio and video as easily as we search text means, effectively, the end of any private space.

Then there's the more basic question of how pictures and sounds alter how we think. An information system dominated by pictures and sounds prizes emotion over rationality. It's a world where slogans and memes have more sticking power than arguments. (Remind you of anyone?) And will someone please think of the children: Do you know how much power YouTube has over your kids? Are you afraid to find out?

But what are we going to do? There seems no going back now. For text, the writing is on the wall.

Becoming Engulfed by Digital Multimedia

Photos, videos, graphics and more are taking over our online experience. And in response, companies and publishers are all pouring money into developing even more multimedia for us to consume. How do we know this?

These numbers tell the story. — Farhad Manjoo

70 million

About 70 million Americans regularly listen to podcasts, according to Edison Media Research. People who listen weekly tend to spend five hours a week on them.

1 billion

In 2017, YouTube reported that people watched a billion hours on that service every day. On average, young Americans spend two hours a day watching video online.

30 minutes

Instagram lifted Snapchat's video diary feature, Stories, to great success; more than 800 million people use Instagram, for more than 30 minutes a day on average.

\$8 billion

A tsunami of money is flowing to audio and video. Netflix unveiled a plan to spend \$8 billion on original content in one year, while Apple plans to shell out \$1 billion.

The Ratio Establishes Itself on Twitter

By Mike Isaac

It's easy to tell when you've nailed a good tweet — just watch the likes and retweets pile up as the post goes viral.

Now there are also more ways to tell if a tweet was bad. That's because a new barometer for Twitter blahness has taken hold: the ratio.

The way a ratio works is simple. Divide the number of replies you get to a tweet by the number of likes and retweets. If the former category is much larger than the latter, you probably tweeted something awful.

Consider the following example.

Chris Cillizza, the CNN political commentator who wrote that tweet, is perhaps the most ratioed man on Twitter. His tweets frequently cut against the grain of overall Twitter sentiment, and their replies are a prime reflection of that. With this tweet, he got more than 3,300 replies, with just 85 retweets and 270 likes.

Mr. Cillizza is at a disadvantage, since political tweets are often among the most ratioed. That's compounded by his perspective on politics — he often plays devil's advocate — which has left him a frequent target of the crowd. (Mr. Cillizza has said that he believes the ratio is a “lefty Twitter concept,” and that he doesn't buy into it.)

Pundits are not the only victims of the ratio. After the chief executive of United Airlines, Oscar Munoz, responded on Twitter to the dragging of a passenger from a flight in April by officers, the airline's Twitter mentions were packed full of angry replies.

By the end of last year, the phenomenon of Twitter ratios finally crossed over into predictability. In December, Newsweek tweeted, “Does Hillary Clinton have terrible taste in men, or just too ambitious to be a supporter of other women?” Imani Gandy, a journalist and legal advocate, summed up the internet's response rather aptly:

How Social Media Gives Women a Voice

By Claire Cain Miller

Susan Fowler had tried going to human resources. She had tried going to her managers. She had tried transferring departments. But nothing changed. The sexual and sexist comments she received as an engineer at Uber kept coming.

So she went online and wrote a 3,000-word blog post exposing the behavior.

A year later, a raft of executives, including Travis Kalanick, Uber's co-founder and chief executive, are gone. Ms. Fowler, meanwhile, has a new job, a book contract and a movie deal.

This has been a period when the whisper network moved online and became a shout. Suddenly, in a way they never had before, women have a voice, people are listening, and men are paying consequences.

It's happening now for a lot of reasons, but one of them is that social media has given victims a platform, a network of allies and a public presence that can't as easily be silenced. Social media, for all its flaws, has served as a democratizing force.

On Twitter, people in Hollywood described abuse. In Silicon Valley, a venture capitalist was fired after an accusatory Facebook post. With the #MeToo hashtag, a chorus of voices shared experiences of harassment and assault by famous men and, in much larger numbers, men who are not.

"Social media changed it dramatically," Tarana Burke said, talking about the #MeToo movement, which she started in 2006 and which went viral last year. "The internet is a great equalizer. The hashtag created a global community of support. That was a beautiful thing to watch."

The balance of power had long been tilted in the direction of men. They were the ones with the status and money to harass and abuse women, and then threaten, bribe or fire them if they complained. Only about a quarter of women who have suffered harassment report it, and the main reasons that more don't are that they (rightly) fear retaliation, don't think anyone will do anything about it and don't want to face those consequences alone.

Social media changed much of that. It's harder to retaliate or ignore reports when the public is watching, or dismiss women's accusations when they are immediately bolstered by the stories of many more women.

Gretchen Carlson, the former Fox anchor who helped start the national reckoning, said in a recent interview at TEDWomen, "Social media has really helped us in this whole effort because it's given women the power to know they're not alone."

The medium can also be abused, spreading false allegations just as quickly. But if anything, that can be seen as a testament to the power women now hold.

How We Get Redpilled, Cucked and Triggered Online

The alt-right's most enduring legacy may be its lexicon. With passphrases borrowed from sources as varied as men's rights message boards and pro-Trump YouTubers, the language has escaped its origins and lodged firmly in our national discourse. Pull up a chair — it's time for a vocabulary lesson. — Kevin Roose

Redpilled (adj.)

A reference to a scene in "The Matrix" that is now used to indicate a person who has achieved a state of right-wing enlightenment. Becoming "redpilled" could mean realizing that Jews control the media, or that feminists are the real oppressors.

Triggered (adj.)

The state of being earnestly offended by an opposing view. On the right-wing internet, being triggered is an automatic admission of defeat.

Cuck (n.)

A weak, emasculated liberal, or a right-wing politician who has abandoned conservative values. Short for “cuckservative,” a portmanteau of “cuckold” and “conservative.”

Virtue-signal (v.)

A term borrowed from social science, now used to refer to liberals who conspicuously express left-wing values, primarily for the purposes of impressing other liberals.

Even the Tech Elite Are Worrying About Tech Addiction

By Farhad Manjoo

Your phone buzzes. A message, an Instagram post, a tweet — some bit of digital effluvia has come in, and it’s right there, promising a brief but necessary hit of connection. All you have to do is look.

But, just as an experiment, how long can you resist looking? A minute? Two? If you make it that long, how do you start to feel? Can you concentrate? Does your mind wander at what you’re missing? And if you give in — as you surely will, as you probably do many times a day — how do you feel about yourself?

The issue of “tech addiction” has been a staple of tabloidy panics for as long as anyone can remember. Yet this ancient worry has now taken on a new and more righteous flavor.

What is interesting is who has been pushing the issue. Several former Facebook executives, the very people who set up the Like-based systems of digital addiction and manipulation that now rule much of online life, have begun to speak out in alarm about our slavishness to digital devices.

And their worries seem resonant. Now that we all have phones, and we’re all looking at them all the time, how can we deny that they hold some otherworldly, possibly unhealthy bondage over our brains?

“It’s a social-validation feedback loop,” Sean Parker, Facebook’s first president, told Axios in an interview in November. He described Facebook and other social apps in terms once reserved for cigarettes — as products specifically engineered to exploit addiction pathways in human psychology. “God only knows what it’s doing to our children’s brains.”

Others have echoed his sentiment.

“The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops we’ve created are destroying how society works,” Chamath Palihapitiya, who once led Facebook’s efforts at global growth and is now a venture capitalist, told an audience at Stanford’s Graduate School of Business in December. The Guardian, meanwhile, found a handful of former Facebookers who said they would quit using social media for fear of being programmed by the social giant.

Even Wall Street has weighed in, with two large investors asking Apple in January to study the health effects of its products and to make it easier for parents to limit their children’s use of iPhones and iPads.

Whether these Cassandras are correct is still a matter of scientific inquiry, though several studies suggest our phones do exert an addictive pull.

A study published in June by researchers at the University of Texas asked subjects to take a series of tests that required full cognitive attention. The researchers found that people who had their smartphones nearby — even though they were on silent — performed significantly worse than those whose phones were in another room. In other words, if your phone is nearby, you can never really stop thinking about it.

The bigger problem is what to do about any of this. Few laws or regulations prevent apps from keeping us hooked, and the tech industry has no serious ethical prohibitions against tinkering with software to drive engagement; indeed, at many tech companies, keeping people glued to the screen is the whole ballgame.

Sure, it's nice that the guys who created this machine are suddenly aware of its dangers. But other than stop our phones entirely — or pursuing some self-directed regimen of conscientious withdrawal, good luck with that! — we might truly be hosed.

Brands Are Becoming Accountable for Where Digital Ads Show Up

By Sapna Maheshwari

For advertisers, one of the internet's great promises has been the ability to automatically target people based on their interests and demographics, with little regard to the websites they are visiting.

But these days, major brands have been forced to rethink how they advertise online. Companies from Kellogg to AT&T have come under fire for inadvertently funding bigotry, hate speech and misinformation, often because they were using automated ad technology to reach groups of people across a vast number of sites and videos.

That's a radical shift from the old way of doing business, when advertisers were far more dependent on individual outlets — say, *The Atlantic* or *Good Housekeeping* — for reaching certain audiences, using people and paper to place those ads. Now, advertisers of all sizes can essentially dispense their money into a complex system of agencies and third-party networks, which often resembles a stock exchange, using data to reach potential customers across millions of websites.

The perils of such systems came into stark relief last year with a new national spotlight on the spread of fake news and hate speech, as people began searching for the financial backers of such content. Consumers and journalists started visiting offensive YouTube channels and websites, taking screenshots of ads from prominent brands in those places and circulating the images on social media, demanding responses from companies. It was a new breed of customer service complaint; suddenly, one misplaced banner ad out of millions in a day could mean serious trouble.

An anonymously run Twitter account, *Sleeping Giants*, was a key driver of the effort. Now with 137,000 followers, it emerged in the weeks after the 2016 election and urged consumers to tweet screenshots of ads from brands like Warby Parker and Kellogg on Breitbart News, the alt-right site closely tied to President Trump's administration.

The account, which often paired its confrontations of advertisers with examples of offensive Breitbart headlines like “Birth Control Makes Women Unattractive and Crazy,” prompted many brands to blacklist the conservative news site and blame automated ad technology for their ad

appearances. Other online movements bolstered such efforts, including #GrabYourWallet, which started as a campaign to boycott retailers carrying Trump-family products.

Brands were also discovered on sites promoting conspiracy theories, an especially worrisome issue after a man fired a rifle inside a Washington pizzeria because of false stories online tying the restaurant to child abuse. Allstate was found advertising on a site that claimed the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting did not happen.

Screenshots and pressure from news outlets also helped spur a major brand exodus from YouTube last spring, after companies like AT&T and Johnson & Johnson were found advertising alongside videos that promoted offensive content, including promotion of terrorism. While YouTube defended itself by pointing to the large volume of content uploaded to the site every second, it has since introduced some changes that limit which videos can run ads.

Some major advertisers left last year with a new skepticism around the sky-high numbers of sites, videos and vendors required to effectively reach consumers. JPMorgan Chase made waves when it told The New York Times in March that it saw little change in the performance of its display ads after cutting back to 5,000 preapproved websites from roughly 400,000 sites a month.

The bank made the change after The Times discovered an ad for Chase's private client services on a site called Hillary 4 Prison under a headline claiming that the actor Elijah Wood had revealed "the horrifying truth about the Satanic liberal perverts who run Hollywood."

Cryptocurrencies for All. Or Even for Nothing.

Today's virtual currency market is a lawless free-for-all, and as with any good gold rush, scammers and schemers have moved in alongside legitimate peddlers to create their own digital currencies for all manner of things. Here are a few egregious examples of crypto-world flotsam that have succeeded despite themselves. — Kevin Roose

Bananacoin

"The world's first blockchain option for investing in production of organic bananas." Private sales: \$2.8 million.

Dentacoin

"The blockchain solution for the global dental industry." Market value: \$350 million.

Potcoin

"The first digital currency created to facilitate transactions within the legalized cannabis industry." Market value: \$31 million.

Useless Ethereum Token

"The world's first 100 percent honest Ethereum I.C.O." This offering promised to take investors' money and give them literally nothing in return. Market value: \$104,000.

Gives Way to Realness

By Amanda Hess

For all the talk about the internet's power to democratize the media, Instagram can present an awfully traditional picture of what a woman is supposed to be. The images that rise on the platform are a hellscape of white feminine conformity, with top influencers sporting the same matte lips and contoured cheeks, their bodies whittled and waxed and contorted into the same poses. (Hey, @kyliejenner.)

But perfectly polished Instagram feeds have now given way to real ones, in which women in particular are showing what they actually look like. And because they have demanded to be seen, brands have taken notice, too.

Recently we have seen canny artists play with the medium's conventions, from the computer-generated Instagram model Lil Miquela (@lilmiquela) to the Instagram feed of Cindy Sherman (@_cindysherman_), who twists the tools of beautifying apps to achieve monstrous results.

In other corners of Instagram, a new crop of artists and models are pushing the platform in a different direction, carving out a radically realistic aesthetic that reflects the lived lives of women, queer people and people of color.

Follow the account of @chella.man for an intimate portrait of a 19-year-old artist's changing body on testosterone, or check out @habitual_body_monitoring2 for images of menstruation and masturbation that present sexuality as something actually experienced by women, not just mapped onto their bodies.

Below, three more rising photographers talk about shattering Instagram's perfect image.

Ashley Armitage

Ashley Armitage (@ladyist), 24, started taking photos of her sister and friends at age 15, and her work still focuses on that intimate crew of nonprofessional models.

"I'm not interested in photographing people and bodies in their ideal forms. That, to me, is boring," she said. "I want to see the scars, the cellulite, the pimples, the stretch marks and the body hair. I want to see the little imperfections, because those are the things that make us human."

Zoé Lawrence

Zoé Lawrence (@zoedlawrence), 22, first turned to photography as a crutch for dealing with her anxiety.

"Photography was a good way to break the ice with people," she said.

Her work naturally centers on queer people and people of color because it grows out of her own social experiences. "It's just what I'm surrounded by," she said. "I don't think a lot about what the mainstream is doing. It's not on my stream. It's not on my feed."

Hobbes Ginsberg

The feed for Hobbes Ginsberg (@hhobbess), 23, is filled with poppy, technicolor selfies — yellow-framed glasses, red-polished nails, blue Los Angeles sky — that sprinkle the Instagram landscape with bright artifacts of her life.

“Seeing other queer people just doing their own thing can feel really empowering as a queer person, and that’s something that’s really important to me,” she said. “But I’m often a bit hesitant to politicize my entire being like that, especially when it comes to the kind of thing I put out on Instagram — which is mostly just meant to be fun and pretty.”

The brands

Over the last year, internet-forward brands have borrowed aspects of the realist Instagram aesthetic, too.

On its website, the cool-girl, eco-friendly clothing brand Reformation features models with shiny and smoothed Barbie-esque bodies, but on its Instagram account (@reformation) it has begun showcasing images of its customers who present a different view. One post, a series of photographs of women wearing Reformation swimwear, leads with a picture of Ali Tate, a model represented by @musecurve.

Also jumping aboard is Glossier (@glossier), the beauty brand Instagram built. It’s promoting its new line of body products with a campaign that doesn’t shy away from (or airbrush) models’ real bodies, fat folds and all.