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Crimea River: Directionality in Memes from the Russia–Ukraine Conflict

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The Russia–Ukraine conflict of 2014 sparked political upheaval, military action, and the emergence of Internet memes as a forum for discursive critique among netizens of the affected countries. A qualitative content analysis was conducted of Internet memes posted to the RuNet Memes Twitter account in 2014 and revealed a preponderance of memes that fell into one of two categories: *directionally Russian* or *directionally Ukrainian*. Directionality as a thematic category is a novel methodological approach in memes research. While the memes reference a given news story or event, they continued to be consumed and reproduced along similar thematic categories. This tendency to follow a narrative is at once endemic to viral media in general and unique to memes given their remix, parody, iteration, and rapid diffusion.

Keywords: Russian Internet, Internet memes, Russia–Ukraine conflict, cult of Putin, participatory digital culture

Overview of the Conflict

During 2014, Russian and Ukrainian netizens took to the Web to discuss aspects of conflict between their two countries by using memes. Internet memes offered them the opportunity to criticize or support the policies and politics on both sides as the issues emerged. One such meme that emerged during the Crimean crisis references a phone conversation between U.S. President Barak Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The *Crimea River* meme (see Figure 1) was tweeted by @RuNetMemes's Twitter account on March 4, 2014, and expresses simultaneously that Obama should simply accept the annexation (suggested by #dealwithit); portrays Putin as clever, if not also cool; and captures a major point in the conflict succinctly in a multi-image-panel meme with dialogue balloons, similar to a comic strip. The *Crimea River* meme, along with its many memetic counterparts, discusses several issues related to the Russia–Ukraine conflict (such as diplomatic and policy issues between the United States and Russia on the issue of the annexation of Crimea) and divulges insights into the manner in which individuals use memes to talk about a conflict.

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RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Mar 4

#dealwithit

Figure 1. Crimea River meme.

Tumultuous events perhaps unavoidably led to armed conflict between Ukraine and Russia—or at least between well-equipped security forces with disputed origins and the Ukrainian military (Urban, 2015). The Ukrainian president who began the year as the country's elected leader, Viktor Yanukovich, eventually fled his capital in search of safety and security in Russia (Walker, 2014). Recently, a documentary of Vladimir Putin produced by and aired on Russian television revealed that Russia's armed forces were on a nuclear alert during the crisis in Crimea (Smith-Spark, Eschenko, & Burrows, 2015).

Opportunities and Constraints of Memes as Political Participation

Coinciding with these events, many Russians and Ukrainians took to the Internet to voice their perspectives, criticisms, hopes, and fears, taking part in a similar practice around the world. Yet, in the case of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the Internet became the proving ground for a flourishing participatory digital culture wishing to express itself in *memetic* terms. Iterative, rapidly diffused, and easily consumed and reproduced, Internet memes are signposts of discursive activity and have been the focus of a growing body of research.

Several authors have discussed Internet memes in terms of online information (Black, 2007; Jain, Rodrigues, Magno, Kumaraguru, & Almeida, 2011), the banality of user-generated content (Dybka, 2013), public knowledge and activism (Shirky, 2010; Vie, 2014), analytical approaches to memes (Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2011), viewing memes as a genre of online communication (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014), memes and participatory culture (Burgess, 2008; Jenkins, 2009; Lewis, 2012), memes and the news cycle (Leskovec, Backstrom, & Kleinberg, 2009), semiotics and memes (Kilpinen, 2008), as well as discourse and memes (Milner, 2012). These contributions mostly focus on memes that discuss topics, events, and people related to the United States. International scholarship is slowly starting to produce contributions on Kenya (Ekdale & Tully, 2013), China (Du, 2014; Shifman, 2014; Wallis, 2011), memetic quiddities and attributes (Segev, Nissenbaum, Stolero, & Shifman, 2015), the Kony2012 meme and social change (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2015), and the use of memes by the government of Azerbaijan to countermand opposition (Pearce & Hajizada, 2014). However, little research has been conducted on the Russian Internet and its memes. Denisova (2015) suggests that memes are a coded language of dissent on the Russian Internet. Arestova, Balandina, and Budko (2015) investigate the origins of the Internet meme in Russian culture.

The specific aim of this article is to present the findings from a content analysis of Internet memes to uncover thematic tendencies as well as structural differences and innovations in creating memes related to the conflict. Additionally, the article offers directionality as a tool in analyzing Internet memes. Emerging from the analysis conducted for this article, directionality identifies two audiences (the audience targeted with critique and the audience most likely to consume such critique). Directionality is also an important tool in analyzing memes, because it enhances our understanding of narrative construction among members of participatory digital culture. It is also worthwhile to note that this analysis draws on an array of disciplines for the purposes of meaning-making across the various memes included in this study and which were produced during the course of the conflict in 2014. Freudian psychology, literary theory, postmodern thought, sociological theory, and recent conceptualizations in the fields of media and communication form a tool kit for the analysis of Internet memes in this study. It was necessary to remain broad for the simple purpose of aligning memetic artifact with appropriate interpretation. But first it is necessary to understand the differences between memes and Internet memes.

Distinguishing Memes from Internet Memes

In *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins (1976) extrapolates the meme as a cultural corollary to the biological gene and uses the term to explain evolutionary advances from the perspective that a meme is a cultural phenomenon. As Wiggins and Bowers (2014) note, "memes are the mediators of cultural evolution" (p. 5). Dawkins views the meme as a thoroughly selfish and virulent idea that vies for human attention in order to infect the mind like a virus, followed by its replication and further spread from brain to brain. Recently, Dawkins claimed that the term *Internet meme* is a remix (his word: *hijacking*) of the original concept he introduced in *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins & Marshmallow Laser Feast, 2013). The meme of evolutionary biologists shares characteristics with its digital counterpart but is foremost an associative concept of cultural evolution. Indeed, the digital counterpart to Dawkins' meme, the Internet meme, is hereby defined as a remixed, iterated message that is rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity.

Unpacking the Meme as an Artifact of Participatory Digital Culture

As artifacts, memes possess three characteristics. Virtual physicality, social and cultural connection, and purposeful production and consumption accentuate the meme as artifact but also relate directly to the duality of structure (Giddens, 1984), which implies an interaction between agent and social system.

Virtual physicality implies a cognitive as well as digital *memory trace*. Giddens (1984) defined memory traces as the structuring properties that enable the merging of time and space in social systems. Memory traces allow individuals to engage in similar social practices across time and space. It is an especially useful concept regarding Internet memes, because their production, consumption, remix, and reproduction occur in the human mind as well as in the digital environment. The recursive production, consumption, and reproduction of memes evince their importance and underscore their virtual physicality in participatory digital culture. Memes as artifacts also possess cultural and social attributes as they are produced, reproduced, and transformed to reconstitute the social system. "In practical terms the memetic social system is reconstituted when members of participatory digital culture use rules and resources of meme creation in the reproduction of further iterations of a given meme" (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014, p. 7). In other words, individuals within the social system understand the process of meme creation. Further, the creation or reproduction of memes may encourage the continued production of a given meme for an indefinite period of time. Thus, memes as artifacts underscore the purposeful production and consumption among members of participatory digital culture. As artifacts of participatory digital culture, Internet memes are the result of purposeful production and consumption because of social and cultural connections experienced on- and off-line. Virtual physicality is merely a symptom of their existence as Internet memes.

Identifying and Analyzing Russian and Ukrainian Memes

A content analysis was conducted of all tweets from 2014 on @RuNetMemes' Twitter feed. An initial review excluded memes that lacked an explicit or implicit reference to the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Given the need to reveal the latent meaning of the messages within the memes, it was appropriate to use a qualitative and critical studies approach in the identification of themes (Buddenbaum & Novak, 2001). Explicit references feature a comparison and/or a contrast between Russia and Ukraine. Implicit references require inference to understand the connection between the meme and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Such memes include humorous, insulting, cynical, condescending, or similar portrayals of Russian and Ukrainian leadership but without a direct reference to the conflict.

Sampling

Moderators of @RuNetMemes first tweeted on January 14, 2014. The date range January 2014 to December 2014 was used to identify memes that refer to the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. The rationale for the date range is a combination of convenience and timeliness. During 2014, @RuNetMemes tweeted a total of 573 times, each with an image that was either accompanied by text on the image or

that had a textual description. In many of the Russian memes, images were not accompanied by text. A sample (N = 167) was identified as either explicitly or implicitly referring to the conflict. The sample was then analyzed in terms of directionality and theme, which is discussed in greater detail in the analysis section.

The Internet memes chosen for this study are taken from the Twitter account @RuNetMemes managed by Kevin Rothrock and Tatyana Lokot. According to Rothrock, the memes tweeted from their account are primarily in Russian and accompanied by an English translation and are the creations of those individuals who comprise the "Russian Internet," a term defined as the part of the Internet that is related to or discusses Russia and Russian interests (personal communication, May 14, 2014). As such, the choice of memes published by @RuNetMemes is subjective and therefor a limitation on the representative value of this research. However, given no other known forum for the analysis of Internet memes created during the Russia–Ukraine conflict in 2014, the choice to draw from the Twitter account was logical.

Coding and Reliability

An emergent coding method established thematic categories. Emergent coding was appropriate after an initial examination of the data. The unit of analysis was the tweeted meme. The content analysis revealed several dominant themes that fall into the three emergent coding categories, all of which were mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and reliable.

Although the *analysis* is qualitative, computing a reliability coefficient was necessary to ensure precision in assigning memes to an appropriate category. An intracoder test-retest reliability coefficient was calculated at 0.96 (Scott's π) for the three mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories: directionally Russian, directionally Ukrainian, and directionally neutral or indeterminate. It must be noted that the categories do not assume that memes coded as *directionally Russian* or *directionally Ukrainian* were necessarily created or tweeted by a Russian or Ukrainian, nor does the researcher assume that Ukraine consists of pro-EU and pro-Russia halves. This article takes the perspective that "Ukraine is a large, diverse country that has managed its many differences admirably since winning independence in 1991" (Finnin, 2014, para. 7).

The rationale for using directionality is to shed light on the intended audience of the meme in terms of social critique. In other words, for a meme to be coded as *directionally Ukrainian,* it is not essential to this inquiry to know whether a Ukrainian or Russian person created the meme. It is, however, critical to discern the discursive aspect of the meme.

Directionality as a coding concept for Internet memes is helpful, because it reveals the subject matter as well as the audiences. For example, the meme shown in Figure 2 was coded as Directionally Ukrainian precisely because it unflatteringly positions Yanukovich, sitting opposite from Putin, as an inept equal to his Russian counterpart by suggesting that Putin has ruined his country as Yanukovich did to Ukraine. The important element in directionality is that the meme at once discloses two audiences: (1) the audience targeted with critique—namely, Putin and his supporters; and (2) the audience poised to consume such critique—namely, those who oppose Putin and his policies. Directionality is also an

important tool in analyzing memes, because it enhances our understanding of narrative construction among members of participatory digital culture.

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Aug 5

Great minds dictate alike.

Figure 2. An image macro meme in the* directionally Ukrainian *category.

Language

Kevin Rothrock, the moderator of the Twitter account @RuNetMemes, provided English translations of any Russian and/or Ukrainian text to accompany the original text on the memes. Additionally, as the researcher, I feel it appropriate to note that my level of proficiency in Russian allows me to understand its use as the most salient language among memes in the sample. As the RuNet Echo project director at Global Voices Online, Rothrock granted me permission to use the memes tweeted by @RuNetMemes for analytical purposes in this study (personal communication, May 14, 2014).

Understanding the Emergence of Memetic Themes

Generally, the themes that emerged from the analysis suggest impassioned perspectives on both sides of the conflict. Topically, memes that were coded as *directionally Russian* or *directionally Ukrainian* demonstrated consistent narrative development along varying themes (as shown in Tables 1 and 2, respectively). Although the narrative may reference a given news story or event, the memes themselves continued to be consumed and reproduced along similar themes. This tendency to follow a narrative is at

once endemic to viral media in general and unique to memes given the requirement for remix, parody, iteration, and rapid diffusion.

Often, and especially in the case of the Ukrainian memes, the tweets included an image macro. As Wiggins and Bowers (2014, p. 2) point out, once text is added to an image—which can be a photograph, screenshot, or other graphic content–it becomes an image macro meme. (Figure 3 illustrates the common understanding of an image macro meme). However, in the case of the tweets on @RuNetMemes, several examples do not fall into this definition. Image macro memes typically establish the joke at the top of the image with the punchline placed at the bottom. This type of structure positions the image as a visual connection between the top-bottom parts of the joke. However, with most of the memes coded as *directionally* Russian members of participatory digital culture deviated from the standard structure by placing dialogue in boxes or balloons similar to comics.

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Mar 2

"W[ant] to travel to Crimean beaches for free? Fail college!" [and be conscripted] #war #Russia #russiainvadesukraine

Figure 3. An image macro meme in the* directionally Ukrainian *category.

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Mar 29

A little nuclear war humor, via @korobkov: "Where are you hoping to vacation this summer?" "I want to go to America."

Figure 4. An image macro meme in the* directionally Russian *category.

The vast majority of memes in the sample did not follow the prescriptive structure for image macro memes. Figure 3 illustrates a meme that structurally follows the image macro definition described by Wiggins and Bowers (2014). In contrast to the familiar structure shown in Figure 3, a meme categorized as *directionally Russian* is illustrated in Figure 4 and is a remixed image including the addition of facial elements and dialogue bubbles. However, as mentioned previously, its structure is not typical for image macro memes. One reason for the difference in structure may be due to a novice level of experience in creating memes among Russian netizens as well as their presumed limited familiarity with U.S. image macro memes, such as *Condescending Wonka* or *Philosophical Raptor*.

Unaltered photographs with a sarcastic, humorous, and/or insulting caption; screenshots with text or a caption; multi-image panels (in which the subject matter is split horizontally or vertically with a line in the middle); completely altered images without a known, unaltered referent; and paneled conversation with dialogue boxes comprise most of the memes in this study.

Analysis

Internet memes as the unit of analysis tended to cluster around two categories. *Directionally Russian* implies memes that are decidedly pro-Russia, anti-Ukraine, pro-Putin/Kremlin, and anti-United States/European Union. Table 1 lists the main themes associated with this category as well as relevant

descriptions. *Directionally Ukrainian* memes are explicitly pro-Ukraine, pro-United States/European Union, anti-Putin/Kremlin, and/or anti-Russia. Table 2 lists the main themes of this category as well as relevant examples.

Table 1. Directionally Russian Memes (n = 70).

Major themes	Example
Scatological insults	Winnie the Pooh praises Ukraine with mouthful of excrement; Ukraine depicted as enjoying a urine shower; flag of Ukraine depicted as a toilet cleaner
United States, Ukraine, European Union as Nazi zombies or vampires	Timoshenko as vampire; Obama as zombie; EU leadership as Nazi; Maidan protestors as zombies
Homosexuality-as-decadence	Poroshenko holding a dildo, Putin laughing; John Kerry portrayed as gay; Poroshenko licks Obama
Putin-centric (cool, tough, unstoppable, threatening)	Lavrov threatens Kerry; Putin threatens Merkel; Putin in sunglasses that reflect burning U.S. flag; Putin as messiah

Table 2. Directionally Ukrainian Memes (n = 83).

Major themes	Example
Russian leadership as ineffective, buffoonish; mocking Putin's cult of personality	Homer Simpson as Yanukovich; Putin needs a straightjacket; Putin as Hitler; Medvedev as terrorist; Medvedev and Kabaeva[a] jealous of Putin
Critical of Russian intervention in Ukraine	Penguins with United Russia party posters in Alaska; fail college, join the Russian army; Russia provides aid to separatists; apathy among Russians; Putin as ghoul pulling down Malaysian Airlines plane with hand
Yarosh business card meme	Joker, Disaster girl, The Creation of Adam, Russian peasant, etc. with Yarosh business card reference
Fallling ruble due to sanctions	Flappy Bird ruble; Erectile impotence as corollary for ruble's decline

[a] Kabaeva is a former gymnast, member of the Russian Civic Chamber, and is rumored to be Putin's girlfriend ("Is Alina Kabaeva," 2014).

Although the two major categories may imply an assumed dichotomy between the two power structures—Russia on the one hand and Ukraine and its European and U.S. support on the other—such an assumption is fallacious and perhaps superficial. The directionalities as identified in this analysis strictly refer to the content in the 153 memes that used the Ukraine–Russia conflict as a source of memetic discourse. Memes that did not thematically fit into either category necessitated the creation of a third category, designated as *directionally neutral or indeterminate*. Some memes initially seemed to be a possible match for either of the two major categories. Although they were thematically relevant to the Russia–Ukraine conflict, their intent was impossible to discern. Table 3 lists the contents of this category.

Table 3. Directionally Neutral or Indeterminate Memes.

Major themes	Example
Nyash Myash/Natalia Poklonskaya	Sexualized and fetishized remix of Poklonskaya's speech as well as later comments in the media
Vague references to Russia–Ukraine conflict	Image of Crimea on a half-eaten cake; Maidan protestors as characters in *World of Warcraft*

Popular Cultural References in Ukrainian and Russian Memes

Absent among the memetic exchanges are references to Russian or Ukrainian television, film, art, literature, or pop culture as the source material for creating insults of Russia's perceived opponents. The absence of these cultural references is peculiar considering how common memes in contexts outside Russia and Ukraine appear to draw on those types of cultural sources for meme creation, such as references to a popular television character in Kenya (Ekdale & Tully, 2013), gaming references in Chinese memes (Wallis, 2011), popular music (Lewis, 2012), French artist Ducreaux's self-portrait (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014), or the use of Star Wars references in to protest excessive force (Shifman, 2014). Particularly striking among Ukrainian memes was the inclusion and remix of Western, primarily U.S., motion pictures.

Film references were overwhelmingly American in all 15 films cited by *directionally Ukrainian* memes. Nearly all directed criticism toward leadership figures. Table 4 lists the film references and a description of the meme along with the date when the meme was tweeted. One reason for the dominance of U.S. film references may simply be the popularity of U.S. films abroad. In fact, "in 2007, American films made almost twice as much at the Russian box office as domestic films—8.3 billion rubles ($325m) compared with 4.5 billion" ("Hollywood Goes Global," 2011, para. 6).

Table 4. Film References for Directionally Russian and Directionally Ukrainian Memes.

Type of meme	Date
Directionally Ukrainian	
Putin as Neo from *The Matrix* dodging questions (instead of bullets, as in the film)	January 17, 2014
Inspirational portrayal of Maidan protest with Batman from *The Dark Knight*	January 24, 2014
Reference to *Iron Man* to critique Yanukovich's lack of resources	January 29, 2014
Putin as Don Corleone and Yanukovich in reference to *The Godfather*	February 27, 2014
Lenin as *Forrest Gump* running from Ukrainian patriots	February 27, 2014
Weekend at Bernie's (in Rostov) with Putin, Yanukovich, and Medvedev	March 11, 2014
Russian ambassador to United Nations as Dr. Evil from *Austin Powers* films	March 16, 2014
Russian ambassador to United Nations as Jim Carey from *The Mask*	March 21, 2014
"I see dead people," from the *The Sixth Sense* —Yanukovich reference	March 28, 2014
Yarosh card held by the Joker from *The Dark Knight*	April 21, 2014
Russian reaction to sanctions with reference to Tom Hanks from *Castaway*	August 2, 2014
Igor Strelkov as *Forrest Gump* resigning as defense minister from Donetsk People's Republic	August 14, 2014
Blue-yellow protest in Russia with reference to *Spider Man* character and films	August 21, 2014
"Let's wait here until the crisis is over," time dilation reference to *Interstellar*	November 18, 2014
Falling ruble reason to time travel into the past, *Back to the Future Part II*	December 17, 2014
Directionally Russian	
John McCain/Maidan as Saruman/Isengard from the *Lord of the Rings* films	January 24, 2014
Maidan protestors as zombies from *World War Z*	September 29, 2014

Only two *directionally Russian* memes referenced films. Interestingly, *directionally Russian* memes referenced films with catastrophic themes (an end-of-the-world scenario in *World War Z* and a heroic struggle against an overwhelming evil in *The Lord of the Rings*). In terms of filmic genre, *The Lord of the Rings* is an epic fantasy adventure, and *World War Z* is apocalyptic horror. However, the scenes selected for the memes depict desperation, impending doom, and/or catastrophe. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the two *directionally Russian* memes that drew inspiration from *World War Z* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Incidentally, the *World War Z* reference includes Ukrainian text on the right side of the two-image panel. It reads "кляті москалі," or "damn Russians."

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Jan 24

Antirevolutionary memes: McCain/Saruman, Maidan/Isengard

Figure 5. Multi-image panel comparing John McCain to Saruman at Isengard.

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Sep 29

Russians channel *World War Z* for this anti-Ukrainian meme. RT @zedolazer: Война миров Z. Украинская версия.

Figure 6. Two-image panel comparing* World War Z *zombies to Maidan protesters.

The narrative development maintained the catastrophic theme even though the two memes in the *directionally Russian* category were several months apart. The *directionally Ukrainian* memes tended to use the film reference as a means for criticizing Russia or its leadership, but did so with an almost whimsical tone, which was absent from the Russian memetic counterparts. Common film genres among the *directionally Ukrainian* memes included science fiction, superhero, mafia/crime, dark comedy, romantic-comedy-drama, and comedy.

Directionally Russian Memes: Analysis

Scatological insults, specifically references to urine or excrement, were unique to memes coded as *directionally Russian* and targeted Ukraine and the European Union. Considering the absence of such vitriolic insults among the *directionally Ukrainian* memes, the motivation to use scatological references suggests an intense hatred of Ukraine for aligning itself with the European Union. Perhaps of greater importance to the analysis, the memetic scatology present among *directionally Russian* memes, illustrated in Figures 7, 8, and 9, implicitly suggests devotional dedication among Putin's supporters to oppose allegiance, partnerships, or alliances not in line with Putin's (sur)realpolitik.

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Jan 20

Get busy living or get busy dying? [Euro-Maidan]

Figure 7. Image suggests that the European Union is excrement.

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Mar 15

Some anti-Ukrainian potty humor.

Figure 8. Comic strip shows Winnie the Pooh eating excrement while praising Ukraine.
Translation: *Tigger asks, "Winnie, my goodness, what are you doing? Why did you take my pot of shit? Why are you eating it, Winnie? Enough! Stop!" Winnie answers, "Glory to Ukraine!"*

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Jul 26

A Russian view on Ukraine's future in the European community.

Figure 9. Top (Ukraine), bottom (European Union).

Characterizations of Ukrainian leadership as homosexual or sexually deviant (and therefore weak or ineffective) were unique to the memes coded as *directionally Russian* (shown in Figures 10 and 11). Regardless of the homosexual and scatological references, the factual nature of the insult is unimportant. The greater the familiarity that members of participatory digital culture have with a given insult, the more likely it will be used for thematically similar memetic creation, especially if it serves to further the memetic conversation, because it will likely persist until it is no longer needed. This is arguably true for memes in both directionalities.

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · May 25

"Now *you* are my favorite wife."

Figure 10. Homosexuality-as-decadence led by the U.S. secretary of state.

Perhaps first noted by Voloshinov in his critique of Freudian psychology, the Western predilection for talking about sex and being open to sexualities signifies a morally corrupt and decadent culture in the West (Costlow, Sandler, & Vowles, 1998). As such, memes that refer to homosexuality as an insult conceptually capture Voloshinov's position and maintain the moral purity and heterosexual masculinity implied within Putin's personalization of politics as spectacle (Goscilo, 2013), discussed in greater detail below. Perhaps the core of any insult reveals more about the aggressor than the target. The core of the insult is a perspective of homosexuality-as-decadence and is especially directed at Western powers (Costlow et al., Sandler, & Vowles, 1998).

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Jun 7

European values are pro-dildo.

Figure 11. Homosexuality-as-decadence in the Ukrainian parliament. Translation: Poroshenko asks, "So, it's soon time for the inauguration. Where is the gavel?" Oleh Lyashko says, "Look over there!" Poroshenko asks, "What's this junk, Lyashko?" Lyashko responds, "European values."

The term *homosexuality-as-decadence* reveals a latent heterosexual insecurity especially directed at men who oppose Putin's policies. Its use as a concept in this analysis reflects no judgment held by the author. Specifically, the homosexuality-as-decadence concept is integral to the cult of Putin, discussed later in greater detail, as it elevates his masculine heterosexuality by ostracizing other dominant men as gay and therefore weak, sinister, and corrupt, which Putin's personalization of politics as spectacle seeks to subjugate and punish through draconian legal measures (Russian Federation, 2013).

The Structure of Russian Memes

Directionally Russian memes tended to demonstrate more intensity, passion, and vitriol compared to the *directionally Ukrainian* memes. Additionally, although a few *directionally Russian* memes resemble common memetic structures (such as the image macro meme), the preponderance of memes in this category demonstrated an inconsistent pattern in terms of structure. Often Russian memes simply remixed an image and included no text (such as Timoshenko as a vampire or Obama as a zombie). One particularly common structure among *directionally Russian* memes was a version of an image macro that included a top-down, two-image panel or a right-left, top-down, four-image panel with either dialogue balloons or text outside the image panel (see Figures 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 15, 17, 18, and 20). This structure seems to be largely unique to the *directionally Russian* memes, with no *directionally Ukrainian* memes copying this structural strategy. In a few instances, the top-down panel included more than two images. As shown in Figure 11, Poroshenko holds a Photoshopped dildo in the Ukrainian parliament to demonstrate "European values." The final panel features an image of Putin and Medvedev laughing. Homosexuality-as-decadence is a major theme among the *directionally Russian* memes and fits well within the larger discourse of Putin's personalization of politics as spectacle.

Directionally Russian Memes: Discussion

In lieu of substantive political and social commentary, members of participatory digital culture celebrate memetic dialogue by recursively reproducing thematically similar content. The memes in this category are symptomatic of the current political and social constellation of Russian society. Structural references to Putin—such as perceptions of his power, masculinity, and dedication to duty—form an essential component of the propaganda that supports Putin's personalization of politics as spectacle.

Putin's Cult: A Personalization of Politics as Spectacle

The political era that Vladimir Putin has established since 1999 is defined by the personalization of politics as spectacle. However, it would be ill advised to read the Putin cult as analogous to the cult of Stalin. This is not to say that Putin's cult is divorced from those of his communist forebears, it is simply that with Putin the emphasis is on the man with images being the primary vehicle for its spread (Applebaum, 2013).

Putin's cult emphasizes his personage; the cult of Stalin and other Soviet leaders was at best an abstraction of the ubiquity and superiority of the Communist Party. Furthermore, in the Soviet era, especially as it concerns Joseph Stalin, the cult of personality was driven by fear and self-censorship which created the artifice of unanimous support for the regime (Ennker, 2004). Contrary to Stalin's cult of personality, Putin and those who support him have crafted an image-centric personality cult that positions Putin as an ideological vessel to house the aspirations, hopes, dreams, and fears of the Russian populace (Goscilo, 2013; Guillory, 2013).

Members of participatory digital culture form a branch of the cult, appeasing their needs for strong moral leadership by appealing to Putin's "political opacity" (Robinson, 2014, p. 110). Putin does not

emphasize a particular ideology; rather, it is precisely the absence of an ideological foundation that promotes using him to sate the needs of the public, whatever they may be. Guillory (2013) contends that Putin is a "unifying symbol [that points to] the much older notion of the king's two bodies" (para. 6)—Putin's personal life and his public persona.

Usually well scripted and planned, the Russian public occasionally catches a glimpse of Putin's personal side, as when he shed tears to learn of his successful election to an unprecedented third term as Russian president or when he announced plans to divorce from his wife, Lyudmila. Putin's public persona, well-crafted to assert authoritativeness, provides the best examples of Putin's cult as the personalization of politics as spectacle, such as the Internet memes that seek to promote Putin above Russia as morally pure and virile. Indeed, and as Cassiday and Johnson (2010, 2013) have argued, the Putin cult is not neo-Soviet but rather *post-Soviet*, and I would add that it is entirely postmodern as well. The deliberate procession of images emerging from Putin's personalization of politics as spectacle is effectively hyperreal in the sense that Putin has fabricated a false reality to provide substance for the extraordinariness of his spectacle (Debord, 1983).

Putin's Memetic Spectacle

Spectacle is particularly relevant to this discussion of Internet memes. As noted by Wiggins and Bowers (2014), memes are a genre of online communication. With regard to the Ukraine–Russia conflict, memes embody the reification of Putin's personalization of politics as spectacle. As Cassiday and Johnson (2013) note, Putin's cult transcends itself through officially sanctioned and planned portrayals of the Russian leader. In addition to the planned aspect of the Putin cult, Russian netizens recursively consume and produce memes either specific to or related to Putin to further the personalization of politics as spectacle. Ross (2004) wrote that the cult emerged from Putin's arguably formidable personality. Accordingly, memetic references to Putin seek to defend Putin from opponents, either real or imagined.

Although neither of the categories of memes in this analysis emphasize Putin himself, his virtue as a virile, masculine heterosexual is implied when memes accuse Russia's opponents of homosexuality. Equally, Putin's moral purity, love of animals, devotion to the Russian Orthodox Church, and his tireless efforts at building a better Russia for Russians are implied when memes associate urine and excrement with Ukrainian leadership and the European Union. Memes that oppose Ukraine, the European Union, and/or the United States use direct, threatening language, perhaps because of the circuitousness of Western political rhetoric.

Directionally Ukrainian Memes: Analysis

In contrast to the *directionally Russian* memes, the Ukrainian examples seem to react to and exist as a result of Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea. Although the Ukrainian memes certainly evince original components, they do not move beyond themes stimulated by Russian actions. Memes that are coded as *directionally Ukrainian* largely respond to Russian actions in eastern Ukraine and Crimea and its relationship with the West. An exception to this may be the blue-yellow meme that emerged as a result of the visual protest of August 20, 2014, when an anonymous

individual hung the flag of Ukraine on one of the Seven Sisters skyscrapers in Moscow and "painted the derelict Soviet star at its top blue and yellow" (Wiggins, 2014, para. 12).

A common theme among the blue-yellow memes that emerged after the visual protest of August 20 was the low level of intelligence among Russian police (see Figure 12) and leadership. Indeed, and as Cassiday and Johnson (2010) point out, Medvedev consistently appears as Putin's favorite buffoon or stooge in many *directionally Ukrainian* memes and especially in the blue-yellow memes (depicted in Figure 13).

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Aug 22

"Well, fuck, how am I supposed to arrest all this?" #RussianPoliceProblems

Figure 12. Blue-yellow meme mocking intelligence of Russian security forces.

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Aug 21

Yesterday they painted the star. Today it was the school of economics. What will they do tomorrow? via @politsmile

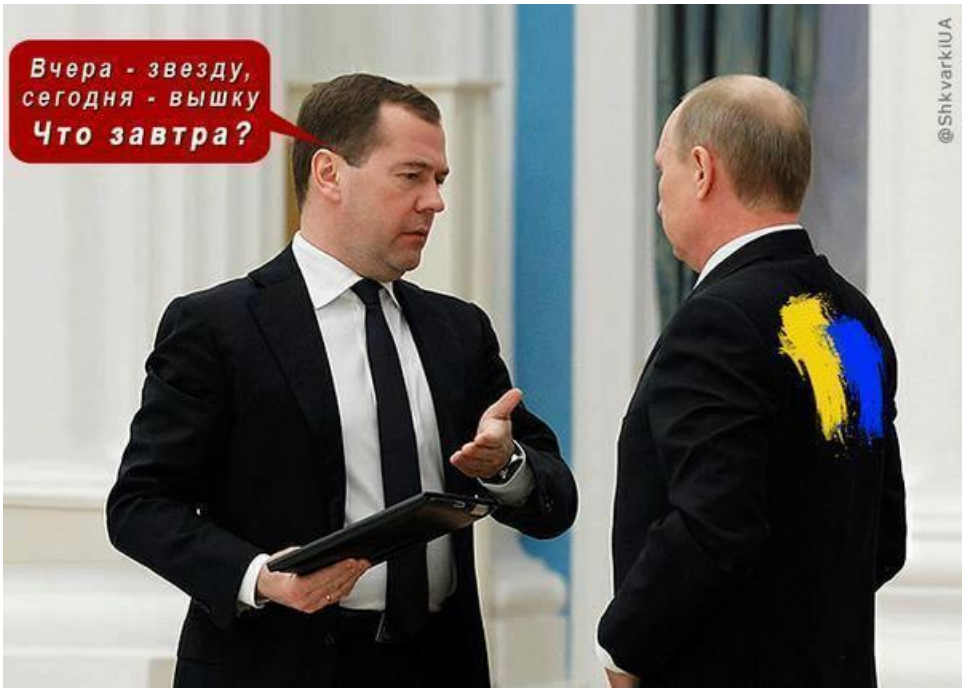


Figure 13. Blue-yellow meme mocking the intelligence of Putin and Medvedev.

Additionally, these blue-yellow memes demonstrate polyvocality given the inclusion of "assertions threaded together with intertextual and interdiscursive reference[s]" (Milner, 2013, p. 2364). Especially prolific among memes coded as *directionally Ukrainian*, pop polyvocality meant the purposeful inclusion and remix of popular cultural references such as films, familiar memetic structures such as image macro memes with setup at the top of the image and punch line at the bottom, and the intentional remix of Putin's own parade of images and tropes used for his personalization of politics as spectacle. Interactions between Putin and Medvedev figure prominently in critical memes, with special emphasis on ineffective (if not blundering) leadership. In most cases, Medvedev is portrayed as a well-meaning but completely inept leader who relies on input and direction from the moderately less-inept Putin.

Humor accompanies most of the critical memes, which stands in great contrast to the more acerbically critical pro-Russia/anti-Ukraine memes. In criticizing Russian leadership, the memes vary from references to Adolf Hitler (see Figure 19) to insinuating that the so-called pro-Russian separatists in the eastern region of Ukraine are far better equipped than the Russian media has stated (see Figure 20). Memes that criticize the separatists tend to portray Ukrainian protesters as simple civilians who are defending their home from Russian incursions. This contrasts with the depiction of the separatists, who appear as well-organized, trained, and well-armed soldiers in *directionally Ukrainian* memes (see Figure 20).

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Jan 17

The man dodges questions like Neo does bullets.

***Figure 14. Putin as Neo from* The Matrix.**

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Feb 24

"We need a strong Ukraine!" "Preferably the whole thing."

Figure 15. Clever remix of image macro meme by changing image to match punch line.

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Mar 2

"Can I haz already sent troops?" #Putin #ukraine #crimea #совфед

Figure 16. "Can I haz" meme remixed with Putin.

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Jun 29

The sign said "Putin go!" and so he went. #DreamOn

Figure 17. Remix of Putin's tearful image from his third reelection as president.

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Oct 31

May we suggest a choice of Halloween costume for the discerning RuNet Memes fan? (h/t @jesseberney)

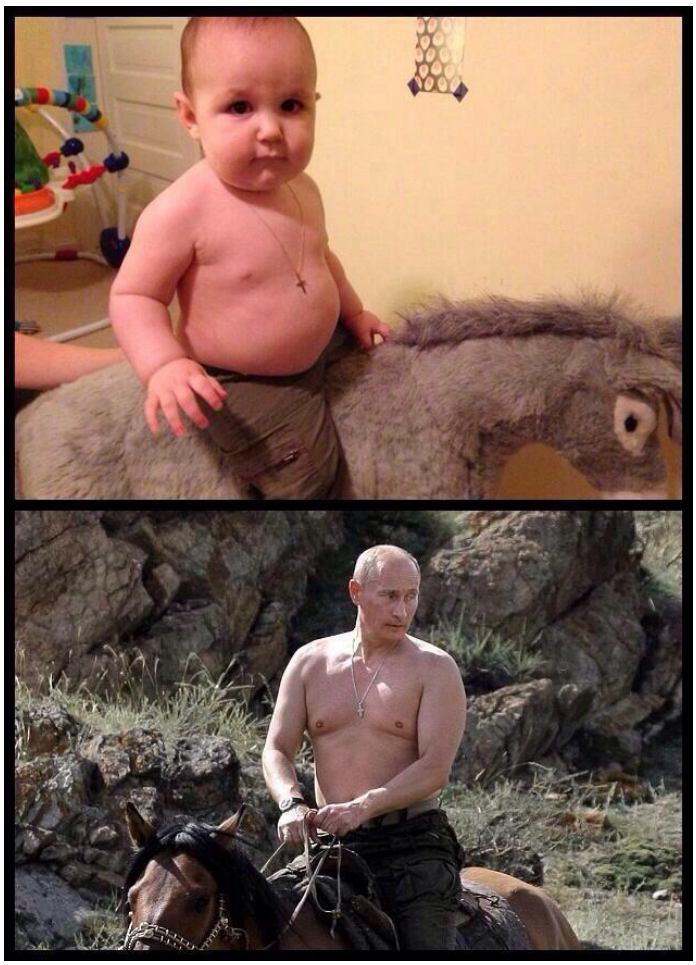
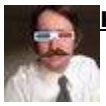


Figure 18. Remix of Putin's strongman image in a two-image panel.

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Sep 6

"Want to grow up like this? You've got to train for it!" via @KSHN

Figure 19. Putin with Hitler as a personal trainer.



Kevin Rothrock @KevinRothrock · Apr 19

Kiev: a planned special op by the West to seize power. Slaviansk: a peaceful protest by the Donbas people.

Figure 20. Two-image panel of differing media portrayals of the conflict.

Directionally Neutral or Indeterminate

On March 11, 2014, Natalia Poklonskaya commenced her duties as the newly appointed prosecutor general and delivered a speech about the crisis in Kiev's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) and the related Russian annexation of Crimea. Video of the press conference was uploaded to YouTube the next day. The clip was uploaded again to the Japanese YouTube channel, where it garnered massive popularity among Japanese netizens (Phro, 2014)—a fact that relates to the anime-zation of Poklonskaya in a series of remixed, iterated memes deriving from the *Nyash Myash* meme. Russian and Japanese fan art surrounding Poklonskaya "overemphasize the cute or kawaii aspects" of her appearance (Rothrock & Tselikov, 2014). *Kawaii* is a concept associated with cuteness in Japanese anime culture (Bennett, 2011).

RuNet Memes @RuNetMemes · Mar 27

The obsession with this woman goes all the way to the top.

Figure 21. Putin's "obsession" with Poklonskaya.

Less than a month after the press conference and following a rising tide of netizen fascination with the newly appointed Russian prosecutor general, the YouTube account owned by Enjoykin published a remixed video of Poklonskaya's March 11 press conference. An *autotuned* Natalia Poklonskaya is featured in the video intermixed with an anime version of Poklonskaya. As of this writing, the original *Nyash Myash* video uploaded to YouTube has nearly 18 million views. The ensuing *Nyash Myash* Internet meme has encouraged the production, consumption, and reproduction of the meme in the form of image macro and video memes, including references to Putin (see Figure 21).

A host of related memetic examples surged in the wake of the popularity of the initial *Nyash Myash* video. The preponderance of *Nyash Myash* memes positions her as strong, professional, loyal, and favored by the Kremlin. However, the *Nyash Myash* video shows a desire for reconciliation between the two belligerents—a sentiment largely absent elsewhere. The *Nyash Myash* memes from the sample taken from RuNet Memes position Putin as allegedly infatuated with Poklonskaya without actually mentioning the Russia–Ukraine conflict, as in the case with the other *directionally Russian* or *directionally Ukrainian* examples. Other memes coded as *directionally neutral or indeterminate* included vague references to the conflict, such as a simple image of a half-eaten cake decorated with a map of Ukraine. Does this suggest that Ukraine is only partially eaten and that more pieces will be taken? Does the image imply that you can have your cake and eat it, too? Is it simply a vague critique of Russia's role in the crisis, or is it an insult directed at Ukraine? As a *directionally neutral* meme, it clearly has something to say about the Russia–Ukraine conflict, but it remains unclear which audiences are being addressed and for what purposes, especially when compared to the memes coded as either *directionally Russian* or *directionally Ukrainian*.

Conclusion

Participatory digital culture allows eccentric expression in memes, perhaps due to the anonymity inherent in being a member of an amorphous mass. Viewing memes about the Russia–Ukraine conflict reveals a situation in which consumers are recursively producers. Spreadable media-as-Internet memes have the potential to become massively distributed, possibly inspiring further iterations that are then rapidly diffused. Parody sits at the heart of memes; it violates the origin through its remix and replacement with imitation. In the current Russia–Ukraine conflict, however, it is remarkable that Internet users perceive the meme as a conduit for meaningful criticism, discussion, and possibly debate. What is it about the meme that members of participatory digital culture perceive as a useful tool for critique? Memes are remixed, iterated messages that are rapidly spread for the purpose of continuing a conversation. As artifacts of participatory digital culture, the Internet memes associated with the Russia–Ukraine conflict demonstrate a communicative capacity to not only satirize and poke fun but criticize political policy, especially in quarters where criticism has no lease. Admittedly, though, while several of the Internet memes in this study offer superficial insults of political opponents or policies, the opportunity to voice such criticisms or insults is in and of itself worthy of study given the limitations on expression in Russian media. In other words, the Internet meme offers Russian, Ukrainians, and others the opportunity to voice their opinions—be they superficial or serious. The manifestation of their opinions as an Internet meme to be easily produced, consumed, and distributed coalesces as a narrative that may have been otherwise ignored or impossible to share. This study has shown memetic directionality as an analytical tool useful to discuss meaning from discursive exchanges on the memescape.

Furthermore, memes from the Russia–Ukraine conflict demonstrate the three characteristics needed to be seen as artifacts of participatory digital culture. In possessing virtual physicality, the memes imply a cognitive and digital memory trace in the tradition of Giddens (1984). As an artifacts of digital culture, the virtual physicality as a characteristic of memes suggests that individuals engage in recursive production, consumption, and reproduction precisely because the memory trace allows agents and social systems, or individuals and participatory digital culture, to quickly understand the context of the meme, remix it, and reproduce and distribute it for others to consume (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014). Memes from the Russia–Ukraine conflict also imply specific social and cultural attributes that are recognized by members of participatory digital culture and enable the reconstitution of the social system (and the furtherance of memes). Specific to the directionality of the memes, individuals who identify as belonging to the Ukraine, European Union, and pro-West side necessarily understand the social and cultural cues included in the memes which are useful in further memetic creation. The same is true for those individuals who identify more with Putin, pro-Kremlin, and so on. Finally, memes as artifacts in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, given their virtual physicality, are the result of purposeful production and consumption also because of social and cultural connections experienced on- and off-line.

In the case of Ukraine and Russia, memes are a tempting tool for the dissemination of tightly encapsulated social/political critique, and they are relatively easy to understand by many people. Recently the Kremlin has criminalized the use of celebrity images in memes "when the image has nothing to do with the celebrity's personality" (Rothrock, 2015, para. 1). In this particular case, a Moscow judge ruled that a specific instance in which a celebrity's image was used in an image macro meme qualified as a violation of personal privacy of Valeri Syutkin, a Russian singer. Although politicians are still vulnerable to the whims of digital culture as it produces and consumes new memes, the court's decision could encourage websites to institute indirect censorship of their own content—perhaps the intended outcome of the judge's decision. Memes are sure to accompany the Russia–Ukraine conflict as it continues, and more attention must be given to the design and use of memes on both sides. Memes appear to have the power to encourage their propagation and perhaps also their censorship. Consequently, it falls to scholars and researchers to continue investigations into the ways participatory digital culture uses memes for discursive practices.

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