

2010's Decade Review, Part 1: The Origin of 2010's Memecultures

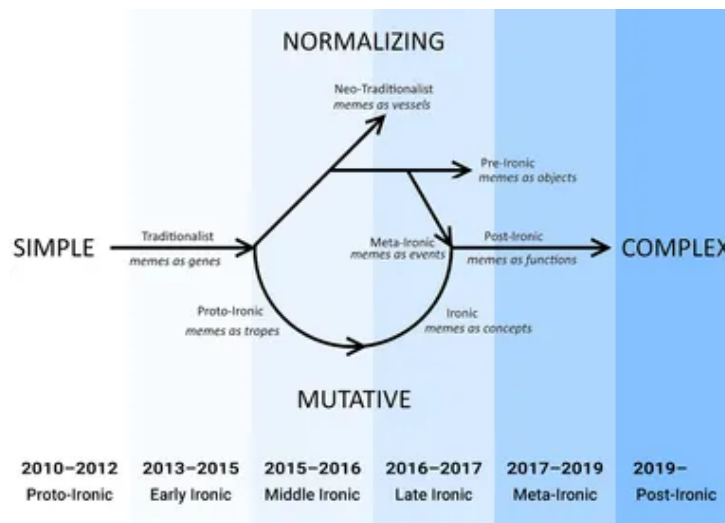
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The importance of the 2010's to meme history was not in its novelty but its scale. During the 2010's, the world reached a cultural boiling point as the underground spilled out irreversibly into the mainstream and destroyed the boundaries between the two.

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The memetic history of the 2010's can be divided into six Eras, starting from the influences that precipitated into the ironic meme movement and arriving at the beginning of postirony.



The Six Eras of recent memetic history, based on our 2015 model (Her & Zharova, 2015)[1]

I have divided the decade into these six Eras based on the general contours of recent cybercultural history. The causal explanations for the historical events that distinguish one Era from another can be

drawn from various types of preceding states or events: conceptual developments; advancements in digital and social technologies; spread of cultural patterns; levels of memetic literacy; platform-level changes; demographics, and so on. The most useful entrance into this scaffolded web of memetic history is through the lens of the techniques that were adopted by the memers who produced original content. This must be contextualised by comparison with the previous decades, in light of the techniques that developed during those respective periods.

This decade was important for memes not because the most important memes were produced during the decade, but because the way we view and use memes developed substantially. The Eras demarcate this development of Internet memetics through its different historical stages. Memecraft was already highly advanced by the beginning of the decade. In fact, the average shitposter today will find many of the essential skills of the typical 2000's anon arcane and even bewildering. The sense of the Internet as a dangerous place has given way to the sense that the Internet is dangerous only insofar as it is contiguous to real life. While the explorers of the 2000's, particularly channers, sought to find their place online and establish an identity around the platform of their choice, the diaspora was forced to define themselves not against the outgroup on a distant platform but by the differences they could telegraph on mainstream platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. As the use of social media became increasingly necessary, users from memetically advanced platforms began to colonise mainstream platforms by bringing relics from their home platforms. Initially, the mere act of reposting memes which were supposed to be kept to their appropriate environments was a subversive act harkening back to trolling, even forum sliding. The Proto-Ironic Era was characterised by the importation of memes into foreign environments by ex-anons who migrated onto *anonymous* platforms. On Facebook, off-platform import was the primary form of memetic content. The pattern persisted throughout the decade^[2], with new memes being produced by a minority of memetically literate users on platforms such as 4chan and Twitter and being spread by low memetic literacy users on platforms such as Imgur and Facebook.

According to our 2015 model of memetic evolution,^[1] ironic memes emerged through the clash between normies and autists following the diaspora of the latter into mainstream social media. Mariya Zharova and I predicted that the continued spread of ironic memes would lead to the development of postironic memes as the gap between the underground and the mainstream narrowed and the tension between the two intensified. The clash was first and foremost between the anonymous and *anonymous* modes of engagement, but the armaments were supplied through *pseudonymous* users on platforms such as Reddit. Pseudonymous users, with secondary identities and a mode of engagement aimed primarily at

outside viewers without the underlying assumption of cultural familiarity, imported memes from underground platforms and spread them into mainstream platforms. This route of memetic import and distribution via pseudonymous platforms became established as the idiosyncratic desires of the respective platforms aligned: the channers wanted new content; the Redditors wanted gold from strangers for content that got to the front page; the captive audiences on Facebook waited for content to appear on their feed. By the latter half of the decade, the supply chain of memes turned into a cycle as Facebook memes came into their own enough for them to be imported back onto underground platforms.

Alongside memes that were imported from the underground, metamemetic ideas about what memes are also spread into the mainstream. The corresponding memetic theories informed the development of memetic techniques and practices adapted for the new environment, made up of underground users on a mainstream platform. These memetic techniques were built on top of older techniques that were developed during the only two other decades that can properly be considered a part of meme history: the 90's, during which the concept of the Internet meme developed, and the 2000's, during which virtually all of the fundamental memetic techniques still in use today were invented.

Internet memes as we recognise them have only existed for about 30 years. Richard Dawkins coined the term "meme" in his *The Selfish Gene* in 1976. 17 years later, in 1993, Mike Godwin coined the term "Internet meme". Godwin developed his idea of the Internet meme concept through his memetic engineering experiment known as Godwin's Law. He designed a "counter-meme" which stated that "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one." He spread the phrase into newsgroups in which comparisons to Nazis were common, namely by libertarians critical of any government. The countermeme worked as Godwin had hoped, drawing attention to the frequent Nazi comparisons, and helping users quickly discredit them when they happened. The countermeme grew through users by guiding users to note exemplary cases more often, as well as by inspiring other users to come up with other natural laws of the Internet of their own.

Godwin's Law is a good example of an attractor, a kind of conceptual magnet which collected examples of itself and grew in size and gravity through this feedback loop. The concept of the Internet meme itself proved to be an attractor, simultaneously justifying and encouraging the production and the dissemination of spreadable content online. The Internet meme concept was unique to the Anglosphere during this period, and determined the direction in which Western cyberculture would progress. Other cybervcivilisations had their own rough conceptual equivalents. For instance, the Korean Internet's

memes, called jjalbang (짤방, short for jjalimbangji 짤림방지, literally “prune prevention”) are founded on the notion that the basic unit of content online is the individual file. The practice was developed by users on the popular digital camera hobbyist website dcinside (디씨인사이드). The forum became a site of socialisation, and users began including random images on their posts in order to prevent them from being detected as shitposts by moderators and pruned. However, the jjalbang was first and foremost a materialist object, and by no means the same thing as a meme. Purists among contemporary users still refuse to apply the term to anything other than image files, making exception for animated jjalbangs (oomjjal 움짤, short for umjiginoon jjalbang, literally “moving jjalbang”).

It is important to note the fact that neither the meme concept nor the Internet meme concept were essential to the development of Internet memes as a cultural technology. In every instance, the digital technology of personal computers and the Internet inevitably led to the practice of memeing, regardless of what cybermetaphysics the theoretically-minded users adopted to explain the phenomenon. This is not to make a technologically determinist claim that memes are inherent to the Internet, or inevitable. Rather, I am arguing that Internet memes are not a particularly novel phenomenon in the grand scheme of human culture. They are the result of our applying ancient techniques and practices onto a new context and object. Just as certain relics acted as vessels of *mana* in holy rituals, memes act as the locus of mana in the post-Internet era. In fact, the function of memes as *omniritualistic* relics has allowed users to revive the *aura* in images a mere 85 years after Walter Benjamin proclaimed its death in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935)[3]. A meme, rather than be framed by the environment in the way that Benjamin argued is the focus of reproduced art, frames its environment by recontextualising it. True, a meme changes meaning based on its environment, just as a poster is perceived differently based on how it is framed. But more importantly, a meme brings with it its evolutionary history. The reproductive success of a meme depends on how well it performs its function as a relic: it must be a good vessel for the mana it has inherited from its past.

The 1990’s built the conceptual foundations for Internet memes as a kind of art that takes time seriously. Following suit from the cyberspatial vocabulary of the 1980’s recognising of the physical nature of the Internet, early theories of Internet memes themselves were dominated by memetic externalist thought. It was entirely ambiguous as to whether Internet memes were supposed to be expressions of internal memes (that is, ideas) or themselves true memes (that is, cultural replicators). The result of this strange metaphysics of Internet memes was that its earliest pioneers designed a structural analogy between a meme and a reliquary (a container for relics) into their archetypal form: a meme was a vessel for ideas,

but the vessel itself was a replicator. This is a startling departure from Dawkins' original conception of the meme as self-replicator, a one-part entity which was meant to serve as a metaphor for genes. In fact, Dawkins created the concept during a time when genetics was still primitive. He had hoped to explain genes using the metaphor of the meme. The Internet meme, as designed by its early developers, turned out to be more similar to the notion of the reproducer than a replicator. A meme was to be the cultural bacterium, not the cultural gene.

Some of the most important memes of all time arose during the 2000's. Arguably the most important among them was the Rules of the Internet, which included entries such as "Lurk moar," "You're doing it wrong," "Pics or it didn't happen," and "Anything can be a meme." One version of the rules read "Everything is a meme. No exceptions." The rules acted as a tongue-in-cheek manifesto for the developing online communities such as 4chan and Something Awful, and the selective adoption of the most attractive rules, such as Rule 34, resulted in feedback loops that generated such force that entire markets and platforms formed around them. During that time, when anonymity drove memetic evolution in the West, fluent adherence to rules such as these acted as the shibboleth for subculturalists. This meant that the rules were used both as justification and inspiration for the development of new memes while enforcing a democratic engagement among the users. During the same period, personality cults around oldbies and hierarchies based on post history drove memetic evolution on pseudonymous forums that produced the earliest Korean memecultures. The overall process was the same in both the East and the West. So, while most of the natural laws of the Internet were discovered during the 1990's, they were predominantly applied during the 2000's to invent new ways of using the Internet. This multi-generational transformation has been a recurring pattern throughout meme history.

The new ways of using the Internet that were invented during the 2000's were introduced to the general public through a combination of factors, among which were viral media and hacktivism. A major theme of the 2010's was the flow of underground content into the mainstream. Again, it is essential to put the decade into perspective by remembering that most of what has happened in the 2010's has already been thoroughly explored in the previous decades. Memes and memecultures had broken into the mainstream numerous times before. Most notably, Anonymous began around the beginning of the 2000's as a collection of subcultural mores for mobilising and coordinating nameless users, and ended up as a folk character hivemind, making routine appearances on TV news by the end of the decade.

The importance of the 2010's to meme history was not in its novelty but its scale. During the 2010's, the world reached a cultural boiling point as the underground spilled out irreversibly into the mainstream and destroyed the boundaries between the two. More memes were produced during the 2010's than in all of the Web's history. The historical significance of this explosion is undeniable. With the unprecedented spread of memetic literacy, memes went from novelty content that had to be defined and explained before discussion (usually with reference to Dawkins and pictures of cats) to a commonplace term detached from its etymology. It's no wonder that clickbait outlets are publishing "The Top 10 Memes of the Decade" articles everywhere. Normies love listicles. But this stems from a cargo cult view of memes as something that the Internet spontaneously generates, which their viewers take as they come, dutifully categorising them by their morphology. This leads to superstitious thinking about how memes work. Autists reflected the same superstition about sociopolitical development by adopting the idea of *meme magic*. It was an exegetical framework which allowed them to recuperate the *Clown World* political climate, which began around 2013 as memes and exploded in 2016, as the one thing they could control and understand: memes. The 2010's was marked by the scale and frequency of open conflict between various perspectives on memes. The conflict was integral to the memetic history of the 2010's. In the next part of this series about the decade, I will explore the development of ironic memes which resulted from the clash between the mainstream and the underground.

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