VISUAL EXPRESSIONS TO COUNTER DIGITAL MISINFORMATION

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Abstract

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The vast array of news and information available online enables individuals to seek out sources more in-line with pre-existing beliefs. Selective exposure to content facilitates the formation of homogeneous echo chambers which limit exposure to dissenting points of view. As a result, it is increasingly difficult for individuals to distinguish between reliable facts and misinformation, a trend which contributes to increased sociopolitical polarization. In fact, a recent survey finds that Americans are more politically divided today than at any other point in nearly a quarter of a century. Given the serious ramifications of digital misinformation, this study advances a new subcategory of Internet memes, identified as infoMemes, as viable countermeasures: First, by establishing infoMemes as a practical method for dissemination of verifiable facts; second, by advancing guidelines for their production and diffusion across social platforms. The objective is to empower practitioners such as journalists and activists with a better understanding of the techniques, tools, and skills required to produce content capable of countering the adverse effects of digital misinformation.
CONTENTS

Figures ........................................................................................................... iv

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................... v

Chapter 1: The Age of (Mis)Information
  1.1 Digital Misinformation ............................................................................. 1
  1.2 A Rapidly Changing Mediascape ............................................................... 5
  1.3 The Rise of Partisanship and its Implications ............................................. 8
  1.4 Research Scope and Objectives ................................................................. 12

Chapter 2: Defining Internet Memes
  2.1 The Origins of Internet Memes ................................................................. 15
  2.2 Taxonomy of Internet Memes ................................................................... 17
  2.3 General Characteristics .......................................................................... 18
  2.4 Content .................................................................................................... 19
  2.5 Form ........................................................................................................ 22
  2.6 Stance ...................................................................................................... 23

Chapter 3: Visual Expressions for the Dissemination of Information
  3.1 An Introduction to InfoMemes ................................................................. 25
  3.2 Conceptual Framework .......................................................................... 26
  3.3 Toward an InfoMeme Model .................................................................... 29

Chapter 4: Confronting Misinformation
  4.1 A Focus on U.S. Immigration ................................................................. 35
  4.2 Confronting Misinformation About Immigration ..................................... 39
  4.3 Methodology ............................................................................................ 41
  4.4 Findings .................................................................................................. 49
  4.5 Discussion ............................................................................................... 50
FIGURES

Figure 1: The infoMeme Model ................................................................. 28

Figure 2: Meme Diffusion Model................................................................. 34

Figure 3: Example of Twitter post from the chaos category referring to the perceived lack of will in the Obama administration to enforce current immigration law. November 23, 2016. ......................... 45

Figure 4: Example of Twitter post from the fear category describing possible threat to immigrants discussing their status on social media. January 27, 2017................................................................. 46

Figure 5: Example of Twitter post from the fear category claiming proof that three million immigrants voted illegally. January 27, 2017................................................................. 47

Figure 6: Another example of Twitter post from the fear category describing the potential financial benefits of building Trump’s Wall. January 27, 2017................................................................. 47
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CHAPTER ONE
THE AGE OF (MIS)INFORMATION

1.1 Digital Misinformation

“We’ve all become prosumers; consumers and producers of content. Because we can independently access previously unavailable information, many of us are more empowered, more involved in researching the pros and cons of the various decisions we have to make about all aspects of our lives and work, rather than relying on experts.”

—Richard Saul Wurman, Information Anxiety 2

On October 18, 2012, Google Inc.’s quarterly earnings report was released more than three hours early due to an unspecified glitch. The report revealed that the company’s third-quarter earnings had missed growth expectations by a significant amount. The weak results coupled with the unexpected release of the earnings report triggered a massive $22 billion plunge of the company’s market capitalization and forced NASDAQ to halt trading Google shares for a short period. In this case, the leaked information came from financial printer R.R. Donnelley & Sons Co., a reputable source, and the data ultimately proved to be accurate. The episode demonstrates the potential chaos possible by a well-executed hoax from a disgruntled employee, corporate

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1 Richard Saul Wurman et al., Information Anxiety 2 (Indianapolis, IN: Que, 2001), 8.
saboteur, or skilled cybercriminal. Fortunately, stock markets prepare for such occurrences and have strategies in place to safeguard investments and financial institutions from severe losses. Still, no system is perfect.

In April 2013, Hackers took control of the Associated Press Twitter account and posted a fictitious report of a bombing attack at the White House. As soon as the breach was discovered the AP’s corporate communications team stepped in to invalidate the report, but the damage had been done. Within minutes of the original post, the Standard & Poor’s 500 Index plunged 143 points briefly wiping out $136 billion in value. Although these types of incidents are rare, they underscore the serious threat rumors, half-truths, and poorly timed revelations pose to modern society.

The World Economic Forum has identified digital misinformation along with terrorism and cyber-attacks as a major threat to humanity. While easily dismissed as hyperbole, the consequences of a comprehensive misinformation campaign should not be taken for granted. For instance, consider the role of misinformation during the 2016 presidential race between former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and businessman Donald Trump. Although presumed to be the front runner, Clinton struggled for much of the general election to keep pace with Trump’s brash demeanor and unapologetic style. What’s more, Trump’s remarkable run for office was characterized by an unusual blending of acknowledged facts with half-truths, rumors, lies, and conspiracy theories.

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Incessant allegations intended to discredit Clinton went as far as to suggest criminal misconduct in the mishandling of thousands of State Department emails. Her health and competency were brought to question when a video of Clinton allegedly fainting after an event at the September 11 Memorial surfaced on the Internet. Trump’s overstating of erroneous “facts” about Clinton at times exceeded run-of-the-mill political antagonism and bordered on slander. Much of the vitriol played out on media outlets on a daily basis and was augmented on social networking sites. Moreover, Trump surrogates and supporters proceeded to disseminate misinformation about Clinton instead of denouncing, or at the very least acknowledging, obvious falsehoods. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to speculate that misinformation across all media and particularly on social networking sites played a role in Trump’s surprising victory.

At its best, the Internet facilitates an unprecedented exchange and transmission of ideas. Yet, the vast availability of information enables users to seek out sources more in-line with pre-existing beliefs facilitating the confirmation and reinforcement of already held views. Selective exposure supports the formation of homogeneous echo chambers which enable the rapid dissemination of information within isolated clusters. As a result, this trend makes it increasingly difficult for users to distinguish between reliable facts, conspiracy theories, and unsubstantiated rumor.  

Mounting evidence suggests that a highly fragmented media landscape has influenced a significant rise in cultural and political polarization. In fact, a recent

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survey by the Pew Research Center finds that Americans are more politically divided today than at any other point in nearly a quarter of a century. Scholars including Lance Bennett, Shanto Iyengar, Kyu Hahn, and Walter Quattrociocchi have summarized findings from psychology, political science, and media affects research that correlate increased polarization to rapid changes in the mediascape and evolving media consumption patterns. In short, intense partisan division and animosity are fueled, at least in part, by how consumers become informed, debate ideas, and form opinions. As technology allows individuals to form isolated network clusters, their exposure to one-sided flows of information make them vulnerable to the influence of misinformation.

This thesis builds upon the work of Bennett, Iyengar, Hahn, and Quattrociocchi and proposes a new subcategory of Internet memes, identified as infoMemes, as a practical intervention to counteract the adverse effects of misinformation on social networking platforms. In doing so, this work fills a gap in communication research regarding the production and dissemination of content intended for social applications. While infoMemes may ultimately reinforce the effects of echo chambers, they have the

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12 Michela Del Vicario et al., "The Spreading of Misinformation Online," 554.
potential to counteract misinformation due to their capacity to be informative without being confrontational, the ease of sharing across networks, and the ability to utilize humor to confront difficult issues. The objective of this research is to empower practitioners including journalists, artists, designers, and digital activists with a better understanding of the tools, skills, and techniques required to publish digital content that promotes informed civil discourse. This thesis explores some of the theories associated with increasing levels of rancor and vitriol influenced by misinformation. Second, it considers the latent qualities of Internet memes and their potential as more than an ephemeral tool for the diffusion of humorous content. Finally, infoMemes are introduced as a viable medium for the dissemination of verifiable information. While the primary focus of this body of work is US immigration, infoMemes are designed to be an effective tool to counteract misconceptions and false narratives about many issues.

1.2 A Rapidly Changing Mediascape

“In the 1930s, the average person had available to them the afternoon newspaper or the radio. Even by the 1960s with the broad penetration of network television, the broadcast news was only three networks applying the same goal of two-sided information flows and standardized journalistic content, though with some mixed degrees of success.”13 The vast majority depended on ABC, CBS, NBC to keep abreast of current events across the nation and abroad.14 The limited number of content providers


offered “a homogenous and generic ‘point-counterpoint’ perspective on the news.”

These qualities all but guaranteed that consumers, at least those with the means to own a radio and later a television, had equal access to reliable sources of information. Moreover, journalistic standards assured that news reporting and commentary met strict ethical standards for accuracy, truthfulness, objectivity, and impartiality.

Newscasts had a leveling effect in which everyone regardless of economic or social status had access to a similar knowledge base. While far from perfect, Americans from all walks of life benefitted from a system that was readily available and accountable to public scrutiny. By comparison, today’s mediascape is far more complex. Media analyst Henry Jenkins estimates that an advertiser would have to run a prime-time spot on 100 TV channels today to reach the same audience saturation that spot would have garnered on the three major networks back in 1960.

The origins of this highly fragmented mediascape can be traced back to the mid to late-1980s and the emergence of cable and 24-hour news networks. “It was not until cable television and the explosion of niche networks that the availability of single-sided information flows became readily available and accessible.” Since then the rapid increase of content providers on both mainstream and alternative media platforms has

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17 Ibid., 716

18 Ibid., 717

19 Jason Gainous, Tweeting to Power: The Social Media Revolution in American Politics, 22.
continued to fragment the mediascape. While Americans continue to prefer their news on a screen, rapid changes in communication technology have facilitated a significant shift toward new media. According to the Pew Research Center, Nearly 60% of Americans identified televised newscasts as their preferred source of news.\textsuperscript{20} That majority, however, continues to erode as the number of consumers who get at least a portion of their news from an alternative source such as a website, app, or digital news organization steadily grows.

Although the trend is observable across most demographic categories, the shift to alternative sources of information is most prominent among young adults who are less likely than their parents and grandparents to rely on traditional media platforms.\textsuperscript{21} About a third of all young adults in the United States regularly get their news content from social networking sites, websites, and apps.\textsuperscript{22} That number is bound to increase as the use of mobile devices continues to expand. Already “the portion of Americans who ever get news on a mobile device has gone up from 54% in 2013 to 72% today.”\textsuperscript{23} In other words, while television remains the dominant player in mass communication, demographic shifts and technological advances threaten its primacy.


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{22} Amy Mitchell et al., "The Modern News Consumer," Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project, July 07, 2016, Young Adults.

Before moving forward, it’s worth clarifying the application of the phrase “alternative media” and differentiating between other possible interpretations. The phrase is commonly used to identify right-leaning media organizations including newspapers, news networks, and talk radio recognized as politically “conservative.” In this context, however, “alternative media” is utilized interchangeably with the phrase “new media” and applies to websites, digital apps, and online news organizations not traditionally understood to be a part of mainstream media.

1.3 The Rise of Partisanship and its Implications

It is no secret that Americans are deeply divided on a series of moral, spiritual, and ethical questions. This type of discord is certainly not a recent development and, generally, not much of a cause for concern. After all, vehement disagreement on moral and political issues has long been a hallmark of the American democratic tradition. In recent years, however, escalating levels of hostility have made political conversations less productive and hindered the free exchange of ideas. The Pew Research Center finds that intense partisan division and animosity are at their highest levels in a quarter of a century. Large portions of the population attribute feelings of frustration, fear, and anger to members of the “other” party. Nowhere is this cultural divergence more apparent than on Internet message boards, comment sections, and social media.

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25 Ibid.
Enumerating all the factors responsible for the breakdown of civil discourse and the rise of partisanship is a considerable challenge. Scholars across many academic disciplines surmise that the increasingly fragmented mediascape facilitates a natural tendency for consumers to gravitate to information that reinforces pre-existing beliefs and opinions. An argument that dates back as far as the 1950s and the heyday of cognitive consistency theory. The basic premise suggests that humans are predisposed to avoid conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors to avoid feelings of disharmony and unbalance. The sheer multiplicity of sources online necessitates that consumers exercise discretionary or selective exposure to information as a means of avoiding cognitive dissonance. Selective exposure enables users to seek out sources and communities more in-line with pre-existing ideology. As a result, homogeneous clusters, or “echo chambers,” emerge as participants create shared systems of meaning further confirming and reinforcing already held views. Selective exposure is particularly prominent on digital platforms that allow individuals to curate content undergirding echo chambers and impeding the transmission of contradictory information.


28 Michela Del Vicario et al., “The Spreading of Misinformation Online,” 554.


According to the work of Michael Cacciatore, Dietram Scheufele, and Shanto Iyengar, selective exposure is driven by three interconnected phenomena. First, a motivation for producers to take into account consumers preexisting beliefs when creating content. As previously discussed, an increasingly diversified mediascape makes it possible for individuals to seek out content that is more congruent with their personal beliefs and opinions. This trend thus provides a powerful incentive for media producers to cater to the political preferences of their audience. Editors stand to gain regarding market share and increased earnings potential by injecting more rather than less politically biased content into their reports. In other words, an increasingly competitive mediascape rewards producers willing to introduce a measure of bias into their content to attract a larger more engaged audience. Second, a tendency for news consumers to not only seek out more agreeable content but also to rely on self-selected social networks of like-minded individuals to decode information. By decentralizing the source of news, alternative media platforms have democratized the traditional model for the transmission of facts. Still, consumers require a method for confirming the content’s importance, relevance, and validity. The sheer volume of material essentially negates a user’s ability to analyze the content effectively without the collective wisdom of their self-selected communities. Finally, a system in which search engines and algorithms limit exposure to content as determined by data collected on personal preferences. The

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31 Michael A. Cacciatore, "The End of Framing as We Know It … and the Future of Media Effects," 19.

result is a digital infrastructure designed to confine consumers to narrow content streams that may isolate them from potentially disagreeable material.

The interconnected phenomena proposed by Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar does not provide sufficient evidence in and of itself to account for the significant rise in partisanship. Moreover, the formation of insular digital communities or even the use of algorithms to determine personal preferences is also insufficient. It is more reasonable to contend that these qualities function in unison to foster the suitable conditions for discord and animosity. In essence, selective exposure not only enables individuals to avoid information discrepant with their personal beliefs but also anyone who advances such ideologies. The result is isolated networks dominated by single-sided content. As more people chose to limit social interaction to self-selected social networks, “their opinions are likely to become increasingly extreme as a result of being exposed to more homogenous viewpoints and fewer credible opposing opinions.”

Selective exposure yields a fragmented audience segregated into polarized clusters that are highly susceptible to the effects of misinformation. A single-sided information flow makes it tough for users to distinguish between reliable facts, conspiracy theories, and unsubstantiated rumors. “Whether a claim (either substantiated or not) is accepted by an individual is strongly influenced by social norms and by the claims coherence with the individual’s belief system.” A problem amplified by the public’s general distrust of the media. A recent Gallup poll finds “Americans' trust and confidence in the mass media ‘to report the news fully, accurately and fairly’ has

34 Michela Del Vicario et al., “The Spreading of Misinformation Online,” 554.
dropped to its lowest level in Gallup polling history, with 32% saying they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media.” Three-quarters of Americans perceive news organizations as more biased according to the Pew Research Center. This distrust is an opening for “ideologically motivated, vested-interest groups known as ‘Merchants of Doubt’” to disseminate misinformation.

1.4 Research Scope and Objectives

The logical outcome of long-term avoidance of disagreeable opinions and perspectives is a more polarized and less informed society. A lack of trust in the media as traditional gatekeepers of information combined with the explosion of single-sided content producers facilitates selective exposure and undermines the civil exchange of ideas. The current status of the mediascape calls into question any “benefits” associated with social networking sites. It also raises concerns about the threat of misinformation, especially when considering the ease of avoiding contradictory facts. Most significant to this study, it amplifies the ethical and moral responsibility of content producers, especially professional communicators, to carefully consider the information they disseminate and the methods utilized.

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37 Sander Van Der Linden et al., "Inoculating the Public against Misinformation about Climate Change," Global Challenges 1, no. 2 (2017): 1600008.

What then can be done to avoid the seemingly inevitable political and cultural polarization associated with an increasingly fragmented mediascape? After all, the implications of a more polarized and less informed electorate to the well-being of a representative democracy are significant. “The foundational notion of American democracy is the idea that people exercise sovereignty through a republican form of governance ... Information communication systems are vital to that process, as they structure what people know and how they understand it.”\(^{39}\) As previously discussed, research from a number of academic fields suggests that partisan division and animosity online are fueled, at least in part, by the methods utilized by news consumers to become informed, debate ideas, and form their opinions. That being so, this study considers the serious ramifications of digital misinformation and introduces a subcategory of Internet memes, identified as infoMemes, as a viable method for the dissemination of information capable of circumventing selective exposure.

As digital modes of expression, infoMemes offer an almost unlimited potential for the strategic reframing of complex sociopolitical issues. The objective of this study is to empower practitioners—artists, designers, communication specialists, and digital activists—with a better understanding of the tools, skills, and techniques required to publish digital content primarily intended to be informative. This investigation, therefore, fills a gap in visual communication research regarding the production and dissemination of such content on social networking platforms. While the primary focus

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of this body of work is U.S. immigration, the infoMeme model discussed is designed to be an efficient method to counteract misconceptions across a variety of topics.

At its core, this project is an analysis of the Internet meme model as a viable framework for the diffusion of verifiable facts across social networking sites. Although many large news conglomerates successfully utilize social media platforms for the distribution of news and information, an informal survey of the mediascape confirms that smaller organizations still struggle with the medium. In general, a lack of resources and trained staff prevents smaller, independent organizations from fully engaging digital audiences with compelling content. The following chapters explore the infoMeme concept and propose a framework for their production and dissemination. Chapter two considers the current understanding of Internet memes, their development, and modes of production. Chapter three introduces infoMemes and considers the similarities and differences that define this subcategory of Internet memes. Chapter four discusses the primary focus of this study, namely U.S. immigration, and the approach utilized to address common misconceptions about the topic.
CHAPTER TWO
DEFINING INTERNET MEMES

2.1 The Origins of Internet Memes

“This quantity over quality shift in our culture has created an ever deeper need for truly informing experiences—for insight, the most precious form of information.”

—Nathan Shedroff, Information Anxiety 2

Although previously relegated to the darkest corners of the web, Internet memes have become an inescapable part of our daily digital experience. For some, these visual expressions of cultural transmission are a fundamental part of their daily communication ritual. Netizens the world over actively engage in their production and dissemination. Internet memes serve as a means of creative expression, sociopolitical commentary, visual vandalism, and entertainment. For others, however, Internet memes represent the antithesis of good taste; a social pariah to be endured rather than appreciated.

The original impetus for memes emerged years before computer scientist Sir Tim Berners-Lee developed the framework for the World Wide Web in 1989. More than a decade earlier, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins introduced “meme” into the academic lexicon in his book The Selfish Gene. A self-described enthusiastic Darwinian,
Dawkins aspired to overcome his dissatisfaction with scientific and theoretical explanations for human behavior through the application of evolutionary theory. He proposed the term meme as the cultural equivalent to genes to account for the non-genetic process by which culture develops, propagates, and evolves. Much like genes, memes are defined as replicators that undergo variation, competition, selection, and retention.\textsuperscript{41} In other words, Dawkins conceives of memes as ideas—discrete units of information—that replicate from person to person as a means of advancing distinctive cultural traits through a process of imitation. “According to Dawkins’ analysis in \textit{The Selfish Gene}, memes that spread successfully incorporate three basic properties—\textit{longevity, fecundity, and copy fidelity}. All three are enhanced by the Internet.”\textsuperscript{42}

In order for a meme to be imitated it most survive long enough to be seen and copied. A memes \textit{longevity} is highly dependent on its ability to endure duplication and adaptation. As the meme is duplicated, it must maintain \textit{copy fidelity} to keep some connection to the original. The greater its ability to endure duplication, while maintaining some semblance to the original, the more likely the meme is to be shared influencing its \textit{fecundity}. The meme concept can, therefore, be applied to a variety of categories each with countless subcategories, which themselves have the potential of becoming memes. Examples posited by Dawkins included melodies, jokes, traditions, and

\footnotesize
\begin{enumerate}
\item Limor Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 17.
\end{enumerate}
fashions, as well as abstract ideas such as God and faith.  

Essentially, “any type of information that can be copied by imitation should be [classified as] a meme.”

Within a few years the gene-meme analogy was embraced by a number of academic disciplines as a novel—yet, somewhat controversial—way to explicate the assorted assemblages that contribute to the advancement and evolution of culture. The meme concept became so popular, in fact, that it emerged as the basis for its own pseudo-scientific field before falling out of favor. Today, only a tenuous connection to the original definition remains as the meme concept has been appropriated and transformed by popular culture. No longer restricted to Dawkins’ original construct, memes are now more closely associated with Internet culture.

2.2 Taxonomy of Internet Memes

Internet memes are a diverse and egalitarian form of communication that maintains a tenuous connection to the original definition posited by Richard Dawkins. The term usually conjures up images of cute animals and people engaged in humorous activities with clever text overlaid in bold uppercase letters for good reason. Internet memes have become the favored method for sharing humorous and provocative content on digital platforms. Free online templates provide an effortless method for their production and popular websites such as Facebook, Reddit, and Tumblr provide a fertile environment for their distribution.

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Given their ubiquitous nature, it is hard to believe that Internet memes were once relegated to the darkest corners of the Internet. Still, they are generally considered too trivial or ephemeral for serious academic inquiry, and as such, they remain on the periphery of communication research. Internet memes for their part have offended, outraged, and amused their way into the hearts and minds of netizens across the globe. In the process, memes have established themselves as a permanent feature of the collective digital experience.

Despite considerable saturation across the Internet, the average user might struggle to define Internet memes beyond the pervasive visual paradigm of a humorous image combined with bold white text. Although there is no real consensus on what defines an Internet meme, researchers in fields as diverse as marketing, advertising, visual communication design, psychology, and computer science have enumerated general conceptual and formal characteristics.

2.3 General Characteristics

This study builds on the work of Limor Shifman to identify the general characteristics shared by the vast majority of Internet memes. Her work utilizes Dawkins’ original conceptual framework, but instead of looking at Internet memes as “single ideas or formulas that propagate well” she interprets them “as groups of content items.” Shifman goes on to define Internet memes as, “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created

with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via
the Internet by many users.” With a solid definition in place, Shifman proceeds to
isolate three broad features that facilitate imitation: content, form, and stance. First,
she identifies content as “both the ideas and ideologies conveyed” by a “specific text.”
Second, form applies to “the physical incarnation of the message, perceived through our
senses.” Finally, stance represents how a producer positions “themselves in relation to
the text, its linguistic codes” as well as the audience.

2.4 Content

According to Shifman, Internet memes are divided into two similar but distinct
varieties: virals and memes. The primary difference between the two categories is
“variability.” She defines virals as “the closest neighbor of the meme concept in both
popular and academic discourse.” The term applies to single visual expressions, such
as videos or photos, that spread across digital platforms as exact copies. On the other
hand, a meme “is always a collection of texts.” A single digital expression shared
multiple times is considered a viral. It does not become a meme until that image, video,
or text is shared, copied, modified, and circulated. Thus, a digital expression must be
disseminated enough to generate derivatives to be considered a meme.

46 Limor Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 41
47 Ibid., 40
48 Ibid., 40
49 Ibid., 56
50 Ibid., 56
Researchers have identified several underlying patterns that influence whether an individual will share, post, or ignore digital content. Shifman focuses on six traits that promote virality and refers to them as the “six Ps”: positivity, provocation of high-arousal emotions, participation, packaging, prestige, and positioning.\(^{51}\) (1) Positivity (and Humor): “people are more likely to share positive than negative stories.”\(^{52}\) While not all virals are funny, a large percentage of the most shared digital expressions exhibit at least some humorous qualities. A recent study finds that the most prevalent types of humor for virals and memes are sarcasm and silliness, but self-defeating humor garners the most likes and shares.\(^{53}\) (2) Provoking “High-Arousal” emotions: “people share content that arouses them emotionally—both positively and negatively.”\(^{54}\) (3) Packaging: straightforward concepts are more likely to be shared (4) Prestige: recognizable personalities augment the content’s prominence (5) Positioning: this trait may apply to two different strategies (a) the location of a piece on a webpage, (b) “the selection of the initial set of targeted customers to whom the message is sent.”\(^{55}\) (6) Participation: “viral dissemination may be enhanced if people are encouraged to share a certain item, but also to carry out other activities related to it.”\(^{56}\)

\(^{51}\) Limor Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 66

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 66


\(^{54}\) Limor Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 67.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 71

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 72
As discussed, the primary difference between viral and memetic content is the introduction of derivatives. “Some virals are born and buried as virals. Others evolve to be memetic: content units that generate user-created derivatives in the form of remakes, parodies, or imitations.” Shifman’s qualitative and quantitative analysis of popular YouTube videos produced a list of six common memetic attributes: 

1. **Focus on Ordinary People**: user-generated content is more likely to encourage derivatives than corporate or professional content.
2. **Flawed Masculinity**: “an extreme manifestation of men’s representation in contemporary mass media …” “presenting far-from-perfect men who fail to fulfill basic functions in their personal and professional lives.”
3. **Humor**: as with viral content, humor plays a prominent role in the diffusion of memes. Three attributes of humor are analyzed: (a) playfulness, memes produced for the sole purpose of eliciting laughter or amusement; (b) incongruity, the juxtaposition of incompatible elements for comedic effect; and (c) superiority, content featuring individuals who are unintentionally funny and thus perceived as inferior.
4. **Simplicity**: content that conveys an uncomplicated concept or slogan.
5. **Repetitiveness**: as a complement to simplicity, repetition enhances memorability and promotes replicability.
6. **Whimsical Content**: content that not only references popular content but also lacks a concrete theme.

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58 Ibid., 74
59 Ibid., 77
most successful tend to integrate at least three or four.” These attributes, therefore, work in unison to encourage the production of derivatives and facilitate memetic diffusion within Internet platforms.

2.5 Form

The vast majority of Internet memes are produced and disseminated by non-professional “designers” with limited exposure to graphic conventions and a lack of technical skills. As a result, the stylistic conventions most often associated with memes reflect the limitations of their production. Generally speaking, a meme’s appearance is determined by several factors: (1) the author’s expertise with common production and publishing methods; (2) community standards for the type of message and its intended audience; (3) the production limitations imposed by the platform selected for initial dissemination. “Beginning in 2007, numerous websites such as I Can Has Cheezburger and MemeGenerator were launched to allow users to easily create image macros.” At present, there are a number of online templates available that enable users to utilize established formats to produce their content. A brief Google search yielded a list of at least ten different websites—including knowyourmeme.com, memecreator.org, imgur.com, and memebetter.com—offering user-friendly meme templates.

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60 Ibid., 85

2.6 Stance

The third feature that facilitates meme imitation is stance. Shifman draws upon discourse and media studies to break down stance into the three subcategories: (1) participation structures: who is entitled to participate and how; (2) keying: the tone and style of communication; (3) communication functions: which references six fundamental functions of human communication. Although useful to identifying basic motivators for imitation, Shifman’s conceptualization remains too broad for practical application and, thus, requires further consideration. As such, the keying subcategory is identified as a point of interest given the goals and objectives of this investigation.

Three other concepts—agenda setting, priming, and issue-framing—are introduced and briefly discussed in this section in order to augment Shifman’s model.

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw first proposed the agenda-setting function of mass media in the late 1960s. Their work explored the relationship between what voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina identified as important political issues and the actual media content propagated during several presidential campaigns during the 1960s and 1970s. Their landmark research concluded that “voters tend to share the media’s composite definition of what is important.” In other words, mass media shapes and influences the issues individuals and communities regard as significant.

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64 Ibid., 177
Subsequent studies show that mass media actually influences what individuals deem important in two ways. First, as recognized by McCombs and Shaw, the media influences the perceived significance of an issue by deciding what to report on and what to ignore. Second, the media’s selection and presentation of content *prime* the audience to associate related frames with an issue or political actor. “The process by which frames bring certain values and other beliefs to mind is called ‘priming.’ Priming as conceptualized by social psychologists refers to the activation and enhanced accessibility of concepts and considerations in memory.”

Similarly, *issue-framing* theory suggests that the way information is presented affects how it is interpreted. George Lakoff defines the process this way, “frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions.” Framing is closely linked to agenda-setting function in that both influence what individuals perceive as important by how information is presented. As such, these concepts supplement Shifman’s model well and have the added benefit of providing a more practical framework for further exploration.

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65 Karen Callaghan and Frauke Schnell, Framing American Politics (Pittsburgh (PA, USA): University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 14.

3.1 An Introduction to InfoMemes

“We have certainly seen instances in which language has been used to cloud our judgment and blur the facts, but its beauty—the true power of words—is that it can also be used in defense of clarity and fairness. I do not believe there is something dishonorable about presenting a passionately held proposition in the most favorable light while avoiding the self-sabotage of clumsy phrasing and dubious delivery. I do not believe it is somehow malevolent to choose the strongest arguments rather than to lazily go with the weakest.”

—Dr. Frank Luntz, Words That Work

The Internet has made available an unfathomable amount of information to a large segment of the global population. Minimal effort is now required to access a wide variety of content from producers ranging from well-established news organizations to unknown “trolls.” The vast availability of information enables users to avoid content that contradicts pre-existing beliefs, therefore, confirming and reinforcing already held views. This type of selective exposure facilitates the rapid dissemination of information within homogeneous echo chambers potentially making it difficult for users to

differentiate between reliable facts and misinformation. Given the serious ramifications associated with digital misinformation, this study advances a subcategory of Internet memes, identified as infoMemes, as a viable method to counteract the adverse effects of selective exposure.

Given the serious drawbacks associated with misinformation, infoMemes are conceptualized as visual expressions composed of a recognizable structure that enables the dissemination of verifiable facts. As a subcategory of Internet memes, infoMemes offer an open model that permits continual adaptation depending on the needs and expectations of the intended audience. Although Internet memes are not usually produced with any consideration to objective fidelity, infoMemes are proposed as an alternative format that provides content producers with a practical method to circulate information across digital platforms.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

InfoMemes have the potential to be far more than an ephemeral tool for the dissemination of humorous content and cute photos of animals. Internet Memes have empowered individuals in the past to create and circulate subversive counter-memes that challenge unjust cultural and political practices. They have been used around the globe to draw attention to injustice, prejudice, and hate. InfoMemes are intended to tap into these qualities and provide users with a recognizable platform for creative expression for the purpose of addressing significant issues that may otherwise go underreported, unnoticed, unintentionally disregarded, or purposely ignored.
InfoMemes are flexible visual expressions that are designed to confront misconceptions about complex sociopolitical issues. As such, their content may be framed in a humorous manner or take a more serious tone depending on the subject matter and the intended audience. Their appearance, however, is intended to be much more structured and derives from a combination of elements inspired by cable and 24-hour newscasts. The objective is to add a level of sobriety by visually associating infoMemes with recognizable mass media conventions.

InfoMemes are defined by five basic attributes: subject bars, content window, source, context bar, author. (1) Subject Bars: a visual cue located in the top left quadrant of the layout which allows users to quickly ascertain the subject matter of an infoMeme. On occasion, it may be necessary to partially or completely remove this component to highlight the content but should be avoided whenever possible. (2) Content Window: the focal point of the composition. It may feature any combination of text, image, and video depending on the subject matter. Text only compositions should be avoided, however, as other modes of communication may be more appropriate. (3) Source: in contrast to other meme genres, access to primary or secondary sources is a necessary component to confront misinformation. A direct link to the primary source should always be included within the composition. The upper right quadrant is reserved for this purpose. The primary source, as well as links to any supporting documentation, should also be included in the explanatory text that accompanies the original post whenever possible. (4) Context Bar: this attribute complements the subject bar to establish the theme for the composition. The text should be limited to two lines and should follow similar conventions as a newspaper headline. (5) Author: the addition of
an author is perhaps the most contentious and crucial aspect of the infoMeme model. The addition of an author is a significant deviation from standard practice for Internet memes created anonymously, as such it underscores the necessity of verifying sources before circulating content online.

Fig. 1: The infoMeme Model
3.3 Toward an InfoMeme Model

Standard Internet meme conventions posit that a viral is a single digital expression shared multiple times across digital platforms. The digital expression may be born and buried as a viral; shared but never successfully inspiring any derivatives. An image, video, or text does not technically become a meme until it inspires imitation and reinterpretations. An overview of the three features that promote meme imitation are discussed in the previous chapter. In short, researcher Limor Shifman isolates three broad dimensions that facilitate imitation and diffusion: content, form, and stance. First, she identifies content as “both the ideas and ideologies conveyed” by a “specific text.” Second, form applies to “the physical incarnation of the message, perceived through our senses.” Finally, stance represents how a producer positions “themselves in relation to the text, its linguistic codes” as well as the audience. While sufficient for analyzing memes at a macro level, the three dimensions require further development to aid in the production of infoMemes.

As a genre of Internet memes, infoMemes are distinctive enough from other varieties to merit an amended diffusion model. Generally speaking, infoMemes follow a similar developmental pattern as other Internet memes. “An idea is generated by an individual. This idea is put into words or images, and communicated via various media (natural and technological) to others. The degree to which this idea is replicated by these others indicates its status as a meme and reflects a process of innovation

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68 Limor Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture, 40

69 Ibid., 40
diffusion.”

In contrast to the vast majority of memes genres, the primary objective of an infoMeme is to disseminate *verifiable information* to counteract misconceptions about complicated sociopolitical issues. This is not to say that political humor and social commentary do not find their way into infoMemes. Empirical evidence demonstrates that humor is a critical component of both meme and viral diffusion. Still, given the one-sided nature of online communication humor could potentially undermine an infoMemes effectiveness. Therefore, Shifman’s diffusion model is amended to accommodate for the fundamental differences between infoMemes and other genres, while taking into consideration the qualities that have been proven to promote diffusion. A four-stage model is proposed which combines the established principles discussed in the previous chapter with the work of Brian Spitzberg. 

The *foundational level* of the amended diffusion model includes Shifman’s three basic features that facilitate imitation: content, form, and stance. However, the selection criteria for content is modified to be more in line with that of a journalist or a news editor. “A distillation of the literature suggests that five values in particular help make the events newsworthy: (1) the presence of conflict, (2) The makings of drama or resonance with well understood story themes, (3) the involvement of personalities, (4) proximity of ‘closeness to home,’ and (5) timeliness or novelty. These news values not only serve as criteria for judging whether or not an event or piece of information ought to be selected for presentation in the media, They also serve as important organizing

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71 Ibid., 318
heuristics for the presentation itself.” Employing some or all these principles is far more likely to yield the appropriate tone for an infoMeme than Shifman’s basic model. They are also more likely to capture and hold the audience’s attention given their origin in established journalistic practices.

In spite of their reputation as semi-chaotic modes of communication, the vast majority of Internet memes follow established conventions for both production and dissemination. Movement beyond the meme level requires an assessment of a meme’s content, form, and stance to determine its overall fitness. “Fitness is the adaptive capability of a meme, where adaptation is the potential of the meme to adjust to the constraints and demands of the networks through which the meme is propagated and replicated.” How is the meme designed? What are its sources? Which networks are best suited for initial dissemination? Ultimately, the primary determinant of a meme’s fitness is content. An internet meme can lack certain features and still inspire replication and propagation as long as it is engaging.

The individual level takes into account a meme’s overall engagement factor as well as the influence and competence of the users involved in spreading it. “Messages begin with some individual actor somewhere, and the characteristics of the actor still matter to the process of diffusion.” A meme’s ability to spread beyond the individual level is dependent on the competence of the user to communicate in a way that is

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72 Vincent Price and David Tewksbury, News Values and Public Opinion: A Theoretical Account of Media Priming and Framing, 177.

73 Brian H. Spitzberg, "Toward A Model of Meme Diffusion (M^3D)," 317.

74 Ibid., 319
perceived as both effective and appropriate. Effectiveness refers to the extent to which a message achieves the desired result, while appropriateness refers to the extent to which a communication exchange is accepted within the particular social context. “The more competent the communicator, the more likely others will be inclined to find such memes credible, adaptive, and valuable, and therefore, worthy of replication.”

A meme’s capacity for replication and propagation at the network level is subject to its ability to negotiate established network constraints. “Social networks may provide some memes a better set of affinity paths than others memes.” Obviously, there are a variety of platforms available each with proprietary structures for content production and diffusion. These parameters not only establish a network’s distinguishing characteristics but also limit a memes capacity to navigate across platforms. For example, Tumblr and Twitter are both microblogging sites. Still, each platform is best suited for the diffusion of specific modes of communication. Content produced for Tumblr is visual—photos and motion graphics—whereas Twitter is far more reliant on compelling textual messages. In other words, although an animated Internet meme can technically be disseminated on both sites, specific network characteristics and user preferences affect its potential for diffusion, replication, and imitation.

Diffusion at the social level is contingent on a memes ability to move beyond its initial platform and influence different networks. “Memes are typically transmitted to a finite number of initial [users] and/or social networks; their subsequent spread is likely

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75 Ibid., 320
76 Ibid., 320
77 Ibid., 320
to depend on certain structural features of the network.” As memes compete for attention, even the most innovative content will eventually stop spreading and producing derivatives if it is not capable of circulating across multiple platforms. The fittest memes, therefore, are those inherently adaptable to a variety of constraints. Their content must be universally accessible to a wide range of audiences. Reliance on niche themes for subject matter may be beneficial for memes to spread across particular networks but may prevent access to the broader social level. Similarly, a memes’ stance or keying must either reinforce established social conventions in an innovative way or propose drastic alternatives if it is to inspire diffusion and replication.

In short, the model visualizes the successful diffusion of a fit meme from inception to mass distribution. The model presumes that variables at each level will challenge the adoption of an Internet meme and affect its capacity for replication, transformation, and retention. The model presupposes that a meme’s foundational attributes—namely content, form, and framing— Influence the diffusion process across all levels and either enable or limit its capacity for ascension.

\[78\text{Ibid., 324} \]
Fig. 2: Meme Diffusion Model
CHAPTER FOUR

CONFRONTING MISINFORMATION

4.2 A Focus on U.S. Immigration

“We believe that words matter, that language dictates politics, which impacts policy. Phrases like “anchor babies” and “illegals” not only demean and misrepresent undocumented immigrants, but also prevent others from seeing them as people who reflect our own immigrant roots.”

—Define American, Humanizing the conversation around immigration and citizenship in a changing America 79

Substantial waves of immigration during the last two decades of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th transformed America. 80 It was during this significant period in American history that the sonnet “The New Colossus” was written by poet Emma Lazarus. Originally composed to help raise money for the construction of the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty, Lazarus compares the great statue to the famed

79 Define American Humanizing the Conversation around Immigration and Citizenship in a Changing America, PDF, Define American.

Colossus of antiquity. Unlike Colossus, however, she personifies the statue as a welcoming figure emblematic of American hospitality and generosity. Over the years, the “Mother of Exiles,” became a symbol of hope for millions of immigrants as they passed before her on the way to new lives. Through “silent lips” she calls out, “give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” The poet conceptualized the statue as a physical manifestation of optimism, freedom, and democracy. As such, her work contributed to the growing perception of America as the “land of opportunity,” which in turn contributed to massive levels of immigration.

“In the five decades from 1880 to 1929, more than 22 million immigrants arrived in the United States—a country that only numbered 50 million in 1880.” Not surprisingly, the arrival of such remarkable numbers proved to be both a challenge and an economic boon. Industrialization across much of the country provided an abundance of jobs for unskilled workers. New immigrants bolstered demand for goods and services, which increased wages and further encouraged growth.

Although the robust economy yielded adequate employment for native-born Americans and foreign workers, gradual shifts in the demographic composition of new arrivals influenced racial and political instability. Tensions mounted as native-born citizens struggled to tolerate the social and cultural impact of new arrivals. “... Differences in language, culture, and religion between new immigrants and the native-

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born population, combined with popular anxieties over the industrialization of the American economy, contributed to the formidable political backlash against Southern and Eastern European immigrants … As a result, increasingly restrictive immigration policies began to be enacted to curb the inundation of additional immigrant populations considered a threat to American interests.

The implementation of restrictive laws combined with the effects of the Great Depression and World War II impeded immigration flows well into the 1960s. The next major influx of immigrants began in the 1970s following immigration “reforms,” such as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. However, “the U.S. economy [had] changed drastically between these two significant periods. In the 1890s, the United States was industrializing rapidly, and most new immigrants went to work in the mines, mills, and factories of the new industrial economy.” In the 1960s, the industrial sector was contracting and factories were shuttered across regions that had previously attracted foreign workers.

Demographically, the composition of this new wave of immigrants was very different from the previous generations. “The 35 million legal immigrants from 1970 to 2013 represent a new chapter in American immigration history, with over 40 percent coming from Latin America and 34 percent from Asia.” What’s more, “The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 for the first time ever placed numerical limits on Mexican

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84 Aviva Chomsky, "They Take Our Jobs!: And 20 Other Myths about Immigration" (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2007), xvi.

migration, just as the Bracero Program was being shut down. Suddenly, legal migration for Mexicans, after so many years of being encouraged, was closed off. But the demand for Mexican labor, and Mexican workers’ need for jobs, continued.”

The Bracero Program was a joint project between Mexico and the United States from 1942 to 1964 that recruited Mexicans to migrate north on short-term agricultural labor contracts. “The abolition of the Bracero Program was supposed to create better, more equal treatment for Mexicans in the United States, in keeping with the civil rights movements of the era, including a growing farm-worker movement.” Overnight, the law illegalized workers while providing few legal alternatives for Mexicans and Central Americans dependent on income from seasonal jobs in the United States. As a result, “the category of immigrants classed as ‘illegal’ mushroomed because of the way the law was designed, and because of the increasing economic demand for immigrant workers.”

In 1986, the federal government made an attempt to address the “illegal” problem with the introduction of the Immigration Reform and Control Act. The law enabled Mexicans in the country illegally to regularize their status as long as they met certain criteria. In the years since critics condemned the amnesty of nearly three million “illegal” immigrants while millions pursuing lawful methods had to wait years for approval. Additionally, they call attention to alleged abuses of the laws’ provisions


87 Ibid., 60

88 Aviva Chomsky, “They Take Our Jobs!”: And 20 Other Myths about Immigration (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2007), xvi.

89 Aviva Chomsky, Undocumented How Immigration Became Illegal, 59.
and increased levels of both legal and illegal immigration after 1986 to justify tougher restrictions and stricter border enforcement. A position enhanced by the terrorist attacks of September 11 and fear of future attacks by rogue terrorist organizations in the future. Still, many of the arguments used to build support against open immigration policies echo previous anti-immigration movements going back at least a hundred years.

4.2 Confronting Misinformation About Immigration

Today, immigration has once again emerged as a hotly contested issue in the United States and much of Europe. Political rhetoric has been dominated by a rise in right-wing populism motivated by a mixture of national nostalgia, class grievance, and economic insecurity. In the United States, for example, Donald Trump’s successful bid for the White House can be attributed at least in part to his stance on immigration, border security, and refugees. Trump’s and his campaign exploited a general anti-immigration sentiment that has been building for some years by leveraging a blend of factual information with exaggerations, propaganda, and disinformation.

Immigration detractors and nativist groups have proven effective in preventing significant immigration reform in recent years by employing similar tactics. Even so, a frank analysis of available data supports the position that immigration is a net positive for America. Both legal and unauthorized immigrants bolster the economy as vital components of the workforce, as consumers, and taxpayers. They contribute to their

communities volunteering in their children’s schools, buying homes, and performing jobs that may otherwise be neglected.

Much of the rancor and vitriol associated with immigration originates from two equally harmful sources. First of all, common expressions utilized by political actors and the mass media generally evoke negative conceptual frames that limit the debate. For example, referring to unauthorized migrants as “illegal” primes the audience to make an association with elevated levels of criminality. However, available data shows no significant correlation between increased crime and immigration. “With few exceptions, immigrants are less crime prone than natives or have no effect on crime rates.” Similarly, framing immigration as a situation requiring “reform” may seem innocuous, but the term imposes a structure that determines the types of solutions required to address the problem. The conceptual frame generated by “immigration reform” constrains solutions to border security and deportation policies while disregarding other factors. Second, the current debate, at least within the realm of social networking platforms, appears to be heavily influenced by outdated facts and baseless assumptions. The complicated nature of the topic fosters the formation and propagation of misconceptions that affects the public’s perception of immigration.

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91 George Lakoff, Don’t Think of an Elephant! : Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives, 72.


93 George Lakoff, Don’t Think of an Elephant! : Know Your Values and Frame the Debate : The Essential Guide for Progressives, 71.
4.3 Methodology

InfoMemes are intended to be flexible digital expressions to confront misinformation about complex sociopolitical issues on social networking sites. As such, their content may be framed in a humorous manner or take a more serious tone depending on the subject matter and intended audience. This section advances a series of principles for their production and dissemination as modes capable of reframing issues associated with immigration while addressing widespread misconceptions.

A qualitative approach was selected to observe public interactions associated with immigration on social networking sites. These observations provided valuable insights which influenced the development of a content strategy based on recognized discourse patterns. More specifically, a participant observation approach was utilized to gather data on current trends dominating public discussions about immigration and associated topics. The following elaborates on the procedures employed and highlights key insights as well as possible opportunities for future innovation.

Participant Observation Approach

Twitter was selected as the setting for data collection. Twitter is a popular microblogging site that allows individuals and organizations to share information in short texts of 140 characters or less. A recent survey by the Pew Research Center, suggests that roughly one-quarter of adults online in the United States use the site. Overall, users tend to be young adults and highly educated.94

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Twitter was selected from among popular social networking sites for two reasons: (1) as a public forum, tweets collected are freely available for anyone to review; (2) the textual nature of the data facilitated manual parsing and analyzing.

Step One: Data Gathering

Data collection was executed using a combination of manual and digital strategies. The most effective method used was the Google Docs add-on Twitter Curator. Once installed, the software allows users to search, filter, and curate tweets from inside the Google Docs interface. It is a free application available in the Google Add-ons store. Overall, a total of 480 tweets were collected from a cross-section of public Twitter accounts during two 1-week periods in November and January. Tweets were randomly selected utilizing a keyword and hashtag search of several terms: (1) “immigration,” (2) “illegals,” (3) “undocumented,” (4) “border wall.” Although other terms were also included, these four terms produced the best results with fewer duplicate responses.

Step Two: Parsing Data

The tweets were then manually filtered and organized to isolate and remove content from advocacy groups, non-profits, news outlets, and partisan organizations. Data manually collected was imported into an Excel spreadsheet, while data collected through the Twitter Curator interface was kept in a Google Doc. Each entry was then evaluated to verify that all relevant elements were accurately recorded. Duplicate entries, as well as any incomplete or incoherent tweets, were also separated from the
bulk of the content. Next, tweets with similar language usage and common themes were clustered together in an effort to identify textual patterns.

**Step Three: Pattern Analysis**

Following the parsing process, 238 of the 480 original tweets were subdivided into analogous clusters. The content was evaluated and grouped together according to similarities in stance, subject matter, or the use of specific terminology. Eventually, three conceptual frames emerged as the most distinct classifications: *chaos, fear, pain*. The most dominant tweet classification was *fear* with nearly 53% of all content falling into this category, followed by *pain* at 27% and *chaos* 20%.

The first pattern to emerge was *chaos*. In this context, chaos refers to the perception that ineffective government policies and weak leadership had somehow contributed to disorder and confusion about immigration. Findings suggest that some individuals believed that the Obama administration was actively engaged in undermining immigration policy and border security. The most common accusation alleged that the president was not properly securing the Southern Border by allowing “illegal immigrants” to freely enter and stay in the country (fig. 3). Although there is no evidence that these claims were widely retweeted, at least within the context of this sample, they were posted on a regular basis by an unrelenting group of political actors.

The majority of the tweets collected in this sample fell under the *fear* category, which was divided into three smaller subcategories to facilitate their categorization. The first subcategory includes posts from native-born citizens and legal immigrants that were concerned about the consequences from years of rampant “illegal immigration.”
The second group is composed of unauthorized immigrants, DREAMers, and their supporters. Many openly express fear or concern about the incoming Trump administration, potential changes to immigration policy, and a rise in anti-immigration sentiments online (fig. 4). The third subcategory aggregates tweets expressing fear or concern about some interconnected issues which do not fit within one of the aforementioned subcategories.

While the fear category applies to the perceived or conceptual effects of immigration and associated government policies, the pain category applies to the tangible or material effects on the unauthorized population as well as native-born citizens. Perhaps the most nuanced of the three identified patterns, pain applies to a broad swath of topics and their consequences. Although no one theme stands out as a recurring point of contention, several threads united many of the tweets. Among them were the added burden on local services, the rising costs of healthcare, relations to unlawful activity (fig. 5), and the high cost of securing the border (fig. 6).

Even though some of the posts did not fit neatly within the fear, chaos, or pain model, the vast majority of tweets collected did. These broad categories stimulated the development of a conceptual framework that called attention to the core tensions in the discourse. For example, a cursory review of the tweets in the chaos category reveals a lack of confidence in the federal government because of the perceived preferential treatment of “foreigners.” Whether the sentiment is true or not is irrelevant, the number of tweets that raised the issue of “fairness” suggests that Americans would benefit from a better understanding of immigration policy and its application.
Fig. 3: Example of Twitter post from the *chaos* category referring to the perceived lack of will in the Obama administration to enforce current immigration law. November 23, 2016.
Fig. 4: Example of Twitter post from the *fear* category describing possible threat to immigrants discussing their status on social media. January 27, 2017.
Fig. 5: Example of Twitter post from the *fear* category claiming proof that three million immigrants voted illegally. January 27, 2017.

Fig. 6: Another example of Twitter post from the *fear* category describing the potential financial benefits of building Trump’s Wall. January 27, 2017.
Step four: Design Process

The results of the pattern analysis yielded valuable insights into some of the core tensions embedded in the current immigration debate. First, the number of tweets that raised the issue of *fairness* suggests that a Twitter audience would benefit from an improved understanding of immigration policy and its application. Second, the high percentage of tweets categorized in the fearful or concerned category suggests that greater accessibility to immigrants and their struggles could potentially increase audience empathy resulting in reduced tension. Lastly, reframing immigration regarding both *costs* and *benefits* would help bring perspective to the financial burdens erroneously attributed solely on immigration.

Once the problem has been identified, the next step in the design process is to determine the intended audience for the infoMemes as well as the appropriate platform for their diffusion. This may be the most difficult part of the process for anyone starting out on their first project. Even though social networking sites reach broad audiences, accommodating a particular demographic with targeted content is more fruitful than an unstructured approach. Although the subject matter is generally determined by the target audience, limitations imposed by network structures must be taken into consideration. In particular, inexperienced producers should be active on the networks well in advance of posting any content as a means of familiarizing themselves with its culture and definitions of appropriateness. Establishing a healthy, interactive network is a critical component for disseminating digital content on social networking sites.

Next, the problem being addressed is applied to the meme diffusion model to develop an appropriate content strategy and relevant stance for dissemination. In this
context, the insights developed through pattern analysis were utilized to single out news stories, studies, and surveys that would address fears, chaos, and pain points associated with immigration. For example, infoMemes addressing budgetary pain points in a local community could highlight the estimated amount of sales, property, and income taxes paid by unauthorized immigrants in a specific community. A subsequent infoMeme could articulate the substantial financial contributions of the second and third generations to the local economy. These infoMemes would be powerful reminders of the positive impacts all immigrants can potentially offer their communities.

The final step in the design process is to consider the infoMemes form. Although somewhat limited by the selected social networking platform, the most popular sites have the ability to display a variety of formats. Ultimately, the subject matter should determine the most appropriate medium.

4.4 Findings

Throughout this investigation, Infomemes have been uploaded to popular social networking sites—twitter, tumblr—as well as online image sharing communities—imgur, 4chan, and Reddit. The most challenging aspect to date has been developing the necessary network connections to diffuse content across these platforms. All image sharing communities selected for this project require regular uploads of content as well as active participation commenting on messaging boards and voting on content to obtain enough popularity points for content to be showcased. Each site offers advantages and disadvantages to sharing content, but infoMemes utilizing motion graphics present an increased level of complication.
The second obstacle to overcome on online sharing communities is the “humor factor.” Most content on these sites is humorous in nature. However, infoMemes are predominantly intended to disseminate verifiable information. Finding the right platform to distribute these digital expressions is equally as important as fostering the networks that will embrace them.

Another disadvantage to the production of infoMemes by the general public is the availability of a user-friendly template that is easy to use but also robust enough to handle motion graphics. While creating videos and animations is considerably easier than ever before, the vast majority of users would have difficulty producing an infoMeme. The combination of the technical skills required to create a video and sheer determination necessitated to secure appropriate primary source material would hinder the average meme producer. That said, it may be more advantageous given the nature of the proposed infoMeme model to target news organizations and advocacy groups to train employees to produce this type of content instead of the average joe. In fact, journalists and activists would benefit the most from being able to distribute their message in a medium that could not be replicated by just anyone. Regardless, the infoMeme model is intended to inspire others to take this precedent and develop better ways to communicate and inform average citizens. The infoMemes is a good start, but more work remains to be done in this rapidly changing media landscape.

4.5 Discussion

Given the massive appeal of Internet memes and the ease of their production begs the question, “Why develop a whole new subcategory for the sole purpose of
disseminating verifiable information?” The answer lies in the methodologies employed to produce and diffuse Internet memes. Generally speaking, memes are created by anonymous actors with no obligation to social conventions or the facts. Their primary objective is to promote humorous content at the expense of almost all other considerations. InfoMemes, on the other hand, are intended to be much more than ephemeral tools for the dissemination of humorous content. They may share some similarities with Internet memes, but the infoMeme model establishes a precedent that future practitioners can develop further to promote instructional material.

“Then why build on the meme structure in the first place? Why not seek a different medium?” Again, the answer lies with Internet memes and their ubiquitous nature online. As such, there already exists a robust infrastructure for the production and diffusion of digital content. What’s more, with the trend of news consumers turning to alternative sources for information online news reporting may be transitioning to a period where the preferred method for news consumption is short one-to-two minute bursts that allow consumers to stay informed and seek more details at their leisure. Online news organizations like VOX (vox.com) and Mic (mic.com) along with stalwarts such as CNN have already exhibited a propensity for successfully promoting their content on social networking sites. If these trends continue, more networks are bound to follow suit. This time of transition presents an opportunity for journalists and designers to influence how news content is produced and delivered.
4.6 Conclusion

For better or worse, the rapidly changing mediascape has transformed both the consumption and dissemination of information. The ability to make well-informed and thoughtful decisions should be, at least in theory, easier than ever before. In reality, the overabundance of information appears to have the opposite effect. An individuals’ ability to access information, contextualize findings, and formulate insights is severely compromised by an inability to efficiently parse through overwhelming amounts of data. There is simply too much content available and not enough time to effectively manage it all. It is far easier to rely on single-sided information flows that reinforce established beliefs and points of view. When taken to the extremes, selective exposure yields a segregated audience within polarized clusters that are highly susceptible to the effects of misinformation. These clusters, or echo chambers, make it much harder for users to distinguish between reliable facts, conspiracy theories, and unsubstantiated rumors. Everyone—voters, policy makers, lobbyist, journalists—who maintains these isolated echo chambers contributes to an environment of discord, rancor, and political gridlock.

Yet, a more diversified mediascape also creates opportunities for creative storytellers, artists, and designers to input levity into the equation. This body of work introduces InfoMemes as a potential method for communication practitioners to push back against the flood of misinformation and half-truths. These digital expressions leverage the versatility of Internet memes to confront the most corrosive and divisive misconceptions on social networking sites. Whether they are produced by journalists, designers, or concerned citizens, infoMemes have to compete for attention in the same highly fragmented mediascape as mass media. The challenge for InfoMemes moving
forward is to be perceived as effective and appropriate in the same social context as
humorous memes and similar content from online news organizations. Still, capable
practitioners can build on the infoMeme model to develop the next wave of informative
content for digital applications. The hope is that future producers of content will build
upon this work to educate future generations of media literate users able to distinguish
between verifiable facts and misinformation.
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