

Indigenous memes by Indigenous hands

How Internet memes become an important storytelling medium used by Indigenous peoples

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ABSTRACT

In 2016, Indigenous activists launched a Facebook page Blackfulla Revolution (BFR) to increase awareness about the impact of colonialism in past through to the present-day Australia. BFR produced and shared a set of memes to illustrate the discriminatory events of colonialism and to invite a wider community to gather online to show solidarity for Indigenous both past and present. Meme creation is one way to produce replicable and spreadable cultural ideas, messages or meanings to like-minded audience or supporters. Studies have focused on the way visual content – including memes – can be used positively and negatively. The study of meme production and engagement amongst Indigenous social media users require further investigation. This paper argues that Indigenous memes creation is worth examining. Key findings include how memes are created and utilised for truth telling and recollection of colonialism; the impact of BFR memes on shared experience and solidarity; and how Indigenous voices and representation are much needed in mainstream media and social media.

Keywords: Indigenous, memes, social media, Blackfulla Revolution (BFR), online communities

INTRODUCTION

Digital meme-making has become a powerful storytelling tool used by indigenous peoples to reject the notion of the establishment of peaceful settlement of Australia (Frazer & Carlson, 2017). Indigenous memes by Indigenous hands demonstrate that archived images coupled with texts can increase the visibility of truth-telling and recollection of Indigenous history in colonial Australia (Graham, 2018). This paper argues that Indigenous memes creation is worth examining in the context of mainstream social media landscape in which Indigenous voices and narrations are lacking. This paper will discuss the way memes are created and utilised for truth telling and

recollection of colonialism; the impact of BFR memes on shared experiences and solidarity; and the need for Indigenous voices and representation in mainstream media and social media.

POPULAR USE OF MEMES

Mememes have become a pervasive form of entertainment in the eyes of everyday Internet users (Drakett et al, 2018). From the Drake to Distracted Boyfriend meme templates, Internet humour, inside jokes, parodies and rumours have become highly visible messages that can be remixed, spread, and shared by everyday users in the participatory online environment (Shifman, 2013; Wiggins et al, 2015). Research conducted by Imgur, a meme generator website, reveals billions of user-generated bite-size fun can reach 250+ millions Internet audience on a monthly basis (Imgur, n.d.). Such growth is aligned with Shifman's observation on mememes as a highly visible and pervasive form of social interaction afforded by the distinctive structures and agencies of Internet and social media sites (2013). Real-time social interaction is accelerated and popularised by social media networks, personal devices, and online stock templates and meme generators, such as Adobe, Canva, Mematic and Imgur. Audiences respond to hidden, yet recognisable, signs, meanings, and in-jokes (McSwiney et al, 2021) by viewing, liking, retweeting, or forwarding a meme to their families, friends, and networks. Other users are motivated to participate meme production for love, glory, and money (Malone et al, 2009), to convey a mood, make a friend laugh, or carry out political agendas. Users are invited to create, remix, deconstruct, re-interpret, and propagate stories, meanings and messages in ways that make sense and available to them.

MEMES AS GENES

The term meme was first conceptualised by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 who assessed the similarities between genes and mememes. Dawkins argues that the spreadable nature of mememes is fundamental to the progression of cultural meanings and ideas, just as Darwinian selection is essential to the process of biological reproduction and survival. Dawkins argues that mememes are a "small cultural unit (or idea) that sought replication for the purpose of its own survival" (Wiggins et al, 2015, p.1889). It implies that the process of variation, selection, retention, copying, remixing, imitation, and propagation is necessary to the reproduction, circulation, and survival of mememes (Shifman, 2012). Mememes are inherently self-serving, competitive, disruptive, and political to purposely "infect individual minds and use those minds as vehicles for replication" (Wiggins et al, 2015, p.1889). In this view, carefully crafted mememes can influence our thoughts, behaviours, and mindset towards a certain person, narrative, or social movement (Knobel &

Lankshear, 2007) and to attract like-minded supporters and target audiences. The survival and spreadability of memes rely heavily upon creators' decision around tactics, textual and aesthetic choices, participatory practices, and social media platforms. Thus, carefully crafted memes have the potential to influence the way that viewers make sense of messages and narratives, contributing to the transformation of cultural and political ideas over time.

VISUAL CONTENT, SOCIAL MEDIA & CRAFTIVISM

Kumari (2021) explains that the Internet-mediated environment has become the centre for political tension, activism, protest, trolling and propaganda in the digital age. From #BlackLivesMatter to Arab Spring, from #FreeBritney to #NoAsianHate, online activism can drive change and deliberation to raise awareness about racism, social injustice, democracy, conservatism, and wellbeing. In these campaigns, visual and textual content are creatively and politically engaged by passive and active participants towards what Esteves (2018) theorises as "craftivism" (p.188) in which everyday amateurs are invited to contribute to the creation and circulation of social action content generated by participants. Participants understand the way that text, images, memes, hashtags, podcasts, t-shirts, banners, and social media are intertwined to establish meanings, communications, and narratives to foster a sense of belonging, promote emotional bonds and form social identities (Delanty, 2018). Thus, the success of social movements relies on well-crafted textual content for supporters (or non-supporters) to interpret, recognise, investigate, decode, argue, and responded to (Storey, 2006).

Conversely, harmful content can be carefully curated by bad actors to cause damage to marginalised communities. Consider Aboriginal Memes, a Facebook group, in which Indigenous peoples were depicted as welfare abusers, child molesters and alcoholics in a series of racist memes. Aboriginal Memes is one of the examples as seen on the Internet that illustrates the way that hate speech can be constructed under false pretences of humour and satire (Kumari, 2021). Perpetrators engage in meme-making, misusing and weaponising innocent looking animals, cartoons and characters in children's books to amplify misogyny and racism (Askanius, 2021; Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). Racist rhetoric is designed to attract like-minded users as they meet online to exchange racially motivated content about Indigenous peoples (Al-Natour, 2021).

INDIGENOUS SOCIAL ACTIONS

The spirit of this paper is to emphasise the way that Indigenous communities are using social media creatively and positively to increase visibility and awareness of Indigenous culture, political struggles, and modern lives. Through a 'show, don't tell approach', online protects such as the #SOSBlakAustralia campaign utilises Facebook and Twitter to mobilise supporters to pressure state and federal governments to stop forcefully removing Indigenous people from their communities. The #IndigenousDads movement sees Indigenous fathers demonstrating the positive use of hashtags, tweets, and photos as they share experiences of fatherhood to reject the racist rhetoric of Bill Leak's cartoon on The Australian newspaper. A media and training organisation, IndigenousX, is founded to promote the diversity of Indigenous peoples. Through featured articles, social media presence and podcast, it continues to raise awareness of Indigenous languages, injustice, arts, health equity and equality, and black queer community – Indigenous topics that have been neglected by mainstream media. Social media is demonstrated to have enormous power to advocate important Indigenous issues. Indigenous social movements are extended from a street level to online space to promote social actions, challenge colonialism, rally against public policy, and describe the true history of Australia.

MEMES FACILITATING A COMMUNITY-LED CONVERSATION

In a socio-cultural environment, meme creation is one of the means to produce replicable and spreadable cultural ideas, messages, or meanings. Meme production is one of the approaches to encourage a community-led discussion, and to facilitate collective action, political expression, self-representation, emotional bonds and fostering cultural belonging (Delenty, 2018; Lumby, 2015). In the context of Indigenous communities, emotional bonding and a sense of belonging are enhanced by sharing visual and textual accounts associating with family history, tremor, injustice, anger, and frustration (Carlson et al, 2017). Together with traditional ways of storytelling using painting, dancing and songs, the ubiquitous nature of Internet memes and the affordances of social media offers Indigenous audience new possibilities to engage in storytelling. By extending their presence and political engagement to the online environment, it brings forth a conversation and acknowledgment about Indigenous past, present and future contribution to the society. By spreading and propagating social media content created by Indigenous producers, the organisation challenge mainstream political conventions as Indigenous-produced content is utilised to express Indigenous voices and narrations.

THE CASE OF BFR

The BFR Facebook group is a meme-based campaign that exposes the truth and brutality of the colonial settlement of Australia. Through Indigenous memes by Indigenous hands, campaign organisers start a “mass movement of support from non-Indigenous brothers and sisters who value the knowledge, custodianship, spirituality, culture and perspectives of First Nations peoples” (BFR, 2016, np). Through the participatory practice of memes creation, BFR producers deconstruct and render colonial ideological notion of “there have never been people here” (Deleuze, 2013, p. 217). BFR memes become a powerful storytelling tool to “record evidence about past actions and share their culture, heritage and history” (Pol, 2021), which is an important part of the reconciliation and healing process in Australia. BFR facilitates a new community experience as producers and Indigenous audiences co-present their true selves and voices amid the mainstream media landscape.

BFR organisers are aware of the way that participatory tools and social media content can increase the visibility of their cultural and identity struggle as well as trauma. On the Facebook page, BFR displaces and arranges historical events in the form of memes chronologically to demonstrate Indigenous resistance and struggle. These events include the arrival of Captain James Cook; enslavement of Indigenous peoples; children being forcefully removed from their families; Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice and health system; and prohibition of Indigenous cultures and languages are revealed in the form of memes (Frazer & Carlson 2017). Using cultural elements such as archived photos coupled with text, BFR memes become a powerful and honest narration tool for sharing traumatic ancestral accounts.

As Douglas (2014) observes, memes as image macros are meant to be used and remixed by amateur producers without any well-defined aesthetic intention. BFR follows amateur practices to produce a series of memes, using authorised archived photos that depict Indigenous peoples in chains and on their own lands; colonial paintings; and state-sanctioned dialogues, events, and ideologies to critically challenge historical and contemporary notions and practices of colonisation (Frazer & Carlson, 2017). BFR primarily uses archives images and purposely stays away from the sanitised, visually appealing digital content in their meme-making approach. The rawness and authenticity are critical to the construction of shared identities. Archives images are essential to the reclaiming of Indigenous voices, culture, identities and power from dominant politicians, public figures, settler commentators who define, limit, constitute the identities of Indigenous

people (Kennedy, 2021). By using original achieve images, it underscores the significance of the pursuit of belonging and acknowledgment of Indigenous peoples in colonial Australia.

The BFR campaign enhances the way stories are told through the eyes of Indigenous peoples, Indigenous media, and Indigenous memes about the notion of the peaceful settlement of Australia. The fundamental principle of colonialism is to deny Indigenous peoples' claim of their own land, languages, cultures, and identities. By declaring a peaceful settlement, it diminishes the presence, existence, innovation, and progress of Indigenous peoples. BFR memes reject this notion and criticise that the settlement was never peaceful. Memes are used as a reminder about colonial violence, traumatic events, frustrations, anger, and injustice that Indigenous peoples face every day (Carlson et al, 2017). BFR memes are demonstrated to be a powerful form of truth-telling, necessitating shared recognition and the understanding of discriminatory events of colonisation. As an educational and knowledge sharing tool, BFR memes provide photographic evidence and the opportunities for audience to share their family accounts to reinforce the fact that there were peoples here.

As demonstrated by the BFR campaign, online community tie is an extension of family traditions, shared experiences, community spirit, Indigenous history, and culture. Opposing to the notion of the establishing of the modern society in the expense of separating traditional Indigenous authorities and values (Yuan, 2012). BFR receives support and comments from Indigenous from Australia, North America, Europe, and New Zealand as audience draw on their own personal experience of colonialism. One Indigenous Facebook user shares a first-hand ancestral account about her great grandmother and great great grandmother were forcefully removed as children from their families (Frazer & Carlson 2017). A Native American Facebook user signs off a comment by using hashtags #WeAreStillHere and #IdleNoMore. A First Nations woman based in Canada describes the forced institutionalisation of children. Non-Indigenous audiences also comment on the lack of truth-telling in mainstream education and societal narrative in which the sanitised version of a peaceful settlement mask over the brutality of colonialism (Frazer & Carlson, 2017). A worldwide audience engagement demonstrates that not only there were Indigenous peoples here in Australia, but there were also Indigenous peoples across the world.

THE IMPACT OF INDIGENOUS MEMES

The impact of Indigenous memes can be explained in several ways. Indigenous meme creation is at the intersection of Indigenous culture, colonialism, traditional and online community, technology, and craftivism. Indigenous people use digital text and images to reject the ideology of colonialism. Indigenous memes function as a truth-telling means to bring forth awareness about Indigenous history and the brutality of colonisation. The making of missing peoples has become an online movement led by a local and global network of Indigenous peoples and supporters. The BFR movement fosters a sense of togetherness as audience embrace a sense of duty to share ancestral stories, political and cultural history in their respective regions. The BFR movement highlighted those traditional social relations can be extended from face-to-face setting to online environment as supporters are mobilised for social actions. BFR illustrates that this Facebook group is a thin community in which social participations are led by loose networks of local and global strangers. It also brings people together and establishes new relations as history, culture, politics, and identity intersect.

THE NEED FOR INDIGENOUS NARRATIVES IN MODERN AUSTRALIA

Internet memes have become a ubiquitous part of acknowledging traditional owners of the land, social change and raising cultural awareness. Participatory practices such as meme-making invite and encourage Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to find new ways to express solidarity and support. Networks and user-generated content become increasingly important to mobilise supporters and promote Indigenous issues in a society in which the diversity and representation of Indigenous peoples in local and state government agencies, and the business and media sectors are still lacking (Duarte, 2017). BFR adds to long line of positive social campaigns that elevate Indigenous diversity and voices in modern Australia. BFR is one of the examples that demonstrates the positive use of political arts and social networking sites to complement traditional forms of collective action and political expression (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). In looking at social media content, production and participations associating with truth-telling and social action, it also reflects the need for Indigenous expressions, narrations, and representations in mainstream media and social media to increase diversity and drive change.

In conclusion, the study of meme production and engagement amongst Indigenous social media users require further investigation. This paper has argued that Indigenous memes creation is worth examining by discussing how memes are created and utilised for truth telling and

recollection of colonialism, the impact of BFR memes on shared experience and solidarity, and how Indigenous voices and representation are much needed in mainstream media and social media. This paper has demonstrated that memes are a powerful visual and cultural response to acknowledge the presence and existence of Indigenous peoples. This paper is intended to invite conference participants to consider the impact and the important role Internet memes can play in the context of Indigenous communities, and how a campaign such as BFR is made possible by an online community that values ancestral history and acknowledges those who came before them.

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