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Recommended Citation

McClure, Brian (2016). "Discovering the Discourse of Internet Political Memes," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2016/roundtables/12>

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Discovering the Discourse of Internet Political Memes

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Abstract: Recent studies highlight increased adult engagement in political activity in online, social media environments. This study undertakes an analysis of the Internet Political Meme to determine how it constructs meaning.

Keywords: social media, internet memes, political discourse

Social Media as a Site of Increasing Political Engagement

Recent Pew Research studies note increases in the number of adults using the internet, using social media sites, and the number who engage with various forms of political activity on social media sites (SMS). Fox and Rainie (2014) indicate that 87% of American adults use the Internet, 97% of adults 18-29 and adults with college degrees. Duggan and Smith (2013) indicate that 71% of those are also on Facebook (FB), the predominant SMS of choice among adult users. Further, consistently 30% of those who are on SMS like FB engage with political material in some form, and indicate that such material influences beliefs and actions (Raine, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, and Verba, 2012). As Raine, et al. (2012) suggest, the number of adults who are capable of and who deliberately engage with political material is increasing, with percentages relatively balanced between those users identified as liberal Democrat and conservative Republican. Those who “follow” politically-oriented sites tend to be actively engaged with the material produced or distributed by those sites; that is, users who are engaged with politically-active sites demonstrate their support by “liking” or sharing posts, or by commenting on them.

The Internet Political Meme as (Inadequate?) Form

On FB, posts such as this tend to take the form of memes, virtual items of culture that can be produced, modified, and spread quickly, online. The interest here is in what I am calling the Internet Political Meme (IPM), posts which sometimes tend to resemble individual panels of comic books or political cartoons, exemplary of what McCloud (1994) refers to as “amplification by simplification”, a process through which ideas are made accessible to a wider audience, by “focusing on specific details” and by “stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning’” (p. 30). These are topical, political, and ideological, and are intended to influence. At first glance, this would appear to be beneficial for democratic participation, with the potential for more people to be better-informed participants. However, as Postman (1985) contends, “You cannot use smoke to do philosophy. Its form excludes the content. [. . .] You cannot do political philosophy on television. Its form works against the content” (p. 7). This study began by assuming Postman’s assertions correct, and considers the possibility that the form of the IPM, works against the content, and subsequently the goal of increased well-informed participation.

Methodology

For this study, hundreds of memes are being considered, analyzed, and organized according to images, text, and themes, with implications for multiple literacy education practices, including media literacy and democratic literacy. These memes come from two intentionally political FB groups with at least 100,000 followers: Occupy Democrats, and Eagle Rising,

representing opposite ends of the political spectrum, prolific in the production and distribution of memes that illustrate their respective ideologies. Both groups have websites in addition to FB; each is a publicly-accessible online group with an identifiable social agenda. Also being examined are FB's recently expanded metrics: like, love, laughing, sad, angry, and wow, as well as shares and comments, which provide examples and types of participant engagement.

Following analysis and organization of individual memes and participant-engagement, bodies of topically- and thematically-similar memes are being examined in regards to their discursive functions, following Hall's (2001) description that discourse "constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about" (p. 72). This study is examining these discursive formations: What and how do these memes communicate?

Preliminary Findings and Discussion

Findings thus far have revealed patterns concerning which issues are deemed significant, which elements of issues are prioritized, and how views of the "other" are perceived and understood. Initial organizational categories based on issues of race, gender, gun control, religion, liberalism, and conservatism have emerged, topics prevalent in the literature of adult education. Discursive analysis has revealed qualities of public discourse discussed in Hedges (2009), in which "propaganda has become a substitute for ideas" and "knowledge is confused with how we are made to feel" (p. 45); in Tannen (1998), in which black and white positions too-easily become default positions; and in Marcuse (1964), and the idea of repressive desublimation, which describes a public under the illusion of liberation.

One role of adult education is emancipation of the adult learner. As more adults engage in political activities in online environments, it becomes essential to examine and understand this discourse and what the discourse communicates, particularly in the area of political activism, particularly if people are to make informed and intelligent choices. Roundtable participants will engage with and consider how individual memes and collections convey meaning, illustrate ideological positioning, and construct an identifiable discourse.

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