My Body is Ready
Best Practices for Using Memes on Library Social Media

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In this column, librarian and social media consultant Andy Woodworth gives an unexpected approach toward library social media strategy with the use of memes. Part whimsical and part informative, memes have the unique potential to go viral on the internet, thus introducing your library's brand to a much wider audience.—*Editor*

MEMES ARE INTERNET STREET ART

I don't always start a professional librarian essay with my conclusion, but to me it's important enough to throw all my chips on the table and use the following paragraphs to guide you to my point. Even if you've just decided, "Ok, I'm going to skip this one because I already don't like it," at least I've said what I've come here to say. For the rest of you that wish to soldier on, let's continue on our rhetorical journey.

Let's unpack last two words of that opening header.

Art is probably the most critical aspect as well as being the most unconventional. I have no art background to speak of, so I must appeal to your philosophical nature: that memes, like art, are images that convey an emotion, a message, or both. Memes can take on profound and lasting meaning or be fleeting in the moment. As visual media, they qualify to be judged as a work of art.

While they are closely associated with humor, they have been used to make serious points about topics such as politics, religion, and social justice. In the last election cycle, memes were used by Russian agents as part of an engagement strategy on social media to provoke users into hyperpartisan stances.[1] The number of captioned photos of American political figures reaches astronomical numbers in terms of search engine results and presents all varieties of the ideology spectrum. This penetration of memes can also be seen in all realms of pop culture and has continued to expand over time.

The notion of street art is all-inclusive, from the tags on street signs, to elaborate graffiti works, to complete building murals. It's art so pervasive that you can't miss it when you don't let it fade into the visual noise of modern life. As it literally surrounds us on our travels, so do memes during online sojourns. One cannot avoid them on their social media feeds, message board sites, or anything that touches upon internet culture. These are the streets of the online world and memes are a part of that landscape.

It's not a radical notion to think of memes as art because they meet all the qualifications listed when society talks

about art. As the internet hinges on the visual, memes fulfill that artistic role as a communicator of ideas and emotions. With tools that make their creation readily accessible, memes are an artform for the masses to generate, share, and revel. They are the frescoes of the digital age.

WHY MEMES?

The origin of the term "meme" is from the 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins.[2] The underlying concept draws parallels between genetic selection and cultural ideas; that they travel, morph, and have characteristics that change over time to their respective environment. Like their organic counterparts, a meme can take on new meanings and connotations as people use them to describe something, use them in a commentary, or otherwise repurpose them for other uses. The term has become synonymous with images with captions (either on, above, or below the image) that creates a narrative about a person, place, thing, or combination thereof.

Memes are highly adaptable, extremely relatable, and well suited for sharing on social media platforms. They have found their way into every aspect of online life as a vehicle for all forms of commentary and perspectives. Like its drawn cousins, a single captioned image can say more intellectually and emotionally than an entire essay. With a few mouse clicks, a meme can be created to fit any situation to convey any message.

Being relatable is one of the innate aspects of a meme. As human beings are visual creatures, communication through images comes naturally. If you think about it, an image with a line of text is how we are first introduced to the world of reading. It is one of the most popular forms of visual expressions throughout our lives, found in a variety of places such as cartoons, print ads, comic books, and instruction manuals. It is a format so familiar as to become near omnipresent, fading into the background of our daily lives.

Sharing is what makes the social media world go around, and memes are well suited for distribution. Sharing is built into the web to accommodate our social animal ways with widgets that will link pictures and stories across email, text messages, and social media.[3] As memes are generally pictures, this poses no great challenge to social sharing. This is important to any social media strategy in creating content, getting impressions or reactions, and building a following within the community. Memes are for sharing, sharing creates engagement, and engagement creates a following.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE

One of the most important elements about using memes is ensuring that it meets the needs of your library's social media marketing strategy. It is important that it works with the staff time invested as well as the social media outcomes that are
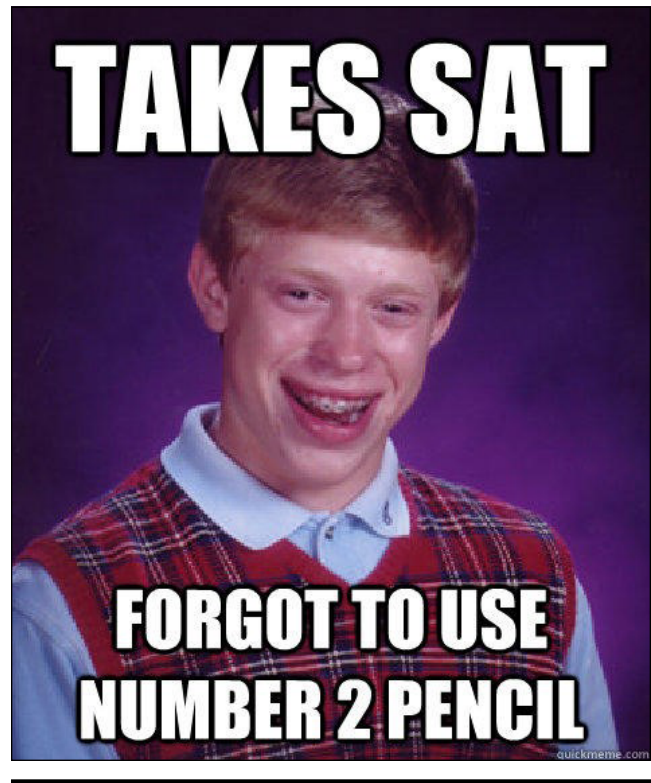

Figure 1. Bad Luck Brian

sought. It is not simply feasible to post memes for the sake of memes, but in service of a greater goal of eliciting sharing, generating community buzz, and bringing people either to the library or the library's website to meet their individual needs. Memes are great, but without a coherent strategy and an explicit purpose in their use on your library's social media they are just a distracting novelty.

In embracing memes as part of a greater social media strategy, the medium demands a certain level of knowledge and attention. The knowledge component has two vital functions: making certain any memes you use are appropriate in terms of the image and text to their understood underlying meaning and the situation they are used, and to ensure that you are using memes that are not (for lack of a better term) inappropriate. Images in memes have underlying context that drives the text narrative;[4] in other words, you don't put an uplifting message on a Bad Luck Brian (figure 1) or make Doge (figure 2) speak in complete and coherent sentences. It goes against the commonly held meaning of the image and will be ignored or generate a negative response (even if you wanted to use it ironically). Context matters, and especially so in the world of memes.

Within the world of memes, there are images that have become associated with extremist ideologies and meanings. For example, Pepe the Frog has found heavy use in white supremacy online forums. Cropped stills of facial expressions from adult films in which the context (as well as the nudity) has been removed have found use as reaction memes on social media platforms such as Tumblr. While not every

Figure 2. Doge

Figure 3. Invercargill City Libraries' Kardashian parody

image requires a thorough background check before it can be used on a library social media account, anything suspect can be checked.

Fortunately, there are websites and tools that can provide additional context and background for meme images:

- Know Your Meme (knowyourmeme.com): the most comprehensive online database for memes. It is a combination of staff curation and user submission with the former doing research into the origins of a meme while the latter provide discovery details and additional examples.
- Reddit (www.reddit.com): there are many groups known as subreddits that host meme creation. They are known by the subdirectory name, r/[name of group], which also indicates what topic they address within the group. r/funny, r/memes, r/memeeconomy, r/adviceanimals, and r/dankmemes are a few examples of groups in which memes can be found. While the search options are limited, they are excellent sources of what memes are currently trending online and how they are being used.
- Google Image Search (images.google.com): a reverse image search can provide additional examples as well as other uses of a meme. It is a good due-diligence tool for

looking at the other ways an image has been used online. Simply upload a copy of the original image you want to use and it will provide matches.
- Search "#meme" on any social media platform: while the most ham-fisted of the due-diligence methods since it relies on people tagging posts correctly, it can provide broad overviews of what memes are being used on a social media website. As there is a risk of getting not safe for work (NSFW) results, it is recommended that such searches be done on back-office computers rather than on public desks.

SO YOU'VE DECIDED TO USE MEMES

The use of memes must be considered within the library's social media strategy. How will they be used online and on what platforms? Do you have the capability of a quick turnaround to find, adapt, and post memes that have just emerged? Or will they be used on planned posts? These are the kinds of questions that need to answered before any text is placed on an image.[5]

Memes should be another tool in the online engagement arsenal. Whether they are used frequently or sparingly, the end goal is to elicit shares and other forms of online engagement. The other important element is that they are manageable within established staff workflow and duties.

If you're still not certain about how memes can work with a social media strategy, here are a pair of libraries that have a strong meme game.

Invercargill City Libraries (https://www.facebook.com/invlibrary/) has a social media team that capitalized on rising memes very effectively. From their Kardashian parody picture (figure 3) to the "Laurel/Yanny" video, they've been able to both generate original content as well as use established memes effectively. As of the date of writing (August 9, 2018), their Kardashian photo has over twelve hundred comments and five thousand shares along with uncounted press mentions and media coverage. Their photo and video sections have many established memes with excellent captions and purposeful use. For example, a Grandma Find the Internet is used in conjunction with promoting technology and computer classes;[6] it is a good match of meme and content to generation comments and shares.

Kansas City Public Library (https://www.facebook.com/kclibrary/) utilizes animated gif memes in connection with library service and material promotions. As Facebook treats animated gifs as videos for no reason known to humankind, their video section is an excellent example of pop culture images paired with related posts. For example, a Justin Timberlake GIF goes with announcing programs in May by way of the misheard lyric "it's going to be me" as "it's going to be May." It is a good use of established memes to promote library content.

The Burlingame Public Library (https://www.instagram.com/burlingame_library/) is an excellent example of the

Figure 4. Shia LaBeouf meme parody

#bookface meme. #Bookface is the art of taking a book cover and lining it up with a person's face, body, or other objects to make it appear connected. The illusion creates thrilling and immediately sharable results that both promote the book and the library without resorting to the use of text. This is especially popular on Instagram with its own #bookfacefriday hashtag where booklovers and libraries can compete for the best photo.

THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE RIGHT JOB

Like all art, the tools that you use to create a meme are entirely up to you.

At the most basic level, there are websites such as Imgur, ImgFlip, and MemeGenerator that allow you to use existing meme images and provide text input boxes for quick creation. In exchange for a tiny website watermark, you get a final product as a link that you can either download the image to your own computer or insert into an appropriate email or social media post. They are simple, quick, and perfectly acceptable for creating a custom meme without using software or investing tremendous amounts of staff time.

There are many programs that can be used for the creation of memes. While they are not necessary to the basic meme formula (picture + text = meme), they do provide additional tools for more complicated meme creation.

Since the basic meme formula is "have picture, add text," any program that can handle this will suffice. Even system standard programs like MS Paint can accomplish this task. Once you start moving into the realm of more advanced editing and use, there are both paid and open source options. Paid programs such as Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop, along with their respective open source equivalents Inkscape and GIMP, provide more powerful tools that enable greater image manipulation. Customizing imagery, inserting library brand or watermarks, and even generating entirely new meme content are possible with enough staff time and a commitment to original content.

The use of animated GIFs (especially in providing reactions to tweets and posts) is also not out of reach for a library's custom content creation. Instagiffer, an open source program, offers the ability to turn video clips (either imported or as a link from an existing YouTube video) into short GIFs as well as being able to add multiple lines of caption text to create dialogue. Again, while the programs are open source (aka free), there is a staff-time cost that would need to be considered to make it function.

There are a range of tools that match the level of staff proficiency and time investment. It's up to each library to determine how best it fits into their social media strategy and online outreach. Memes may not fit into a library's broader online aspirations, but if desired they are available for enhancing engagement and building a library's brand.

SAY IT AGAIN: WHY MEMES?

Memes are a viable addition to any library's social media strategy due to their flexibility in use and connotations, innate ability to be shared, and high placement in online popular culture. With an easy entry level to content creation, they can fit any staff-time or technical-knowledge parameters that you want to assign them. With some knowledge, practice, and attention, memes can take your library's social media game to a new level that is contemporary, memorable, and (most importantly) shareworthy.

To quote that Shia Lebouf meme:[7] Just. DO. IT. (figure 4).

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