

# Internet Memes as Statements and Entertainment

ANNE HEIMO & KAARINA KOSKI

The internet has been accessible to us for over twenty years, and social media for a decade. By now, they have become an irrevocable part of everyday life for around a third of the world's population. At the same time, our everyday work surroundings have become digitised into something global, and internet use has gradually become ubiquitous, ever-present. While still in the 1990s researchers related differently to online and offline life, they are now viewed as continua of each other. People do everything on the internet that they do elsewhere too: take care of relationships, reminisce, rejoice, weep, argue, seek and produce information, study, teach, go shopping, use up time and show their creativity in many different ways. Nor has the internet lessened people's need to belong to communities and to communicate with each other, even though the ways of maintaining contact have changed somewhat.

Folkloristics investigates vernacular activity, to which technology mediated tradition also belongs to. The majority of research into the phenomena defined as folklore on the internet has, however, been carried out in other fields, for example in media studies and sociology. Although folklore materials have been digitised and catalogued in archives and on internet sites from the 1990s on, folklorists, with a few exceptions, have warmed rather slowly to researching tradition mediated by technology.<sup>1</sup> The folklorist Alan Dundes judged already in the late 1970s that the development of information technology would offer new and exciting opportunities for the mediation and production of folklore. In the next decade, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1996) reassured folklorists that information technology would not destroy oral culture but work as a base for it to develop. It is not, however, clear what is meant by folklore on the internet. Trevor J. Blank, the editor of the first article collection to deal with the topic, *Folklore and the Internet* (2009), suggests a fairly broad definition: 'the outward expression of creativity – in myriad forms and interactions – by individuals and their communities' (Blank 2009: 6). Despite the virtual nature of

the internet, the web is always a matter of communication between people, as Robert Howard points out in an interview: 'folklore is the informally shared knowledge that we perceive as connecting us to each other' (cf. Owens 2013). Texting and chatting, which have arisen in the internet age, are forms of face-to-face communication (McNeill 2009: 84).

Internet folklore can refer to folklore which occurs on the internet or which has been born in and of the internet, making use of or commenting on its facilities. Internet-mediated contemporary folklore is not particularly stable, which poses new challenges for its analysis. Among 'the folk' who have the technical equipment and skill to use it, ideas and items transform easily from one mode of expression to another and spread via various channels. The study of rapidly spreading and constantly changing material requires a knowledge of vast imageries with which the analysed phenomena mix and merge. In the study of folklore on the internet, performances offline and the creative process of an individual are noteworthy, as well. The interaction between the actions online and offline is what keeps many of the internet phenomena spreading.

In this article, we sketch an outline of the internet as a site of participatory culture and concentrate especially on internet memes as an emergent form of contemporary folklore.

## Social media and participatory culture

The use of social media has made the internet a setting for active involvement. The audience has grown from information seekers and consumers into producers and participators, who share their own thoughts, video clips, images and personal memories. The media scholar Henry Jenkins calls this creating and circulating of one's own work *participatory culture*. This mode of cultural activity blurs the division between amateurs and professionals, consumers and producers, grassroots and mainstream. However, participatory culture is not only about production and consumption; it is also about affiliation, expression, collaboration and distribution, and it shifts the focus from individual expression to community involvement (Jenkins *et al.* 2006). The folklorist Robert Howard (2013) stresses the importance of

1 Apart from Americans, Estonians have been pioneers in this matter (see e.g. Kõiva and Vesik 2009; Kõiva 2014).

examining the construction and use of power relations, in other words vernacular authority, in participatory media, where the institutional and vernacular often occur side by side. According to Howard, vernacular authority ‘emerges when an individual makes appeals that rely on trust specifically because they are not institutional’. The appeal is backed up, for instance, by tradition and not by a formally instituted social formation like a church, a media company or an academic publication (*ibid.* 81).

In participatory culture which spreads via the internet, the local and the global merge and interact (see McNeill 2012). Group dancing videos shared on the internet and imitated all over the world serve as a good example of this interaction. In spring 2013, thousands of people created their own *Harlem Shake* video in their local communities and shared it on YouTube. In *Harlem Shake*, a masked person starts to dance in a bizarre way in some public space, such as a café or office, and after a while, other people join in, wearing costumes or carrying random objects. This trend lasted a few months (Know Your Meme 28.4.2014). In spring 2014, we have observed a parallel phenomenon called *Pharrel Williams – Happy We are from (Name of City)*. In these videos, people from 1,477 different cities – ranging from Dakar to Turku – and from 135 different countries from Taiwan to Iceland, dance to Williams’s song<sup>2</sup> (We are happy from 28.4.2014). In March 2014, Tunisian Star Wars fans published their own version *Happy – We are from Tatoonine* (YouTube 28.4.2014).

For a folklorist, the internet provides an endless flow of creative expression. However, just like the offline world, the internet is in constant flux and contains too much information and patterns to be mastered or adopted. With its numerous sites, applications, actions, practices and modes of expression and interaction, it also appears dissimilar to each user. Our interests, skills and networks on the internet mould our practices and what we get out of the whole. It is typical that in a discussion with his or her students, a folklore teacher finds that they do not share the same internet phenomena that ‘everybody’ seems to know at the moment. The gap between generations and interest groups exists both online and offline.

### Meme as an etic and emic concept

Ten years ago, a typical example of technologically transmitted folklore might be a humorous image or a chain letter delivered via email. Today, it is the internet meme. Memes are shared on internet pages and social media in various forms. They can be images with or

2 At the time of writing this, a search for *Harlem Shake* results in 9,700,000 matches on YouTube. *Happy We are from (Name of City)* gives 20,600,000 hits (YouTube 28.4.2014).



President Obama’s call to President Putin on 16 March 2014 about the Crimean crisis has produced a whole variety of memes about what was actually said during the call. Here, Putin humiliates Obama with the traditional knock-knock joke and refers to the popular song ‘Cry Me a River’, which has been used a lot during this crisis.

without text, video clips, catchphrases or requests to do something, such as to share some particular information or picture on Facebook.

The meme is thus a concept which refers to cultural units propagating in human populations in various forms. The meaning of the term varies according to the context. As a scholarly concept it is subject to constant debate. The British biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) coined the term ‘meme’ as a parallel to gene, in order to explain the transmission of cultural ideas, skills and trends by means of evolutionary theory. Memetics parallels the propagation of cultural items with the spread of biological information in DNA which, via reproduction, leads to the similarity of biological organisms and ensures the continuity of the genes themselves. Thus, memes are mental units which spread via mimicry from brain to brain. They adapt to various forms to survive and propagate, and use people and communities as hosts. Academic reactions to the meme theory have been diverse. While the advocates of the theory have welcomed it as an explanation of human cultural behaviour, opponents have stated that the meme theory offers nothing new and explains nothing. Critics note that memetics tends to deny human agency and to overlook cultural complexity, reducing it to a biological metaphor. The theory has also suffered from serious biases in its evaluation of religious and scientific ideas (see e.g. Ellis 2003: 77–83; Shifman 2013: 362–6). From a folklorist’s point of view, memes are nothing other than folklore (Ellis 2003: 83). However, folklorists tend



'Batman slapping Robin' memes have been popular on various networks. The text of the Finnish version goes: 'Today I had school...' - 'It's the university!'

to think that biological metaphors and other attempts to imitate natural sciences belong to the past of the discipline. Rather than a natural phenomenon parallel to a biological organism, folklore is now conceived as a social achievement sustained by performance and human agency. (Hafstein 2001)

As an emic term especially among internet users, meme refers to viral contents, such as various forms of photoshoplore, video clips, jokes, gestures, facial expressions and verbal phrases, which have gained a wide distribution and popularity (McNeill 2009: 84–5). Internet insiders generally understand and acknowledge that the point of memes is in social activity and sharing (Stryker 2011). Memes are a phenomenon of contemporary culture which need not be studied only in the frame of memetics. Memes have attracted the attention of scholars in various fields, such as media and communication studies and linguistics. The internet has made the processes of propagation, variation and recirculation visible and salient not only by accelerating the circulation of cultural phenomena but also by offering metadata about the circulation and popularity. As an emic term, meme usually refers to the concrete expressions, such as video clips, facial expressions, parodic characters, or certain types of images. The users of the term do not usually refer to the biological and neural implications which it has in Dawkins's theory (Knobel and Lankshear 2007: 199–202; Shifman 2013: 364). In vernacular use, an item is called a meme when it has rapidly gained a wide distribution and popularity. Many also think that it has a life span and eventually dies (Koski 2012). Memeticists, in turn, assume that memes live long and survive. Many researchers define the actual forms and expressions as meme vehicles, and the meme is the idea behind all the variation. The question whether memes are only the ideas or rather the concrete practices and artefacts, divides researchers, while some of them accept both forms. (Shifman 2013: 366–7)

As a vernacular concept, the meme flexibly ranges

from the abstract idea of any catchy and widely propagated phenomenon to very concrete expressions. A typical meme consists of an image (or video) and a text which expresses a message neatly and humorously. A recurrent form of memes is demotivational posters or demotivators, which show the image and the text in a black frame, portraying the phenomenon in a critical light. Memes are distributed as such or they are adjusted to serve a new purpose by reworking the text or changing the image (see Baran 2012: 172, 176; Kaplan 2013: 136–7; Shifman 2013: 362). Even though the digital environment presents the opportunity to share the viral contents as they are, it seems that people want to recreate them: to make their own versions by mimicking and remixing (Shifman 2013: 365). This is easy to do with meme generators, *i.e.* internet pages and applications which provide the currently circulating pictures and the means to add a new text, as well as the opportunity to share the fresh version of the meme. There are numerous web pages which serve as repositories of internet memes. Cheezeburger is a website which presents internet humour, and it has subpages which are specialised in memes; Memebase and Know Your Meme. The latter provides information about each recognised meme, its history, distribution and forms, as well as its popularity. Know Your Meme shows for example graphic figures about the rise and decline of the search interest in popular memes.

It has been difficult for some folklorists to accept the fact that memes as well as urban legends and jokes do not only circulate on the internet, but can also be found on websites, which not only resemble archives, but are archives *per se*. These archives hold massive collections of folklore items and are curated by the same people who use them. All members of these sites may not have the right to add items to the collection or edit it, but they can discuss and debate on what counts as a meme (Kaplan 2013: 128, 136–9). These websites can be compared to what Elisa Giaccardi (2012) calls *new heritage*, digitally born and non-institutional heritage. In contrast to former notions of cultural heritage as a product, as something stable that must be protected from changing, with this protection necessarily in the hands of experts, new heritage acknowledges change to the point that it should be seen as a process,

which is dynamic, ever-evolving and managed by the same people who created it or participate in the process. Digital archives and repositories of memes are not, however, outside the circulation and use of the memes. Internet searches are a recurrent form of entertainment in internet culture. Memes, as well as contemporary legends and jokes, are not only enjoyed one by one in social discourses but browsed in books and websites, where there are dozens of them.

### Meanings and pointlessness

Online memes such as images and videos are not only products or messages. They are cultural practices of participation in social interaction. For example, on YouTube, sharing and commenting on videos is the primary medium of social interaction between active users (Burgess 2008: 102). Like any folklore, memes can have multiple meanings and functions for communities and individuals alike. Online memes particularly need to be catchy and easy to grasp to become widely known and propagated in a short period of time.

Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear analysed nineteen online memes, mostly video clips, which were particularly popular among internet users and had also been reported in broadcast media. They found three patterns of characteristics that were likely to add to the meme's popularity and productivity. First, the popular memes had some element of humour. The humour the researchers observed could be quirky, absurd or potty, as well as ironic or parodic. Second, the popular memes gave potential for intertextuality, which was realised in user-generated versions as rich cross-references to various phenomena of popular culture: to movies, to news or to other memes. Third, they showed anomalous juxtapositions, which included incongruous couplings of images or for example provocative paralleling of harmless characters with evil or terrifying deeds (Knobel and Lankshear 2007: 204–5, 208–16). Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green have used the word *spreadability* for contents which are continuously reworked, given new meanings and recirculated by individuals and corporations. The question is not only about vernacular culture; the commercial producers also seek to design spreadable products which can start circulating in user-generated content (Jenkins *et al.* 2013). Thus, the key to the popularity and propagation of online contents, or memes, or folklore, is the adaptability to multiple purposes. Jean Burgess emphasises the difference between participatory culture and mere popularity. Some videos may have millions of views around the world while others trigger creative responses in the form of new videos and other mimicking actions (Burgess 2008: 101–2). While traditional folklore genres tend to have certain limits, guided by cultural competence, to how much a story or poem can be altered in order to

properly represent the tradition, internet culture can involve surprising, absurd and random elements. However, what can generally be mimicked or changed are the form, content and stance. Limor Shifman has used the term *stance* to describe the addresser's position in relation to the meme, to his or her own performance of it and to the potential audience. When recreating the meme, the person can decide to share the same stance as previous users or to change it, perhaps even make a parody of it (Shifman 2013: 367). The variation of stances can be seen for example in the Pepper-Spraying Cop meme. A photograph of a pepper-spraying policeman started spreading after a student protest at the University of California had been forcefully put down by the police in 2011. The meme shows a cop pepper-spraying the faces of students, who sit peacefully in a row. The image generated a myriad of new versions and quickly became a meme. The first wave of them was political and showed the police pepper-spraying American symbols like the monument of former presidents and the Constitution. Another group of them shows characters and imagery of popular culture as the target of the spray. These versions show a more complex interpretation: the meme has become more playful and the original meaning, which was the criticism of the police officers' excessive force, has in some cases even been reversed. The political use of the meme turned into having fun by remixing various memes in Photoshop and expressing dislike towards celebrities by means of the pepper-spray (Shifman 2013: 371–2; see also Blank 2012: 8–11). Memes can be used to point at social injustice or to make political arguments. However, the same meme can serve as entertainment, poetically referring only to itself or to other currently popular memes and



Batman slapping Robin in offline reality. In the annual Finnish carnival for graduating from high school, students cruise on lorries decorated with topical slogans. Here, Batman argues that it is more important to read for your final exams than to watch the winter Olympics, in another lorry, Batman viewed boozing as more important than preparing for your exams.



The image on the left parallels friendly and non-friendly visits to neighbouring countries. These started circulating right at the beginning of the crisis. The mascots of the 2014 Sochi Olympics on a tank (above) express the contradiction between Russian actions in the sports games and in the Ukrainian crisis. Putin's political decisions (on the right) were questioned in Western-minded memes and he was compared to Hitler. Hitler and his actions during WW2 are commonly used as parallels to current political events.

having no particular point. Julia Rone suggests that the whole point may even be that there is no point. Memes can be made just because they can be made and because they have no exchange value, which dictates most production. The pointless memes are useful as a domain of freedom. An example of a pointless meme is a ten-hour-long version which only repeats a sequence of one or two seconds from a well-known video meme (Rone 2013: 10–11). Even if the meme itself may seem pointless, the act of making and sharing it has meanings. The easiness to create and rework memes with internet applications may mask the fact that the question is of a creative process and a conscious decision to create and share a new version. By referring to other well-known memes, the makers of new versions show their knowledge of the tradition and deliberately link their contribution to it (see McNeill 2013). Thus, participation in a wider phenomenon is a social activity. It is also possible that a video clip or image which seems difficult to understand was part of an ongoing discussion at the moment of uploading. It is not always possible for an outsider to distinguish between 'pointless' entertainment, disguised cultural criticism and a comment in a discussion long gone.

### Memes as newslore and political arguments

The folklorist Russell Frank (2011: 9–13) calls folklore that arises from the news *newslore*. Memes are often newslore, where a stance is adopted towards current affairs. Subjects range from world political crises to the

characteristics of public figures. A political viewpoint is announced, for example, by publishing a humorous picture or picture collage, where a politician is made fun of by manipulating his image or twisting his words (Baran 2012). The leaders of particular countries, such as Russian president Vladimir Putin, former US president George Bush<sup>3</sup> and North Korea's Kim Jong Il, are the dominant figures of the meme tradition. Historical politicians, especially Adolf Hitler, are also popular subjects of internet humour and memes. Hitler is presented as a comical figure in many memes, of which the video-memes known as 'Hitler reacts' or 'Downfall' are some of the most popular (see Rone 2013).

Researchers disagree about the political role of newslore. Some argue that it only substitutes for the real opportunities to power or resistance. Others suggest that the critical examination of problems in folklore is a first step towards solving them. At least newslore is a form of engagement in political discussion and often requires a lot of background information to be understood properly (Frank 2011: 11–12). According to Zeynep Tufekci, who has studied the use of social media during political outbursts, countries that are between democracy and dictatorship are those which most easily fuel political satire. She also points out that it would be an understatement to consider online activism as 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism', which has no impact

3 Russell Frank (2011: 107–27) even talks of *Bushlore*.

(Tufekci and Wilson 2012: 377). We will present two different cases of newslore in memes. The first case is international and links to the Ukrainian crisis commented on in memes during the spring of 2014. The other is a Finnish discussion which burst out when Swedes commented on traditional Christmas pastry.

Russia hosted the Olympic winter games in February 2014. In public discussion, the games were regarded as a way to show Russia's capability and to polish its reputation. Soon after the Olympic Games, it was claimed Russia had sent military forces to a politically unstable Ukraine, which President Putin categorically denied. The situation of Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula was commented on in a myriad of memes, which juxtaposed the friendly atmosphere of the Olympics with hostile military occupation.

Russian internet sites had their own demotivators, which portrayed Ukraine as backward and incapable, and its possible union with Europe as a poor or immoral decision.

As the Crimean crisis grew into an international question, memes indicated that it had also become a contentious issue in US domestic politics. The question was whether the United States should have used more power to influence the parties of the Crimean crisis. Especially the conservative wing in the US has been unsatisfied with the cautious diplomacy of Barack Obama in his relation to Vladimir Putin. In their memes, Putin rules over him in every respect. The tough image of Putin engaging in masculine activities is juxtaposed with Obama as a polite or even sissy character. The opposite view of the US policy is expressed, as well. Especially the 'American Eagle' meme is used to criticise the aggressive foreign policy of the US and its earlier actions.

Memes may not necessarily affect the political elite and their decisions. However, they spread arguments and insights, and the neat and often emotionally charged way they do it can affect the minds of countless internet users who happen to see them. (See also Tufekci 2013: 849)

Another example of newslore and memes is the emotionally charged debate which emerged around the traditional star-shaped Christmas pastries in Finland. These delicacies, filled with plum jam, had previously been common in Scandinavia, but lately they have been a well-known and beloved tradition only in Finland.

Russian demotivators seek to show Ukraine as incapable of credible military action or independence (above and middle). They also ridicule and question its pursuit of unity with Europe. 'Ukraine - when once it was in Europe'. The black-and-white photograph dates from World War II. The meme 'Joker Mind Loss' or 'Everyone Loses their Minds' is based on a screen shot of the villain Joker in the Batman film *The Dark Knight* (below). These memes usually point to some injustice and humorously refer to the original film with the words 'no one bats an eye'.





## Kuin kaksi marjaa...



Natsien  
tummus



Joulutorttu

[naurunappula.com/675181](http://naurunappula.com/675181)



Traditional Finnish star-shaped Christmas pastry paralleled with the swastika (middle). This meme uses a juxtaposition model familiar to Finns from the leading newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, which used to publish humorous look-alike photos of celebrities under the title 'Like two berries'. Here, too, the texts are reversed to underline the misleading similarity. Home-baked pastry and gingerbread in the form of a swastika (left and right). Activities around this meme ranged from statements to cheerful participation.

On 10 November 2013, a leading Swedish newspaper, *Svenska Dagbladet*, published a recipe for traditional Christmas pastry with a photograph of this traditional dish. The Swedish TV company SVT reacted by wondering why the newspaper was promoting swastika-shaped pastry. The picture of this 'Nazi pastry' started circulating in Swedish social media.

The Finnish press released the news a week later. The reaction that soon followed was probably strengthened by the fact that Sweden, the Finns' hated and beloved neighbour, was involved. The internet pages of the newspapers in question were soon filled with emotional comments. The commentators were upset about such accusations against Finnish Christmas traditions. The same arguments were repeated again and again: that the pastry is star-shaped and not a swastika; that a swastika is actually a millennia-old symbol which had originally nothing to do with Nazism; that pastry cannot possibly offend anybody; and that Swedes are stupid and should mind their own business. While some were annoyed about the patronising attitude of the Swedes and anybody who thought there was a problem, others ridiculed the whole situation and made suggestions about which traditional dishes should be prohibited next. Still one strong emotion was defiance: we will show the Swedes and all moralist-idealist patronisers that we make our pastry in whichever shape we want! The phenomenon of Nazi pastry spread rapidly in blogs, Facebook, Tumblr and various other internet sites, showing photos of swastika-shaped pastry and gingerbread that the public had started to bake or memes which placed the Finnish star-pastry in connection to Nazi symbols. Swedes got their share, too. The Finns' relationship with the Swedes has been competitive and ambiguous, involving a stereotype of the Swedes' sexual orientation. Thus, the picture of 'a politically correct Swedish arsehole pastry'

– a simple dough ring with dark brown filling – which somebody actually baked, makes an intertextual reference to a long tradition of jokes about gay neighbours. In the case of Nazi pastry, the internet phenomenon was a short-lived reaction to topical news. This case shows that while the internet mediated the news, the discussion and the memes, a great deal of the action happened in the kitchens and on home computers with graphic applications. The memes made use of models which were familiar from the internet. The pictures, the meaning of which would be difficult to understand without the context, belonged to a discourse which defended the local cultural heritage and expressed a reaction to excessive requirements of political correctness. This case also shows that beside the chance to make a statement, it has been important and rewarding to participate in the internet phenomenon shared on one's social networks and to contribute with comments, actions and pictures to the topical discussion or joke, as many saw it.

Memes dealing with defects and stereotypes can also show self-irony. For example, the memes published on Facebook's Suomi Memes site deal with and repeat stereotypes and cultural characteristics associated with Finns: apart from *sisu*, also self-isolation, violence and alcohol-dependence. On the basis of the memes, a picture of Finland is mediated as a land where it is always cold and grim. In some of the memes, Finnishness is assessed in relationship to other countries' inhabitants, especially the neighbouring Russians and Swedes. Although the memes published on the site depict Finns and Finland in a rather negative light, this is self-irony. On the basis of comments, this is amusing to the 25,000 or so likers of the site. Very few question or oppose the picture of Finns that is presented.

In memes that play with national stereotypes there may also be more serious political aims. Memes can be

used with the intention of bolstering one's own country or a people's status, and even in circumstances where this is unintentional, others may nonetheless interpret it as nationalist activity, as with Julia Rone's (2013) 'Nyan Cat' example. 'Nyan Cat' is a widely spread video meme in which a pixelated grey cat, whose body is a pop tart pastry, flies through outer space and leaves behind a rainbow-like trail. The originally Japanese Nyan Cat video can now be found for example in French, Mexican and Albanian versions on YouTube, where the original rainbow has been replaced with the national flag and the music changed to the appropriate local folk music. In some instances the imposition of these national elements has led to heated debate in the comments posted.

#### Multi-purpose images and variation for fun

Popular culture is the most powerful source of memes. While politicians come and go and news loses its topicality, certain classics of popular culture persist and flourish year after year. Such favourites involve *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, as well as *The Lord of the Rings*. Their characters are useful and known by everybody in the relevant networks. Beside the commercial production, the internet creates its own popular culture. Memes can be born from scratch and lift some previously unknown character or phenomenon to celebrity. Some memes become tradition dominants; they can be used for various kinds of purposes. There are memes to send to your friend as SMS messages to announce you are amused, bored or curious. There are memes which function like proverbs, naming a situation by coupling it with a well-known traditional unit. These are typically images which can be easily sent or shown in face-to-face contact from a mobile device. Widely distributed memes serve as a means to make a statement when needed, but especially because of spare time and handy meme generators, they are also manufactured and varied just for fun.

One such multi-purpose meme is the 'Batman slapping Robin' meme, also known as 'My Parents are Dead'. The meme originated in 2008, when it started spreading in the blog service Tumblr. Six years later, the Cheezburger archive alone houses over 4,000 variants (Cheezburger 28.4.2014). According to Know Your Meme, the image originates from an exploitation comic book published in 1965. The story behind it presents an alternative reality in which Batman believes his parents were killed by Superman and harbours revenge. In the meme, the original image in which the furious Batman slaps Robin has been turned into a mirror image. Like this, the meme portrays Batman interrupting Robin with a slap just when Robin is suggesting something stupid. This enables the meme users to place in Robin's balloon a claim, message or sentence which Batman will powerfully negate by his slap. For example, in Finnish

universities, many scholars have been annoyed by the students' habit of calling the university 'school'. The Batman meme in which Batman yells 'It's the university!' kept circulating in academic networks on Facebook. Even though the 'Batman slapping Robin' meme has a relatively fixed pictorial form, it can also be encountered offline.

#### Conclusions

Even though the definition of meme is wide, we have here chiefly dealt with one particular type. As folklorists, we could say that we are dealing with a folklore genre, which is characterised by a relatively stable form as an image with a varying text and a digital distribution. These images are a form of communication which contemporary internet insiders use and recognise. The competence to produce this genre requires not the traditional oratory skills but the knowledge of the right applications and internet sites, a competence to use them, and the appropriate equipment, which the bearers of this line of tradition usually have. The interpretation and also the successful production require a good knowledge of related material because these online memes play with rich intertextuality. Typical of vernacular communication, these memes are not only used online but they are referred to in offline activities and communication.

It seems that memes are here to stay, whether we appreciate them or not. Though at first glance this folklore genre may seem trivial, in reality memes are one of the most popular ways of making statements and taking a stance in today's world. People have always contested political power and criticised their leaders by ridiculing



The 'American Eagle' is a meme frequently used to criticise US politics and undesirable social phenomena such as xenophobia and excessive consumption. Here, it comments on the economic interests behind military actions. This meme opposes the US conservative hankering for a stronger leader to put the rest of the world in order.

and making fun of them, but the scope and pace that it can be done on the internet and especially social media is unique. We have presented some examples here of how this is done with memes. Memes can be used to make statements on everyday matters too, to express one's feelings on the result of yesterday's ice hockey game or today's weather. They can even be used to comment on other memes. Like all folklore, some of them disappear quite quickly if they do not have the capacity to say something or amuse us, and some of them will continue to live their lives in limitless new variations. ■

**ANNE HEIMO** is a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Turku. **KAARINA KOSKI** is an university lecturer of folkloristics at the University of Turku.

## References

All websites accessed on 28.4.2014

### Websites

- Happy we are from Tatoonie, YouTube, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HvaFhUcm-4>>  
 Know Your Meme, Cheezburger, <<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sites/cheezburger>>  
 Memebase, Cheezburger, <<http://memebase.cheezburger.com/>>  
 Quickmeme, Batman slapping Robin, <<http://www.quickmeme.com/Batman-Slapping-Robin/>>  
 Suomi Memes, Facebook, <<https://www.facebook.com/SuomiMemes?ref=ts&fref=ts>>  
 We are happy from, <<http://www.wearehappyfrom.com/>>  
 YouTube, 'harlem shake', <[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=harlem+shake](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=harlem+shake)>  
 YouTube, 'happy we are from', <[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=happy+we+are+from](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=happy+we+are+from)>

### Literature

- Baran, Anneli 2012. 'Visual humour on the Internet', in *Creativity and Tradition in Cultural Communication*, vol. 1: *Jokes and Their Relations*, ed. Liisi Laineste, Dorota Brzozowska and Władysław Chłopicki (Tartu, ELM Scholarly Press), pp. 171–86 (DOI: 10.7592/EP.1.baran)
- Blank, Trevor J. 2009. 'Introduction: toward a conceptual framework for the study of folklore and the internet' in *Folklore and the Internet*, ed. Trevor J. Blank (Logan, Utah State University Press) pp. 1–20, <[http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1034&context=usupress\\_pubs](http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1034&context=usupress_pubs)>
- 2012. 'Introduction: folk culture in the digital age' in *Tradition in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Trevor J. Blank (Logan, Utah State University Press), pp. 1–24
- Burgess, Jean 2008. "All your chocolate rain are belong to us?" Viral video, YouTube and the dynamics of participatory culture' in *Video Vortex Reader*, ed. G. Lovink and S. Niederer (Amsterdam, Institute of Network Cultures), pp. 101–9
- Dawkins, Richard 1976. *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press)
- Dundes, Alan 1980. *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press)
- Ellis, Bill 2003. *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi)
- Frank, Russell 2011. *Newslore* (Jackson, University of Mississippi)
- Giaccardi, Elisa 2012. 'Introduction: reframing heritage in participatory culture', in *Heritage and Social Media*, ed. Elisa Giaccardi (London & New York, Routledge), pp. 1–10

- Hafstein, Valdimar 2001. 'Biological metaphors in folklore theory: an essay in the history of ideas', *Arv* 57, pp. 7–32
- Howard, Robert Glenn 2013. 'Vernacular authority: critically engaging authority' in *Tradition in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. T. J. Blank and R. G. Howard (Logan, Utah State University Press), pp. 72–99
- Jenkins, Henry, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green 2013. *Spreadable Media* (New York University Press)
- Jenkins, Henry, Ravi Purushotma, Katie Clinton, Margaret Weigel, and Alice J. Robison 2006. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture* (Chicago, The MacArthur Foundation), <[http://mitpress.mit.edu/sites/default/files/titles/free\\_download/9780262513623\\_Confronting\\_the\\_Challenges.pdf](http://mitpress.mit.edu/sites/default/files/titles/free_download/9780262513623_Confronting_the_Challenges.pdf)>
- Kaplan, Merrill 2013. 'Curation and tradition on web 2.0' in *Tradition in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Trevor J. Blank and Robert Glenn Howard (Logan, Utah State University Press), pp. 123–48
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara 1996. 'The electronic vernacular' in *Connected*, ed. George E. Marcus (University of Chicago Press), pp. 26–66
- Knobel, Michele, and Colin Lankshear 2007. 'Online memes, affinities, and cultural production' in *A New Literacies Sampler*, ed. M. Knobel and C. Lankshear (New York, Peter Land Publishing), pp. 199–228
- Kõiva, Mare (ed.) 2014. *Maailm ja multitasking. Tänapäeva folklorist* 10 (Tartu, EKM Teaduskirjastus)
- Kõiva, Mare, and Liisa Vesik 2009. 'Contemporary folklore: internet and communities at the beginning of the 21st century' in *Media & Folklore*, ed. Mare Kõiva, Contemporary Folklore, 4 (Tartu, ELM Scholarly Press), pp. 97–117, <<http://www.folklore.ee/rl/pubte/ee/cf/cf4>>
- Koski, Kaarina 2012. "Mutta sitten sain nuolen polveeni". Internetmeemin nousu ja uho', *Hiidenkivi* 3, pp. 14–17
- McNeill, Lynne S. 2009. 'The end of the internet: a folk response to the provision of infinite choice' in *Folklore and the Internet*, ed. Trevor J. Blank (Logan, Utah State University Press), pp. 80–97, <[http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1034&context=usupress\\_pubs](http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1034&context=usupress_pubs)>
- 2012. 'Real virtuality: enchancing locality by enacting the small world theory' in *The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction*, ed. Trevor J. Blank (Logan, Utah State University Press), pp. 85–97
- 2013. 'And the greatest of these is tradition: the folklorist's toolbox in the twenty-first century' in *Tradition in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Trevor J. Blank and Robert Glenn (Logan, Utah State University Press), pp. 174–85
- Owens, Trevor 2013. 'Born digital folklore and the vernacular web: an interview with Robert', *The Signal, Digital Preservation*, Library of Congress, <<http://blogs.loc.gov/digitalpreservation/2013/02/born-digital-folklore-and-the-vernacular-web-an-interview-with-robert-glenn-howard/>>
- Rone, Julia 2013. 'Fegelein's views on folklore', *Seminar\_BG*, <<http://www.seminar-bg.eu/spisanie-seminar-bg/special-issue2/item/380-fegeleins-views-on-folklore.html>>
- Shifman, Limor 2013. 'Memes in a digital world: reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18, pp. 362–377 (DOI: 10.1111/jcc4.12013)
- Stryker, Cole 2011. *Epic Win for Anonymous* (New York, The Overlook Press)
- Tufekci, Zeynep 2013. "Not this one": social movements, the attention economy, and microcelebrity networked activism', *American Behavioral Scientist* 57(7), pp. 848–70 (DOI: 10.1177/0002764213479369)
- Tufekci, Zeynep, and Christopher Wilson 2012. 'Social media and the decision to participate in political protest: observations from Tahrir Square', *Journal of Communication* 62, pp. 363–79 (DOI: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01629.x)