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KNOW YOUR MEME AND THE HOMOGENIZATION OF WEB HISTORY

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Knowing a Meme

Know Your Meme (KYM) is a website devoted to compiling histories, definitions, and examples of internet memes. KYM has emerged as an invaluable resource for scholars, journalists, and everyday internet users to understand memes. However, internet scholars should interrogate the implications of elevating a single website to such a dominant role in establishing the histories and definitions of memes. I use a discursive interface analysis to demonstrate how KYM constructs itself as a definitive authority. An overreliance on KYM without acknowledging its limitations overlooks the essential plurality of the Web and instead implies a singular history of memes as an element of internet culture.

Because KYM has emerged as *the* source for meme definitions and examples, it is necessary to reflect on how scholarship leans upon the website. At various times it has been called a “huge database” (Shifman 2014), a “site providing meme annotation” (Zannettou et al., 2018), and a “reference site” (Phillips & Milner, 2017). Each of these phrases ascribes KYM varying credibility and trustworthiness. This variation is important for researchers to bear in mind when they turn to KYM as a source of Web artifacts. In their discussion of internet history methods, Driscoll and Paloque-Berges (2017) point out the necessity of “keeping in mind what each source obscures, leaves out, or misrepresents” (54). Accordingly, this paper uses the examples of Pepe the Frog, OK Boomer, and niche Facebook meme groups to demonstrate that an overreliance on KYM can have significant stakes. It may overlook entire uses of the meme, potentially downplay harmful ideologies, and generally imply the possibility for a meme to have a single primary meaning.

Contextual Specificity of Memes

Pepe the Frog is possibly one of the most studied memes, largely because of its overtly political implications. But nevertheless, its KYM entry page has several aspects that can be considered inaccuracies. In U.S. and European contexts, Pepe the Frog’s political associations are generally its use by extreme far-right groups and white nationalists. Yet

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in other contexts, Pepe the Frog can be much more positive, as in the case of Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests. Within this context, the meme is entirely sutured to ideals of democracy and human rights. Not only does the KYM page entirely overlook this Hong Kong context, but its interface also places the connection to white nationalism and anti-Semitism near the bottom of the page. By requiring the user to scroll past several advertisements and benign history of the cartoon frog, the website partially downplays the significance of harmful ideologies. Because the internet is a global infrastructure and phenomenon, it is virtually impossible for a single website like KYM to create an entirely comprehensive definition of *all* uses of a meme.

As another example, the "OK Boomer" meme may at first glance appear to be a simple pithy retort, but it nevertheless represents tensions and differences between generations. Is it a joke that some people happen to take seriously? Or is it a serious critique of generational differences that some people happen to take as a joke? It is both of these simultaneously; different groups experience and understand the meme differently. Yet elements such as KYM's "confirmed" or "Deadpool" categorization overlooks this nuance and constructs the website's perceived authority. KYM's meme definitions have the effect of consolidating the multiple communities for which a given meme may be significant.

The stakes of defining even seemingly benign memes are also demonstrated by the proliferation of niche "meme pages" on platforms such as Facebook. With names such as "geology schistposting," "grad school memes with relatable themes," and "Crustacean Memes for Crabby Fiends," these online communities are spaces for people to create, remix, and share memes that are hyper-specific to their common interests. KYM's goal of "documenting internet phenomena" may simply not be possible to achieve to a degree of detail and specificity that accounts for the specific uses and cultural meanings of a meme as understood by all online communities. Because memes are a form of contemporary folklore, they are necessarily situated within particular contexts. Attempts to write a singular and comprehensive definition of a meme represent the potential legitimization of one group as dominant while simultaneously subordinating others.

***Know Your Meme* in the Historian's Toolkit**

Though there are concerns with an overreliance on KYM, it remains an invaluable resource for researchers of internet and Web histories. We can acknowledge its limitations without casting it aside entirely, just as others have critiqued how the Internet Archive tracks Web history while simultaneously noting its continued utility within the historian's toolkit (Brügger, 2018; Brunton, 2017; Milligan, 2016; Rogers, 2017). Tracking online culture is a challenging research area, which is why we must consider which websites and resources we rely on to shape and represent histories of the internet. My analysis of KYM, then, attends to such concern and considers how this website fits within broader issues of internet history research. KYM offers an initial starting point for the study of memes and their use by particular online communities. The website can be useful in guiding the further development of their research project.

We should avoid relying solely upon KYM and instead seek out the specific communities that are using a given meme. We should turn to the actual users and their communities to fully understand a meme and when it is necessary collect individual meme examples, we should attempt to do so within those original contexts. KYM remains useful to guide the initial stages of research, but it should rarely be the end point. And when KYM is used within academic writing, we should take the time to contextualize the website with a fitting label and avoid simply calling it a mere “database” or “reference site” without additional explanation. Ultimately, I conclude that we should move toward defining KYM as, “a curated collection of user-submitted meme instances and partially crowdsourced definitions.” These few extra words can do a lot of work to contextually introduce KYM. While KYM is undeniably a useful resource, it is important that those of us who study the histories of the Web are mindful about how we lean upon this website and situate it within our work.

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