

# Semiotic Technologies and the Crafting of Catchy Memes

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## [OVERVIEW]

### Introduction

The philosophy of signs which has developed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has combined with the technological models which emerged at the same time to provide a descriptive language to talk about communication.

Philosophical notions such as reference, sense, signs, meaning and their derived terminology have merged with the models and lexicon generated by the technological revolution that had brought **landline telecommunication** and **television**.

Definitions of information, code, redundancy, function, and medium, for instance, have combined with contemporary notions coming from psychology and structural linguistics which developed around the same time. **A symbol of this theoretical approach is the influential diagram by Karl Buhler which was updated by Roman Jakobson through the addition of notions borrowed from telephone technology.**

This hybrid language has provided precious conceptual tools to describe, and speculate about, mass communication. This has given rise to a **rhetoric of marketing** through which

**multimodal strategies of persuasion** have been articulated in an abundant literature. (e.g., Jean-Marie Floch, Laura Oswald, Andrea Semprini, Marcel Danesi and others have theorized and given some degree of pragmatic consistency to this intellectual movement). This language has been particularly useful for **deconstructing** a wide array of advertising productions through a kind of **reverse engineering**.

It might also have cast some light on the reasons for failure when marketing campaigns have **not come up** with the intended results. **Forensic semiotics** can indeed be useful when it comes to understanding why a marketing campaign crashes. **The unpredictability of current semiotic models (as many marketers are wont to acknowledge)** makes them more adapted to perform autopsies than to engineer successful designs.

**There is always a part of creative intuition and chance in the game of marketing.**

The relationship between semiotics and marketing remains intense although it turns out to be, at times, somewhat problematic. Websites such as *Creative Insights* or the *Semiotic Thinking Group* bear witness to ongoing debates on these issues.

While the semiotic theories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have spawned countless marketing companies, it seems indeed that the technologies they have developed have led to mixed results. Current examples such as the Heineken and McDonald pro-social attempts to give humane substance to their brands are good examples. We will return later to these case studies in view of the diagnostic on pro-social branding campaigns that have been discussed in the Semiotic Thinking Group.

**[PROSOCIAL BRANDING] let me show one of these which we can keep in mind as I proceed with my talk.**

I would like to suggest in this paper that the 21<sup>st</sup> century environment is changing so drastically that the semiotic technologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have become mostly obsolete.

### **From theories to technologies**

**Environments are the crucibles of theories.** Indeed, both natural and artificial environments offer the human mind affordances and challenges that require adaptive responses in the form of explanations (i.e., cognitive accommodation) and technologies (i.e., pragmatic control).

Although some environments are relatively stable for various durations, all environments are under the pressure of constant and uncontrollable forces

which cause cognitive and pragmatic instability. **Environmental reconfigurations call for novel adaptive responses.** Since the stone-age, technology has always been a crucial part of the

environment. This is particularly true today, in an era that has been dubbed the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial **revolution** with the advent of cyberspace **as an overpowering environment**. The emergence of **the Internet of things** and of a life-world that must be negotiated within a **hybrid space** which blends physical and virtual realities.

This is the environment through which we now have to navigate and make decisions that **more often than not** consist simply of clicking on an icon or a button, hitting a key or touching a screen. Voice command is also in the picture and **mere intentions** now appear to be on the technological horizon. [see how this remote control brain technology help those who have lost the neuromuscular control of a limb}

**Individuals, institutions, and commercial companies** alike are building new identities and survival strategies. Obviously, marketers cannot win their campaigns with **the conceptual weapons of yesterday's wars**. This new environment calls for a **drastic updating of theories and technologies**.

It is my contention that the notion of "meme" seems to be more adaptive than the notion of "sign" that was inherited from the medical and theological traditions. Sign is an awkward conceptual tool that so much looks backward that it must be complemented by the dynamic notion of semiosis if it is to make any sense. It carries a **heavy ideological baggage** and drags with itself an **unfriendly terminology** which becomes a serious handicap when it comes to communicating with other disciplines.

The theoretical language and technologies of the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution should be fluid and operational across disciplines if only because **there is not a single problem either abstract or practical that can be solved by a single discipline.**

Perusing the tweets and requests found in the Semiotic Thinking Group platform, for instance, provides a rich source of information which proves that those involved in the world of marketing **experience that problem** more than any other practitioners. They are indeed on the frontline.

**The notion of meme has emerged toward the end of the previous century.** The idea had been adumbrated decades earlier under various names (early text by Jean Piaget) because it is a needed assumption if one is to understand observable social phenomena which are not amenable to rational understanding.

As an evolutionary concept, a meme is essentially unstable and dynamic. It is an **algorithm**, that is, a set of instructions. It acts as an **agent** which is fundamentally transformative in the sense that it is consequential (it has measurable effects) and that it may transform itself during the transmission process (evolutionary variation followed by natural selection – actually, we should say environmental selection since the word “natural” seems to exclude the technological dimension of the environment which is known as the Baldwin effect).

It is debatable (and potentially testable empirically) whether a meme can be defined as an **instance of artificial life** that can hack the human brain or as a **natural form that is alien** to our understanding of what an organism is and can “infect” the human brain like a parasite. This question has been amply discussed by Richard Dawkins, Suzan Blackmore and Daniel Dennett, for example, but there is a huge literature which a decade ago attracted the attention of **DARPA** -- Defense Advanced Project Agency – (more on this later if we have time). The essential is that we must recognize that the meme is the most plausible assumption that can account for observable effects. In this respect it is a notion by default because we cannot conceive of any other possibility. It has always been a part of human life in the form of cultures.

The spreading of technologies, habits, and fashions has been early conceptualized following the dynamic model of bacterial or viral contagion. Spreading phenomenon such as the kind of pottery known as bell beaker pottery in Neolithic times slowly occurred over centuries and millennia (-3000 > -2000) and can be construed as a relatively slow motion process which can be retraced by archaeologists. But, at the dawn of globalization, the spreading movement of technological innovations became **more visible and representable in real time**, and this challenged extant models and theories. Thus, the **counter-intuitive** notion of “meme” emerged (Dawkins 1976) challenging intuitive theories based on the assumption of rationality and functionality.

Memes indeed can spread irrespective of their usefulness or negative effects on their carriers as long as they can ride the carriers long enough to reach other carriers. This is the way humans have sometimes used horses in order to reach distant goals.

## The game of memes

An important point of departure for memetic thinking in pragmatic terms is the book by Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman on cultural transmission (1981). Then, in the following decades, there has been many speculative articles and books published on that subject. In 2006, DARPA organized a brain storming session designed to explore the merit of this theory with, naturally, the consideration for possible military application. A compendium of 1681 pages was published online and served as a basis for the discussions.

My early paper on “Why do memes die” was included as well as a paper by my U of T colleague, Professor Marion Blute. We both participated in this two-day brain storming session.

[comments on the conditions]

This event created a dynamic. The Toronto Semiotic Circle organized two symposia on memes in 2008 and 2009. They are available in the section Virtual Symposia of the <https://semioticon.com>

**[SLIDES 4 and 5] [Slide 6]**

In the following decade, research has been pursued in the United States with a strong involvement of the U.S. military as well as, it can safely be assumed the Russian military as the conundrum of the last presidential election demonstrated. **Twitter and other social media have become meme-machine guns.**

## [SLIDES 7 8 9]

In the competitive world of the Internet, memes have become trivialized to designate posts, usually including an image and a caption, that receive a high number of likes. Players win when their memes go viral.

Some specialized websites offer applications which provide the tools to create memes. They go by names such as “makeameme”, “memeful”, “meme generators” and the like. Individual practitioners endeavor to create a caption that is both surprising and relevant. The aim is to trigger in the viewer pleasurable feelings that prompt them to “like” and thus to spread the meme exponentially.

This phenomenon represents a marketer’s dream and it happens that an advertisement reaches that kind of viral status, often at the surprise of their own generators, at times also, with unintended effects in as much as the “likes” may be a form of protest against objectionable attitudes. **A recent example I mentioned above is the MacDonald’s attempt to convey an impression of humane caring while promoting a fishburger by playing upon a child’s** the sense of loss following his father’s death. The fishburger is meant to connect the living with the dead through a common taste for fish and thus recover a sense of identity. {employees and letter of admission at college}

In many respects, the Internet **and more particularly marketing campaigns both commercial and political** can be considered as a research laboratory through which we can discover what makes a meme either weak or robust. **It is cultural evolution under the microscope.**



The question that a semiotician should raise is: what kind of technology is involved in meme production and in meme competition. A meme is a meme only in as much as it succeeds **in going viral.**

We may look toward the recent past for a clue. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dada and Surrealism opposed the rationalism and formality that dominated cultural life. Semiotics, which developed at the same time, embodies on the contrary, this rational culture of predictability. It claims to explain everything in terms of sign,--- and **semiotics, in the terms of one of its major branches, is equivalent to logic.** Along the way, the philosophy of marketing chases predictability as a magic grail. But marketers know too well that the best rationally planned campaign often ends in failure. Perhaps, memetics, even in its current tentative form, offer **the grounds for a different technology.** Could viral memes be crafted and fulfill intended effects?

Let us look at surrealism for an inspiration.

The process of meme production (through chance) nicely dovetails with the surrealists' creation of "images".

Let us recall that in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century French and other European artists launched a movement which became known as Surrealism. It was an artistic revolution that started in poetry and soon spread to the visual and kinetic arts. The core of the Surrealists' manifestoes was the promotion of the "image" as the key to true art in opposition to what they considered the failed culture of academic esthetics.

Note that their definition of an image was not primarily visual. It was first a literary device but with trans-medial potential. This technology was quickly applied by painters, sculptors, and film makers. We find definitions of the image in Pierre Reverdy, **Andre Breton**, and **Louis Aragon** for instance.

**[SLIDES 10 11 12 13]**

To craft an image consists of bringing together two distant realities. The more distant the realities, the more powerful the image. However, this conjunction must create a spark of unexpected truth. In other words, it must **create information** that is more than the addition of the two realities.

Not the kind of information one gets when we ask the weatherman whether it will rain or not, but the kind of information that challenges our capacity of making sense of it because it is totally unexpected. It shocks us and opens up a new vision of the world. The surrealists claimed that making images in this sense was addictive. We know now that surprising information of that sort triggers the production of certain neurotransmitters in our brain, such as serotonin and dopamine, and that as a consequence our reward centers are stimulated and we experience some form of euphoria.

It is well known that neuroscientists have identified dopaminergic systems in the primate brain. They involved so-called “reward centers” which respond to anticipation of information. They are sensitive to unexpected outcomes which stimulate the dopamine pathways leading to these

brain reward centers. There is evidence that a **virtual outcome** can stimulate the dopaminergic neurons as effectively as actual reward (such as nutritive and sexual satiation).

**Hidden pattern recognition, unexpected discovery of new connections, sudden understanding of an elusive meaning** or the **making of meaning** cause a unique kind of elation or a **high** which apparently coincides with the release of dopamine among other neurotransmitters in the mid-brain system. How these processes correlate with feelings and decisions that are difficult to articulate verbally is the subject of current research.

We cannot fail to note, though, that this is precisely what happens when we “**like**” a post or when we react positively to a totally novel **logo** or an **unexpected slogan**. The conditions for a verbal, visual, or multimodal perception of a technological production to become a meme (or a successful advertisement) depends **on its capacity to hack our brains because of the properties of the algorithm that has generated it, and thus creates a positive feeling that leads to the decision to click.**

**Clicking now means liking but often it also often means buying or voting.**

I would like to suggest that a close examination of successful memes can open the way to the foundation of a memetic technology better adapted to the current cyber-environment than the concepts provided by traditional semiotics, even in its more dynamic forms. I have earlier raised a number of questions which appear to become more relevant with time: Why do memes die? How to catch a meme? I am now hinting at “How to make a meme?” But this leads to the ultimate question How to kill a meme. (To kill a mocking meme?).

This allusion is not merely for the sake of a pun. Harper Lee's novel is a good example of a **robust meme**.

By bringing together two very distant social realities, it achieved a powerful image (in the surrealist sense). A strong disjunction is transformed into a strong identity.

If the survival chance of a meme depends on its potential (in the electro-magnetic sense transposed to the domain of semantic fields), any meme exposed to a stronger potential would succumb to entropy. This approach should be of interest both to the marketers who struggle within a jungle of memes and to those who want to protect themselves from the onslaught of voracious memes which strive to enslave them within the worldviews and values they peddle.

The notion of killing a meme or just to catch one is interesting in itself. It assumes that memes are alive in more than a metaphoric sense. Many memes appear to have long lives sustained by robust polarity.

They can be subject to domestication but they can always escape and run wild. Crafting a meme may be somewhat like playing with fire, creating a Frankenstein monster, or a robot sheepdog.

#### **AND MEME CAN JUST APPEAR AT RANDOM AND PROLIFERATE**

**The Indonesian onomatopoeia** It is like language itself whose evolution we cannot control as it keeps changing in spite of whatever rules are created to prevent its irrational, unpredictable, and perpetual motion. Recently a notice that Mr. Bean had died in a stunt accident spread through the Internet. It has been proven to be fake news but it keeps running. Its algorithmic potential is high. A clown never changes. A clown is immune to death. The news is too

upsetting, (i.e. maximally informative)

for dying out with a simple denial. Ironically, it is the death that survives, irrespective of the continuing life of the clown.

This last example raises the question of truth and ethics...but that could be a theme to be explored in another Semiofest in the years ahead.

Question period:

# Never thrilled by the slogan that became a worshiped icon: The message is the medium

This proposition is neither an analytic nor a synthetic judgment.  $A \text{ is } B = B \text{ is } A$  in logic

But it had an impact because it hacks an old debate in which form and function, or content and expression are set one against the other as if they were ontological objects and the object of the debate is what comes first or what is more important. This is an egg and chicken type of scholastic problem. It is in fact a false problem. Both form and function are dimensions or properties of one and the same process which are artificially separated for the sake of a philosophical debate.

#example of meme killing: Trump and pussy < Clinton and pizza parlour

The Russian seem to have advanced their meme technology:

Trump = peace > Clinton = nuclear war

You have to follow the sequence and the screen life of these items of information