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## INSTITUTIONAL MEMETICS: METONYMY, LIMINALITY, AND DIGITAL RELIGION

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The rise of memetic culture in digital media is a growing source of popular culture and academic research. Moving from /b/ board insider knowledge to broader cultural adoption, this paper theorizes the intervention of institutions into the production and circulation of memes as a part of a third wave of memetic culture. While studies on memes have emphasized the push of participatory culture into everyday life, this research on religious institutional memes contributes to an emergent vein of digital religion scholarship focused on institutional authority. In an analysis of the Mormon 'doubt your doubts' meme as liminal and metonymic, we theorize religious memetics as a space for the reconnection of the everydayness of religious practice to institutions, which boils down meaningful moments of faith into facile, non-threatening avenues for sharing religion. While this is beneficial for institutions, the reflexive and metonymic function of religious memes ruptures routine, offering participants momentary pauses from the demands of orthodox religious life; a cathartic release and recalibration within everyday religious practice. Implications on corporate branding, public relations, and the pitfalls of publication are discussed.

Moreover, this paper proposes that the field of memetics needs to account for institutional memes in addition to individuals' generation and circulation of memes. The study of memes has quickly become a source of much academic research and debate (Phillips 2012; Shifman, 2013; Shifman, 2014). Knobel and Lankshear (2007) offer a definition of the uptake of the term meme within popular culture defined as "a popular term for describing the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language 'move,' or some other unit of cultural 'stuff' (p. 202). Beyond thinking of memes as an idea or unit of cultural stuff, this paper examines the way that movement is influenced by individual and institutional articulations of memetics. Institutions, not only individual users, can be thought of as actors spreading memes. Herein, religious communication and digital religion becomes a fertile site for understanding the tension between lived religion, emergent technology, and institutional power.

While academic definitions of memes often focus on the boundaries of what does or does not constitute a meme, this paper argues that memes can also be categorized in Suggested Citation (APA): Burroughs, B. (2015, October 21-24). *Institutional memetics: metonymy, liminality and digital religion*. Paper presented at Internet Research 16: The 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Phoenix, AZ, USA: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

three distinct waves of memetics. The first wave of memetics can be positioned within the insider knowledge of 4chan, advice animals, and LOLCats. Understanding this first wave of memetics required being a part of a specific, tight knit community that guarded this valued knowledge, often resulting in the ‘trolling’ of those without this insider privilege. The second wave of memetics saw this insider knowledge become more mainstream and conventional as the tools to make memes and their ubiquity within popular culture continued to rise. The term ‘meme’ is a part of the popular lexicon as social networking platforms facilitated the spread and speed of memetics in digital culture. No longer were memes contained solely within message boards but became a part of popular communicative patterns and the dissemination of information. We are now transitioning into a third wave of memetics where institutions are beginning to also adopt memes as a form of communicative practice.

Despite the rapidly growing body of scholarly work on Internet memes, very little research has been conducted on religious memes. Cheong (2010) refers to microblogging, primarily tweeting, as “faith memes”, which rapidly transmit and spread religious ideas. Bellar et al. (2013) released a preliminary report on the connection between participatory culture and memes in lived religion. Religious communication and digital religion scholars should study memes because they circulate religious messages as part of participatory culture, but memes also make salient certain important values and beliefs in the interplay between institutional doctrine and individual worship.

The “doubt your doubts” meme originates from LDS apostle and First Presidency member, Dieter F. Uchtdorf’s General Conference address on October 5, 2013. In his talk, Uchtdorf states “that in nearly 200 years of Church history—along with an uninterrupted line of inspired, honorable, and divine events—there have been some things said and done that could cause people to question.” He pleads for members instead to “doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith.” This last line almost immediately became a meme, posted, reposted, and shared throughout the Mormon blogosphere, known colloquially as the “bloggernacle.” Uchtdorf’s “doubt your doubts” sermon reveals the LDS Church’s approach to the ongoing challenges it faces in the increasing quantity and accessibility of uncomfortable historical information about Mormonism online.

The meme also operates metonymically as the phrase “doubt your doubts” comes to stand in for an idealized version of Mormon religious practice where faith and personal spiritual experience subsume doubt by absorbing these complicated questions about Mormonism and religion more broadly. It provides an ostensibly simple solution to individuals’ complex fears and anxieties as the entire sermon is succinctly repurposed and marked for faithful consumption.

The complex historical, doctrinal, ritual, and cultural elements of an organized religion can, through an Internet meme, be condensed down into digestible bytes. Shifman (2014) argues, “Because memes constitute shared spheres of cultural knowledge, they allow us to convey complex ideas within a short phrase or image” (p. 173). Memes as metonyms become building blocks for religious practice. Memes construct loose metonymic chains that become embedded in the everyday practice of maintaining social networks. The metonymic chains also construct shared belief systems and networked

sociality as your network becomes aware of your religious proclivities and value systems. This is most often performed as small, banal enactments and engagements with religious memes--simple, facile, and non-threatening avenue for sharing faith with others online. A comment, 'like' or a shared meme, often not grandiose proclamations of faith but interstitial engagements, meld and marinate faith with everyday practice.

Institutions recognize that social media and memes have created these liminal spaces where members are suspended between hierarchical, institutional order. The re-articulation of institutions through memetics attempts to steer the cultural practices within the space. This point can be extended to non-religious contexts and has implications for corporate marketing, branding, and public relations.

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